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Preface

This little book contains the articles written by Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the series Dharma Vahini for the Sanathana Sarathi, the monthly journal published from Prasanthi Nilayam. They are given here in English; but, it must be said that the original Telugu is simpler and sweeter. It is difficult to express in English the fundamental ideas of Indian culture, for English is strange to the translator and perhaps to many a reader; the English vocabulary does not offer satisfactory equivalents to many words that form the common currency of Indian languages. The reader will, therefore, pardon me for the alloy of abstruseness that might have come into the pure metal of Baba's Telugu clarity.

This must be said of this book: It is the authentic Voice of the Divine Phenomenon, that is setting right the moral codes and behaviour of millions of men and women today. So, it merits careful and devoted study. The Lord has declared that when ethical standards fall and man forgets or ignores His glorious destiny, He will Himself come down among men and guide humanity along the straight and sacred path. The Lord has come; He is guiding those who accept the guidance; He is calling on all who have strayed away to retrace their steps. Baba's love and wisdom know no bounds, His grace knows no obstacle. He is no hard taskmaster; His solicitude for our welfare and real progress is overwhelming.

May this book reveal to you the Mother's love that has made Baba write it, the Father's authority that backs every injunction therein, the Teacher's illumination that lights up every statement, and the Lord's sublime Universality, which invites you to expand your personality into a great Instrument of service.

N. Kasturi

1. What Is Dharma?

People must dedicate themselves to dharma and always be engaged in dharma, so that they may live in peace and the world may enjoy peace. One cannot acquire real peace, nor can one win the grace of the Lord, through any means other than the dharmic life. Dharma is the foundation for the welfare of humanity; it is the truth that is stable for all time. When dharma fails to transmute human life, the world is afflicted by agony and fear and tormented by stormy revolutions. When the effulgence of dharma fails to illumine human relationships, humanity is shrouded in the night of sorrow.

God is the embodiment of dharma

God is the embodiment of dharma; His grace is won by dharma. He is ever fostering dharma. He is ever establishing dharma. He is dharma itself. The Vedas, scriptures (sastras), epics (Puranas), and traditional accounts (ithihasas) proclaim aloud the glory of dharma.

In the scriptures of the various religions, dharma is elaborated in language familiar to the adherents. The duty of everyone, everywhere, and at all times is to pay homage to the personification of dharma (Dharma-Narayana).

The stream of dharmic activity should never run dry; when its cool waters cease to flow, disaster is certain.

Humanity has reached this stage only because dharma, like the river Saraswathi, flows unseen, below the ground, feeding the roots and filling the springs. Not only humanity but even birds and beasts have to adhere to dharma so that they may be happy and survive in comfort and joy.

Therefore, the waters of dharma have to be kept flowing perpetually and fully, so that the world might enjoy happiness. Disaster now dances madly on the world stage, because right is neglected and there is disbelief in the essentials of dharmic life. So, one has to understand clearly the very heart of

dharma.

Dharma is misunderstood

What is meant by dharma? What is the essence of dharma? Can common people lead a happy life and survive if they stick to dharma? Naturally, these doubts confuse the mind in the course of life. Solving them is necessary, even urgent.

As soon as dharma is mentioned, the ordinary person takes it to mean: giving alms, feeding and providing lodging to pilgrims, adherence to one's traditional profession or craft, law-abiding nature, discrimination between right and wrong, the pursuit of one's innate nature over the freaks of one's own mind, the fruition of one's fondest desires, and so on.

Of course, it is a long, long time since the spotless countenance of dharma was tarnished beyond recognition.

Beautiful fields and groves run wild with neglect and soon become unrecognizable bushland and thorny jungle; fine trees are hewn by greedy people, and the shape of the landscape is changed. With the passage of time, people get accustomed to the new state of things and don't notice the transformation, the decline. This has also happened to dharma.

Everyone has to acquaint himself with the outlines of dharma, expounded in the Vedas, scriptures (sastras), and Puranas. Misunderstood by incompetent intelligence, unbridled emotion, and impure reasoning, these works have been grossly diluted, and their glory has suffered grievously. Just as raindrops from the clear blue sky get coloured and contaminated when they fall on the soil, the unsullied message of the ancient sages (rishis), the example of their shining deeds, and the bright untarnished urges behind their actions are all turned into ugly caricatures of their original grandeur by uncultured interpreters and scholars.

Books written for children contain illustrations to clarify the text, but the

children spend their time with the pictures, forgetting what they are intended to clarify. In the same way, the unwary and the uneducated mistake the rituals, which are designed to illustrate the grand truths, as profoundly real in themselves and ignore the truth that they were meant to elucidate. Travellers moving along the road rest for a while in wayside shelters, but during their stay, they damage by neglect or misuse the very structure that gives them rest. So too, the dull and perverse alter the very face of Vedic morality and deceive the world into believing that their handiwork is what the Vedas teach!

When such mauling of dharma took place, when the face of dharma suffered disfigurement at the hands of the enemies of God, the Lord responded to the call of the gods and the godly and saved the world from ruin, by restoring right and truth in the field of dharma and karma, i.e. in both ideal and practice.

Now, who can cure the present blindness? Man has to slay the six-fold beast of inner enemies (arishadvarga) that lead him on to disaster: lust, anger, greed, delusion, pride, and hate. Thus only can dharma be restored.

Buddha and Sankara adhered to dharma

The Lord was referred to as dharma by the Vedas and as highest wisdom (vijñana) by Buddha. In those days, no one liked the word "Veda". In the times of the demon (asura) Somaka, those who followed the Vedas desisted from calling them "Veda". While in mortal dread, such behaviour is passable. Yet the Buddha was full of reverence for the Vedas; he was ever infused with God. The Buddha is often spoken of as an atheist (nasthika)! Well, if the Buddha is an atheist, who then is the theist (asthika)? The entire life of the Buddha is a saga of dharma.

Sankara is criticized by some people as being opposed to the path of dharma and karma (action). But Sankara opposed only the dharma and karma that have fulfilment of desire in view. He was indeed the great teacher who taught the path of dharma and karma, of endeavour impelled by the understanding of the basic truth.

The adherence of Sankara to dharma and karma based on truth and the faith of the Buddha in the essentials of the Vedas can be appreciated only by one who has the higher vision. Without that, one will be led astray in the interpretation. In order to climb a great height, a ladder as tall as the height is needed, is it not?

On the path of dharma

Whoever subdues egotism, conquers selfish desires, destroys bestial feelings and impulses, and gives up the natural tendency to regard the body as the self that person is surely on the path of dharma; that person knows that the goal of dharma is the merging of the wave in the sea, the merging of the self in the Over-self.

In all worldly activities, be careful not to offend propriety or the canons of good nature; do not play false to the promptings of the inner voice; be prepared at all times to respect the appropriate dictates of conscience; watch your steps to see whether you are in someone else's way; be ever vigilant to discover the truth behind all this scintillating variety. This is your entire duty, your dharma. The blazing fire of wisdom (jnana), which convinces you that all this is Brahman (sarvam khalvidam Brahman), will consume into ashes all traces of your egotism and worldly attachment. You must become intoxicated with the nectar of union with Brahman; that is the ultimate goal of dharma and of action (karma) inspired by dharma.

"Sacrifice ignorance (a-jnana) and ego (ahamkara) at the altar of wisdom (jnana) and install dharma therein"; this is the message of the Vedas. Every single unselfish act that prepares the ground for the merging of the soul with the Over-Soul, that broadens the vision toward the basic Brahman immanent everywhere, is a dharmic act.

Each such act is a tiny stream that swells the river of holiness rushing toward the sea of knowledge of Brahman.

Your acts and activities are all rituals in the worship of the highest Atma,

which pervades the universe. Whatever is done in an attitude of dedication and surrender is a component of the dharma that leads to realization. The strategy of the Indian (Bharathiya) way of life is directed toward the sanctification of every movement and every thought, word, and deed into a step toward that realisation.

Symbolic meanings of spiritual terms and acts

You have to understand ancient pious actions (dharma-karmas) by entering into their symbolic meaning.

The spiritual field has many a technical term, with its own special connotation. These terms have to be clearly understood so that you can grasp correctly the teaching of the scriptures (sastras).

Take an example. People used to celebrate sacrificial rites (yajnas) in ancient times, and they sacrificed animals in these rites. But the animal is only a symbol. It was not the dumb creature that had to be cut to pieces. The animal leads a life of sacrifice, even without its career being completed at the sacrificial pole! The animal that has to be disemboweled and offered is different.

In the spiritual vocabulary, animal means "the body consciousness", "the I-consciousness", and this is what has to be slaughtered. The Lord is known as Pasupathi or Govinda. Pasupathi means the Lord of all individuals (jivas), pasu meaning individual; and govinda means the guardian of cows or individuals, "go" meaning individual.

The tending of cows is a symbolic play of Krishna to indicate His mission of tending individuals.

The scriptures (sastras) have profound inner meanings. The aim of dharma is to make the individual (jiva) give up attachment to external nature and the illusion that it causes and to make it realise its reality or rather, unrealise what it has now taken as real so that it may stand revealed in its genuine

identity.

These meanings must be learned by young and old. Take, for instance, the Siva Temple. Right in front of the idol of Siva is the image of Nandi, the bull. You are told that the sacred bull is the vehicle (vahana) of Siva, and that is the reason for its being there. But, really speaking, the bull (pasu) represents the individual (jiva) while the lingam is the symbol of Siva. "No one should pass between the bull and the lingam, the individual and the Siva," it is said; for they are to merge in one. Siva has to be seen through the two horns of Nandi, they say.

When asked the reason for this procedure, people reply, "Well, it is holier than other methods of viewing the lingam." But the inner meaning is, "You must see the Siva in the individual" - the bull Pasu and Siva (Pasupathi) are one. Nandi and God (Iswara) become the Lord of individuals (Nandiswara). Both are only two ways of referring to the same entity. When in bondage, it is Nandi; when the bound becomes free and union with God is achieved, it is God. It is worshipped and is entitled to be so honoured. The true sacrifice (yajna) occurs when the bull (pasu) is offered to the Lord of animals, Pasupathi, and its separate identity is cast away. The significance has now been forgotten.

Today, these symbolic acts have changed beyond recognition. The practices of today and the principles of yesterday are far apart. Even the smallest detail of secular life has to be inspired by the higher ideal of spiritual fulfilment. Then, even simple folk can be led step by step toward the goal. When you do not discriminate the process and purpose of every act, but still go on doing it, it becomes a funny fossilized version. Once, even Prahlada said, "Since it is difficult to destroy egotism, man finds it easy to destroy this dumb animal as a substitute. Animal sacrifice is the manifestation of the quality of inertia (thamoguna); it is the path of bondage. The sacrifice of the animal of egotism is the pure sacrifice (sathwic yajna) on the Godward path of liberation." Thus, the highest goal (paramartha) of those ancient days is turned into the fool's goal (paramartha) of these days! Every one of the ancient practices, which were once full of meaning, has grown wild beyond recognition.

Branches have shot out in various directions. It is now impossible to pluck the tree by the roots and plant a new one. So, the existing tree has to be trimmed and trained to grow straight. The highest goal has to be constantly remembered and not diluted into the lowest.

2. Divine Versus Worldly Dharma

Dharma cannot be restricted to any particular society or nation, for it is closely bound with the fortunes of the entire living world. It is a flame of light that can never be extinguished. It is untrammelled in its beneficent action. Krishna taught the Gita to Arjuna, but He intended it for the whole of humanity. Arjuna was just an excuse.

That very Gita is today correcting all mankind. It is not for any particular caste, religion, or nation; it is the very breath for humans everywhere.

Dharma expresses itself in a variety of forms. Sometimes, it is known by the people who codified it, like Manu-dharma, sometimes by the group that followed it, like caste-dharma, sometimes by the stage of life to which it is applied, like householder-dharma, and so forth. But these are subsidiary practical details and not the fundamental norm. The Atma-dharma, the divine dharma, is what I am speaking of.

Practical dharma, or rules of good behaviour (achara-dharma), relates to temporary matters and problems and physical needs, to one's passing relationships with the objective world. The very instrument of those rules, the human body, is itself not permanent, so how then can these dharma be eternal? How can their nature be described as true? The Eternal cannot be expressed by the evanescent; truth cannot reveal itself in untruth; light cannot be procured from darkness. The Eternal can emerge only from the Eternal; truth can emanate only from truth. Therefore, the objective codes of dharma relating to worldly activities and daily life, though important in their own sphere, have to be followed with the full knowledge and consciousness of the inner basic Atma-dharma. Then only can the internal and external urges cooperate and yield the bliss of harmonious progress.

If, in your daily avocations, you translate the real values of eternal dharma into love-filled acts, then your duty to the inner reality, the Atma-dharma, is also fulfilled. Always build your living on the Atmic base; then, your progress

is assured.

See the stone as God

Making God into stone, that is the effort being made today! How can such effort lead to truth when the real task is to see the stone as God? First, the form of the Godhead has to be meditated upon and imprinted on the consciousness; then, that form has to be conceived within the stone and the stone forgotten in the process, until the stone is transformed into God. In the same way, you have to imprint on your consciousness the basic dharma, the fundamental fact of Atma as the only entity; then, filled with that faith and vision, you have to deal with the manifold world of objects, its attractions and impingements. The ideal can be realized only thus. If this is done, there is no danger of the authentic meaning getting diluted or of Atma-dharma losing its lustre.

What happens when a stone is worshiped as God? The unlimited, the ever-present, the all-pervading-immanent entity, the Absolute, is visualized in the particular, in the concrete. Similarly, dharma that is universal, equal, and free can be spotted and tested in a single concrete act. Do not be misled by the idea that this is not possible.

Don't you accomplish many difficult things, things that only increase your anxiety and fear? If one is wise, can't one take up instead things that are more worthwhile, things that give peace of mind?

Follow divine dharma and be free

To be free is your birthright, not to be bound. It is only when you guide your steps along the path illumined by the universal unbound dharma that you are really free; if you stray away from the light, you get bound and you are caught.

Some might raise a doubt: How can dharma, which sets limits on thoughts and words and regulates and controls, make a person free? "Freedom" is the

name that you give to a certain type of bondage. Genuine freedom is obtained only when delusion is absent, when there is no identification with the body and senses, no servitude to the objective world. People who have escaped from this servitude and achieved freedom in the genuine sense are very few in number. Bondage lies in every act done with the consciousness of the body as the Self, for one is then the plaything of the senses. Only those who have escaped this fate are free; this "freedom" is the ideal stage to which dharma leads. With this stage constantly in mind, one who engages in the activity of living can become a liberated person (muktha-purusha).

It is only because you bind yourself that you become bound and stray away from the dharmic path. It is always so; no other person can bind you; you do it yourself. If faith in God's omnipresence is deep-rooted, you would be aware that He is your self and that you could never be bound! For that faith to grow, you must grasp Atmic bliss firmly. The reality of the Atma is the bedrock, the incontrovertible wisdom (nishchitha-jnana). Devoid of that foundation, you become the target of doubt, despair, and delusion. The maid of dharma will not wed such.

Therefore, first endeavour to become free. That is to say, as a preliminary to successful living, cultivate faith in the dharma as the core of your personality and then learn and practise the discipline necessary to reach down to that core. With that qualification acquired, you can engage fully in worldly activities, following the dharma prescribed for their regulation. Then you become a moral individual (dharma-purusha).

Those who hold the physical objective world as the all of life and the body as the Self lead wasted lives, live as meaningless as making God into stone. Making the stone into God is the holier, more wholesome task. So too, seeing divine duty (Atma-dharma) in an act transforms it into an act of worship, elevates it, and removes its binding characteristic. Performing the duties of worldly life with no regard to genuine practice of the law of truth (sathyadharma) is as unholy as treating God as stone.

Good behaviour (achara-dharma) pursued apart from the law of truth and the

law of truth divorced from good behaviour are both barren of results. Good behaviour and the law of truth are inextricably intertwined and should be treated as such. The senior officer needs the work of the junior official as much as the junior official needs the help of the senior officer. Who, then, is the bound one and who the free? Both are bound to their desire to be happy and comfortable. Until the fundamental secret of the Atma is recognized, the outer state of bondage will persist. When that is done, the burden of slavery to the senses and the objective world will be diminished.

Then, the code of behaviour toward the objective world will be merged with the code toward the inner Divinity, and the urges will all be cooperating harmoniously.

The Vedanta, the scriptures relating to the Supreme Spirit (adi-Atmic sastras), and dharma - all invite one to live and act as God (Bhagavan) and not as bondsman. Then, all acts become virtuous acts (dharma-karmas) and not acts done with intent to gain the fruits thereof (kamyakarma). The shackles of bondage cannot be avoided by a mere change of type of activity. They can be avoided only by changing the point of view from the created to the Creator (deha to the Deva). Thereby, the moral qualities will also be rendered stronger.

Egotism based on the body is hell

Some people hold the opinion that being employed is bondage, while sitting at home without any specific work is freedom! This is a sign of want of intelligence. When employed in a job, one has to obey the superior officer. But can one escape the demands and compulsions of relations even while at home? When amidst friends, can one avoid the necessity of acting according to their fancy? Can one be free at least from the need to take care of one's own body and cater to one's own comfort? How then can one feel free while in the cage of bondage? All life is a prison, whatever the difference between one type of sentence and another. It is so, as long as the attitude of identifying the Self with the body is there.

That is why Sankara once said that "egotism based on the body is what is meant by hell (naraka)." Egotism of this kind is just another form of the contra-divine attitude.

Who can remove all the thorns and pebbles from the face of the earth? The only way to avoid them is to move about with footwear. So too, with the philosophy of Vedanta, with the vision fixed on the reality (sathya), with full faith in the Brahman, which is your own essential nature, you can bypass the need to transform the external world to suit your ideal of happiness and attain the practice of truth (sathya-dharma). That one is already liberated who tramples down egotism and declares with conviction thus:

I am not the bondsman of this body,
which is the repository of all types of servitude; the body is my bondsman.
I am the master and the manipulator of everything, I am the embodiment of freedom.

All codes of duties must help in this process of destruction of the ego; they should not foster it and make it grow wild. That is the road to freedom. If a person, finding life with the son miserable, goes to the daughter and lives in her house, that is not winning freedom! That is only a way of feeding the ego. This search for sensual happiness cannot be elevated into dharma.

True dharma is the fundamental basis

After all, what is a home for? For the enjoyment of the bliss derived from the contemplation of the Lord, for getting the opportunity to meditate on the Lord undisturbed. All the rest can be ignored, but not these. The true dharma of the individual is to taste the bliss of merging with the Absolute and to attain true liberation. A person who has reached that stage can never be bound, even if put in the grimmest of prisons; on the other hand, for a person who is the slave of the body, even a blade of grass can become an instrument of

death.

True dharma is to be immersed in Atmic bliss, the inner vision, the steady faith in the identity of one's real nature with the Absolute, and the realization that all is Brahman; these four are the authentic dharma. In this physical existence as particular individuals, these four are named truth, peace, love, and nonviolence (sathya, santhi, prema, and ahimsa) for the convenience of practice (but yet saturated with the inner dharma of Atmic reality), so that particular individuals who are also personifications of that Absolute can follow them in daily life. The mode of pursuit of dharma, now, as in the past, is to adhere to these high principles in every act and thought. The truth, peace, love, and nonviolence of today are but the unintermittent immersion in Atma, the vision fixed on the inner truth, the contemplation of one's real nature, and the knowledge that all is Brahman, the one and only. These, the fundamental and the derived, must be coordinated and harmonized. Then only can it be termed Atma-dharma.

It does not matter what your activity is or what name and form you have chosen. A chain is a chain whatever the material; it binds whether it is iron or gold, doesn't it? So too, whether the work is of this type or that, as long as the Atma-dharma is the base and the Absolute Principle (Atma-thathwa) is the root, it is dharma, beyond doubt.

Such work will bless one with the fruit of peace (santhi).

When the waves of egotist fear or greed drive one forward, into the privacy of the home, the loneliness of the forest, or any other refuge, it is impossible to escape suffering. The cobra does not cease to be a cobra when it lies coiled; then, too, it is cobra. In daily practice, when acts are motivated by the basic principle of the reality of the Atma, every act becomes stamped with the seal of dharma. But when acts are motivated by convenience and selfish interest, the dharma becomes pseudo-dharma. It is a variety of bondage, however attractive it may be.

Like prisoners in a jail pushed in a single file by wardens, either to the court of

trial or to the dining barracks, the prompting of the senses pushes the bondsman forward either to a place of sorrow or to a place of relief.

Why, even the feeling "that is a friend" or "this is an enemy" is an error. This delusion has to be given up. The Lord, the embodiment of love, is the only constant friend, relative, companion, guide, and protector. Know this and live in that knowledge. This is dharma built on the bedrock of understanding, this is life built on the bedrock of dharma. Ignoring this fundamental basis, when attention is concentrated on external polish, the goal moves beyond reach. Attachment to the world can be destroyed only by attachment to the Lord.

Why complain that the ground cannot be seen when all the while your gaze is fixed on the sky? Watch the ground and look at the sheet of water that reflects the sky - then you can see, at the same time, the sky above and the earth below. So too, to adhere to the law of truth (sathya-dharma) (which, after all, is the practice of the immanent Atmic principle) you must see in every act the reflection of the glory of the Atma; then, attachment to the Lord will transmute attachment to the world into a pure offering. The goal should not be altered or lowered; that is to say, the essentials should be kept intact. Dharma does not depend on the various names and forms that its application entails; they are not so basic; dharma depends more on the motives and the feelings that direct it and canalize it.

3. The Basic Flaw

One cannot escape from disquiet as long as fundamental ignorance persists; mere change of occupation, prompted by the desire for more comfort or the need for satisfying some passing likes, will not give lasting satisfaction. It is like hoping to improve matters in a dark room by a mere readjustment of furniture. However, if a lamp is lit, passage across the room is rendered easier even without readjusting furniture. There is no need to interfere with the furniture at all.

So too, in this benighted world, it is difficult to move about truthfully, correctly, and peacefully without knocking against some obstacle or other. How then are you to succeed? Light the lamp! Let it reveal the reality; get the light of spiritual wisdom (jnana). That will solve all the difficulties. You may claim that you live according to dharma, but your basic flaw is that your acts are not done in the spirit of dedication. If so done, they get stamped with the authentic mark of dharma.

Some clever people might raise a doubt and ask: "Can we then kill and injure in the name of the Lord, dedicating the act to Him?" Well, how can a person get the attitude of dedicating all activities to the Lord without at the same time being pure in thought, word, and deed? Love, equanimity, rectitude, nonviolence - these are the attendant virtues of the servant of the Lord. How can cruelty and callousness coexist with these virtues? To have selflessness, the spirit of self-sacrifice, and the spiritual eminence required for the dedicatory outlook, one must have first won the four characteristics of truth, peace, love, nonviolence (sathya, santhi, prema, ahimsa). Devoid of these, mere naming will not make any deed a votive offering.

Acts that are expressions of dharma are deathless, and only those who know that they are deathless can perform them. That is the highest destiny of humanity. Instead of reaching it, people are intent on doing acts against dharma. People everywhere degrade themselves from their status as children of eternity (amritha-putra) to that of children of futility (anritha-putra)!

Holding nectar in their grasp, they are drinking the poison of sensual pleasure.

Neglecting the joy of contemplation of the fundamental Atmic reality of the universe, they are entangling themselves in the external trappings of this objective world of appearances. One can only bewail that this fate has overwhelmed mankind!

Dharma and the Gita

The Gita also declares in a verse in Chapter 14,

Brahmano hi prathishtha aham amrithasya avyayasya cha
Shashvathasya cha dharmasya sukhasya aikanthikasya cha.

I am the bliss of Brahman, of positive immortality,
of timeless dharma, and of eternal bliss.

This immortal dharma (amritha-dharma) is described in the Upanishads, and since the Gita is the kernel of the Upanishads, the same is emphasized in the Gita also. The dharmic way of life is as the very breath; it is the road to self-realization. Those who walk along it are dear to the Lord.

He dwells with all who are truthful, whose deeds spring from dharma. That is why the Gita teaches Arjuna to develop certain qualities that help the practice of the Atmic dharma. These are delineated in verses 13 to 20 of Chap. 12. Those who have drunk deep at the fountain of the Gita will remember them. The most important of the verses in this context is:

Ye thu dharmyamritham idham yathoktham paryupasathe.

Shraddhadhana Math parama bhakthasthe atheeva me priyah.

But those who revere this dharmic way to immortality and who completely engage themselves with faith, making Me the ultimate goal, are exceedingly dear to me.

What a grand idea this verse conveys! This is the concluding verse of the series that gives the qualities one has to develop. It calls the entire group the dharmic way to immortality (dharmya-amritham)! The Lord has declared therein that those who have these qualities, those who trust in Him as the only ultimate goal, those who are attached to Him single-mindedly - those are dearest and nearest to Him.

Note the expression "dharmic way to immortality (dharmya-amritham)" used here. Ponder it and draw inspiration from it. The nectar of the Lord's grace is deserved only by those who adhere to the Lord's dharma. Simple folk believe they have devotion toward the Lord, but they do not pause to inquire whether the Lord has love toward them. People who pine to discover this are rather rare. That is really the true measure of spiritual success.

The same person is king to his subjects, son to his parents, enemy to his enemies, husband to his wife, and father to his son. He plays many roles. Yet, if you ask him who he is, he would be wrong if he gave any of these relationships as his distinctive mark, for these marks pertain to physical relationship or activities. They denote physical kinships or professional relationships, names attached to temporary statuses. Nor can he reply that he is the head, the feet, the hands, etc., for they are but the limbs of the physical form. He is more real than all the limbs, beyond names and forms, which are all falsities that hide the basic Brahman; he is known as "I". Reflect over that entity well and discover who that "I" really is.

The Atma has no form

When it is so hard to analyse and understand your entity, how can you pronounce judgement on other entities with any definiteness? What you refer to as "I" and as "You" relate to the body, the appearance; they are not real (sat). The Atma is one and indivisible; dharma based on That is genuine dharma.

Some ask, "You go on saying Atma, Atma. Well, what is the form of this Atma?" But wherefrom is Atma to get form? It is eternal, unchanging, immortal. It is goodness, right, beneficence. It is immutable, unblemished. It cannot be limited by any particular name or form. It can be understood by the spiritual wisdom (jnana) that dawns in and through the body, i.e. as acquired as the result of activity (karma-deha). The body alone has name and form, so, in every activity of the body, you should manifest the dharma based on Atma-consciousness (Atma-dharma).

It is said, "the Atma is neither male nor female; neither cattle nor sheep nor horse nor elephant nor bird nor tree; it is beyond such categorizations." These distinctions and differences arise on the basis of activity; the Atma is incapable of modification; only one thing can be posited about it, viz., that It is. The sum and substance of all this is that the Atma is the Absolute, the highest goal (paramartha). The rest is all particular, insignificant, false, unreal, denotable, and identifiable.

Take a palanquin. Before being transformed into that article, it was a tree, which was changed into timber and planks and finally into a palanquin. With every change in form, the name is also changed. Sitting in a palanquin, no one would claim to be on a piece of timber or on a tree. Objects undergo change; they are not eternal. They are not real.

Objects can be distinguished only by means of name and form; they can be described only by means of their characteristics. For they are artificial and temporary.

What exactly is a chair? It is a particular modification of wood, isn't it? Remove the wood, and the chair also disappears. Think of the wood, which is the substance, and the "appearance" of the chair will vanish. So too, dharma! Dharma based on caste (varna), dharma for a householder (grihastha), dharma for a forest dweller (vanaprastha), dharma for a renunciate (sanyasa), dharma for a student (brahmacharya), this dharma, that dharma - all are modifications of the basic dharma, like the chair, the bench, the palanquin, etc. The separate varieties disappear as soon as you go deep into their nature; the corporeal dharmas fade away, and only dharma according to the Atmic consciousness (Atma-dharma) remains. The articles of furniture vanish and the wood alone remains; so too, the objective dharmas disappear and Atmic consciousness alone shines in unique glory.

Of course, for the worldly career, the corporeal dharmas are important. I won't say they are not. Just as wood is turned into furniture and used, so dharma based on the Atmic consciousness, or dharma based on peace (santhi), or the law of truth (sathya) has to be shaped into dharma for a householder, dharma for the forest dweller, dharma based on caste, dharma for women, dharma for men, etc. The stuff is the same in all; the substance is identical, in every separate form. How can the substance be used up? It can only be transmuted and transformed and the various modifications named differently when used for different purposes.

Dharma based on the Atmic consciousness can be viewed piecemeal and compartmentalized for different purposes, just as wood is hewn, sawed, joined, arranged, and rearranged. But it is dharma based on the Atmic consciousness nevertheless. As long as the different systems of dharma are derived from that "wood", there is no harm; remember, however, that the furniture can never be regrouped into the original tree! Apply the Atmadharma in the fields of worldly activity, but don't call the worldly dharma Atma-dharma! That would be playing false to the Ideal, the Absolute.

Dharma is ...

Dharma is the moral path; the moral path is the light; the light is bliss

(ananda). Dharma is characterized by holiness, peace, truth, and fortitude. Dharma is yoga, union, merger; it is truth (sathya). Its attributes are justice, sense control, sense of honour, love, dignity, goodness, meditation, sympathy, nonviolence; such is the dharma that persists through the ages. It leads one on to universal love and unity. It is the highest discipline and the most profitable.

All this "unfoldment" began with dharma; all this is stabilized by truth (sathya); truth is inseparable from dharma. Truth is the law of the universe, which makes the sun and moon revolve in their orbits. Dharma is the Vedas and the mantras, the spiritual wisdom (jnana) they convey. Dharma is the course, the path, the law. Wherever there is adherence to morality, there one can see the law of truth (sathya-dharma) in action. In the Bhagavatha too, it is said, "where there is dharma, there is Krishna; where there are both dharma and Krishna together, there is victory." Dharma is the very embodiment of the Lord; since the world itself is the body of the Lord, the world is but another name for the moral order; no one can deny it, now or ever.

4. Masculine And Feminine Natures

People refer to various duties, rights, and obligations, but these are not the basic dharmic truth (sathya dharma); they are only means and methods of regulating the complications of living. They are not fundamental.

All these moral codes and approved behaviours are prompted by the need to cater to two types of creatures and two types of natures, viz. masculine and feminine.

They connote creation (prakriti) and God (Paramatma), gross and subtle, inert and conscious, the all-pervading duet. All this creation came about by the interrelation of the inert and the conscious, didn't it? So too, all the various morals have emerged on account of this bifurcation. All this ramification and elaboration of dharma is due to this: the masculine and the feminine.

The chief guides of living

Therefore, the chief dharma for the practical progress of the world is the moral conduct and behaviour of these two; whatever any great teacher might teach, it cannot go beyond these two distinct natures.

The dharma for the male and female are important applications of the dharmic truth mentioned above. Other codes and disciplines are but accessories, tributaries like the streams that meet the Godavari when it is coursing forward. They are related to the various circumstances, situations, and statuses, which are temporary; you have to pay attention to the main river and not the tributaries. Similarly, take the major masculine and feminine dharma as the chief guides of living and do not give the minor accessory dharmas any decisive place in the scheme of living.

Dharma for women

The Feminine Principle is spoken of as the illusion imposed upon Himself by

the Lord, as the energy with which He equipped Himself out of His own will. This is maya, the feminine form. This is why woman is considered the embodiment of the highest energy (Parasakthi Swarupa).

She is the faithful companion of man, his fortune; since she is the concretization of the will of the Lord, she is mystery, wonder, the representative of the protective principle, the queen of his home, his beneficence, the illumination of the house.

Women, who are the repositories of the embodiment of energy (sakthi swarupa), are in no way inferior. How full of fortitude, patience, and love is their nature! Their self control is seldom equalled by men. They are the exemplars and leaders for men to tread the spiritual path. Pure selfless love is inborn in women. Women who are full of knowledge, who are cultured, who are bound by love, and who are keen on discriminating whether their words and deeds are in conformity with dharma - such women are like the goddess Lakshmi, bringing joy and good fortune to the home. That home, where husband and wife are bound together by holy love, where every day both are engaged in the reading of books that feed the soul, where the name of the Lord is sung and His glory remembered - that home is really the home of the Lord, Vaikunta! The woman who is attached to her husband by means of love is indeed a flower radiating rare perfume; she is a precious gem, shedding lustre in the family.

A wife endowed with virtue is really a brilliant jewel.

Chastity

Chastity is the ideal for womankind. By the strength derived from that virtue, they can achieve anything.

Savithri was able, through that power, to win back the life of her husband; she actually fought with the Lord of Death. Anasuya, the wife of the sage Athri and the mother of Dattatreya, was able to transform even the Trinity into infants. Nalayani, who was devoted to her leper husband, could by the

mysterious force of her chastity stop the sun in its course.

Chastity is the crown jewel of women. That is the virtue for which she has to be most extolled. Its beneficent consequences defy description. It is the very breath of her life. By means of her chastity and the power it grants, she can save her husband from calamity. She saves herself by her virtue and wins, without doubt, even heaven through her chastity. Damayanthi burned to ashes a hunter who attempted to molest her, by the power of her "word". She bore all the travails of lonely life in the jungle when her husband, King Nala, deserted her and she suddenly became the victim of cruel fate.

Modesty

Modesty is essential for woman; it is her priceless jewel. It is against dharma for a woman to overstep the limits of modesty; crossing the limits brings about many calamities. Why, the very glory of womanhood will be destroyed. Without modesty, woman is devoid of beauty and culture. Humility, purity of thought and manners, meekness, surrender to high ideals, sensitivity, sweetness of temper, the particular blend of all these qualities is modesty. It is the most invaluable of all jewels for women.

Through her innate sense of propriety, the modest woman will ever keep within limits. She becomes automatically aware which behaviour is proper and which is improper. She will stick only to virtuous deeds and behaviour. Modesty is the test of a woman's grandeur.

A woman without modesty injures the interests of womanhood itself, besides undermining her own personality.

She is like a fragranceless flower, which the world does not cherish or honour, or even approve of. The absence of modesty makes life, for a woman, however rich in other accomplishments, a waste and a vacuum. Modesty lifts her to the heights of sublime holiness. The modest woman wields authority in the home and outside, in the community as well as in the world.

Some might interrupt and ask, "But women who have swallowed all the compunctions of modesty are being honoured today! They strut about with heads erect, and the world honours them not a whit less." I have no need to acquaint myself with these activities of the present-day world. I do not concern myself with them. They may receive honour and respect of a sort, but the respect is not authorized or deserved. When honour is offered to the undeserving, it is tantamount to insult; to accept it when offered is to demean the very gift. It is not honour but flattery that is cast on the immodest by the selfish and the greedy. It is like spittle, dirty and unpleasant.

Of course, the modest woman will not crave honour or praise. Her attention will always be on the limits that she should not transgress. Honour and praise come to her unasked and unnoticed. The honey in the flower or lotus does not crave bees; it does not plead with the bees to come. Since the bees have tasted the sweetness, they themselves search for the flowers and rush in. They come because of the attachment between themselves and sweetness. So, too, is the relationship between the woman who knows the limits and the respect she evokes.

If a frog sits on a lotus and proclaims that fact to the world, does it mean that it knows the value of the beauty or the sweetness of that flower? Has it tasted any of these? It may flatter the lotus, but has it at least recognized what it contains? The honour and respect given to woman today is of this type, rendered by people who do not know what to appreciate and how. They do not know the standards of judgement, they have no faith in the ultimate values, and they do not respect the really good and great. So how can we call the thing they offer "honour" or "respect"? It can only be called "a disease" or, at best, "etiquette". That is all.

The principle of Atmic dharma will not allow the term "woman" to be applied to "a woman without modesty".

Heaping respect and honour upon a person who does not follow Atmic dharma is like heaping decorations on a body that has no life in it. The soul that has left the body cannot enjoy the respect shown to the corpse. So too, if

a person who is unaware of the Reality, who has not experienced the purpose of the Atma's embodiment, is crowned with fame and glory, who derives joy therefrom?

The modest woman will not care for such meaningless trash and tinsel; she will rather seek self-respect, which is much more satisfying. That characteristic makes her the Lakshmi of the home. That is why the wife is referred to as Lakshmi of the home. If the wife has no such mark, the home becomes a seat of ugliness.

Woman: the prop of home and religion

The woman is the prop of the home and religion. She plants and fosters religious faith or dries up and uproots it. Women have natural aptitude for faith and spiritual endeavour. Women with devotion, faith, and meekness can lead men on the Godward path and the practice of holy virtues. They will get up early, before dawn, clean the home, and, after finishing their bath etc., sit for a while engaged in repetition of the name (japam) and meditation (dhyana). They will have in their homes one small room set apart for the worship of the Lord. There, they will place images of the Lord, as well as pictures of holy sages and of gurus and guides. They will consider the room specially sacred and fill the atmosphere with their prayers both morning and evening, as well as on holy days and festivals. A woman who is steadfast doing these will be able to transmute even her atheist husband, persuading him to join the prayers or engage in some good activity or some scheme of social service marked by the attitude of dedication to the Lord. Indeed, it is the woman who maintains the home; that is her mission. She is truly the representative of divine energy (sakthi).

On the other hand, if the wife tries to pull the husband away from the Godward path, from the spiritual to the level of the sensual, or if the husband treats the wife who is disposed to seek joy from her spiritual endeavour as a person following the wrong track and tries to drag her away from it, the home is unworthy of that name. It is not a home but an inferno, where ghosts and evil spirits revel.

Really, woman should strive to achieve the knowledge of the soul and live every moment in the consciousness of her being only the Atma; she must evince always a desire to become one with the divine consciousness.

The home where the woman is such and where the husband and wife are leading their lives in the shade of great ideals, where together they sing the glory of the name of the Lord and spend themselves in good deeds, where truth, peace, and love reign, where regular reading of holy books is done, where the senses are under control, and where there is equal treatment for all creation prompted by the knowledge of the basic unity of all creation - such a home is certainly Heaven on Earth.

A wife with such a nature is a wife worth the name. She must have real love toward the husband; only then can she be called housewife (grihini). Only then is she a dharmic housewife (dharma-pathni, the bharya), the instrument and companion for dharma, wealth (artha), and desire (kama). She who knows the mind of her husband and speaks softly and sweetly is the real friend. Why, sometimes, when the wife has to point out the path of dharma to the husband, she takes on the role even of a father! And when the husband is down with illness, she is the mother.

A woman must accord first place to the service of her husband; that is true worship for her. Her prayers, worship, and spiritual exercises (puja) can wait. Without serving the husband, she cannot attain bliss in worship or meditation.

As a matter of fact, the Lord must be welcomed as represented by the husband, and all service rendered to him must be elevated to the level of worship; that is the path of genuine duty. If every act is done as if it is for the sake of the Atma and its merger with highest Atma (Paramatma), then activity becomes dedicated to the Lord. All such acts save; they do not bind.

It does not matter how bad or low the husband is; through love, the wife must bring him round, correct him, and help him gain the blessings of the Lord. It is not correct to feel that her progress alone matters and that she has no concern in his improvement or uplift. On the other hand, she must feel that

the welfare of the husband, the joy of the husband, the wishes of the husband, the salvation of the husband are the panacea for her also. Such a woman will automatically receive the grace of the Lord, without special effort. Grace will be showered upon her; the Lord will always be by her side and be kind to her in all ways. By her virtue, she will ensure the salvation of her husband.

5. Education For Women

Education is necessary for both men and women. But education for women has to be in accordance with their special needs. Educated women are really the promoters of dharma for the whole world. Parents must also cooperate in equipping women with proper education. Women should not be given freedom in certain matters. I will not approve of their being given such freedom. They must be made into ideal women; their education must be so shaped.

Unbridled freedom is destructive of dharma, and it also harms the woman herself. Mixing in society without any discrimination produces ruinous results. Of course there were educated women in the past, but they never gave up their dharma, they never forgot the goal of Atmic dharma. Education (vidya) must be built on the basis of discrimination (viveka). Sulabha, Savithri, Anasuya, Gargi, Nalayani, and other such models of chastity, devotees of the Lord like Meera, yoginis like Chudala, all were born in this country of God (Bharatha-desa) and strengthened dharma by their adherence to it. Once, when Sulabha was discoursing on the Atma with all her scholarship and experience, even Janaka was astounded! It is through the example of such great and holy women, with their character and conduct inspired by devotion and spiritual wisdom, that even today simplicity, humility, and devotion shine in the hearts of the women of this country of God.

Today, women should draw inspiration from them; efforts must be made to live as they did in the past. The Hindu woman must always have before her as her guide the ideal of dharma and progress in spiritual discipline.

She can master any subject related to the objective world that is prominent today, but the welfare of the spirit should not be forgotten; she must get interested in Vedantic study, which cultivates the inner vision. A woman without this training is a rock without support, a danger to herself and others, a very unbalanced individual. Sulabha and others who pursued such studies became expounders of Brahman (Brahmavadins) of great fame. India

produced several such female saints and scholars. Learned scholars (pundits) and wise persons used to approach such women for inspiration and guidance.

Progress is based on proper education for women

On what is progress based? The progress of the nation, the community, and the family depends on the proper education of women. The country can be lifted to its pristine greatness only through women mastering the science of realization of the Reality (Atma-vidya). If the nation is to have lasting prosperity and peace, women have to be trained through an educational system that emphasizes moral conduct and moral qualities. The cause for the present fall in moral standards and absence of social peace is the neglect of this aspect of women's education. The earth and sky are still the same; the change is in the ideal of education, from dharma to a-dharma.

The education of today is spoken of as vidya, but that is merely a way of calling it. It doesn't deserve that name, if you consider the present actions of the educated and their personality traits. The educated person must be capable of imbibing the inner joy of the Atma, regardless of external circumstances; that person must have grasped the purpose of existence and must be aware of the discipline of realization. In the old days, the grace of the Lord was the diploma that every student sought to secure. That diploma was awarded to those who were proficient in the cultivation of morality, the knowledge of the Atma, sublimation of instincts, good conduct, pure habits, control of the senses, restraint of the mind, and development of divine qualities. Today, however, things are different. Diplomas can now be gained by mugging up a few books! One cannot acquire moral and spiritual training through modern schooling.

Every woman must be given education in a well-planned manner. She must be able to understand the problems of the country. She must render such service and help as she can, within the limits of her resources and capacity, to the country, community, and family. No nation can be built except on the culture of its women. The coming generation is shaped by the mothers of today; this generation is so full of a-dharma and injustice because their

mothers were not vigilant and intelligent enough. Well, what is past is past. To save at least the next generation, women have to be warned in time and guided to take the ancients as their model.

Past, present, or future, for all time, women are the backbone of progress, the heart of the nation, the very breath. They play the chief role in the dharma of life here below, a key role that is charged with holiness. The woman's mission is to lay down the canons of rightness and morality. She must provide children with moral and spiritual training. When the mother is imbued with dharma, the children get the benefit and get similarly saturated.

When she is skilled in morals, the children learn to be moral. Therefore, the level of education among women decides whether a country is to prosper or decline. Her acts and conduct are crucial factors.

The responsibility of the elders and the parents is very great in this. Take the students of today. No trace of culture can be seen in them; matters of the spirit and talk of the Atma raise laughter among them! A mastery of words, a servitude to tailoring, these have become the fashion. This is not genuine culture. The educated women of today are helpless when it comes to managing a home. Home to them is but a hotel, they are so helplessly dependent on the cook and the maid. The educated woman is but a painted doll, decorating the modern home; she is a handicap to the husband, a weight around his neck. He is squeezed by her insistent demands for spending money on all kinds of objects. She does not share in the tasks of housekeeping, so by sheer idleness, eating, and sleeping without exercise, she develops illness that leads her quickly to death.

The wanton behaviour of women has enveloped the world of today in an atmosphere of declining dharma.

Women are harming themselves by running after fleeting pleasure, disregarding the need to develop good character and elevating qualities. They are enamoured of pseudo freedom, which feeds their conceit. To get fixed up in a job, to earn degrees, to move about with all and sundry without

distinction and discrimination, to discard respect for elders and give up fear of sin and evil, to overlook the claims of the good and the holy, to force the husband to dance to one's tune, to deny the tribute of repentance to one's errors - are these the signs of education? No; they are all the monstrous shapes of uneducation (a-vidya), the uneducated egotistical attitudes that make a person ugly and repelling.

If the wife feels that the husband's home is sacred, then that home itself will endow her with every skill and qualification. There is no place anywhere that excels such a home for her. One saintly poet sang that the home is her temple, her school, her playground, her political arena, her field of sacrifice, her hermitage.

Study and society not harmful in themselves

Educated women can do useful service to the community around them according to their skill, taste, inclination, desire, character, educational status, mode of living, discipline, or scholarship. But they should avoid tarnishing the reputation of their parents, their family, or themselves. A woman without a good character is as bad as "dead"; so, women must be ever vigilant when they move about in the world. They should avoid flippant talk or free mixing. The discriminating woman will engage only in acts that will add to the lustre of her husband's fame and honour, never an act that will tarnish it. That is why it is said that "virtue (sadguna) is the sign of the educated person, the thing that makes education worthwhile." I do not declare that women should not be educated or should not move in society. Wherever they move, if they are endowed with good qualities and if the good qualities are accompanied by good actions, good habits, and adherence to the eternal (sanathana) dharma and spiritual discipline, then their study is really worthwhile and society is indeed benefited. Study and society are not harmful in themselves; they react with the nature of the people who make use of them and yield good or bad results. The cat holds the kitten as well as the rat in the selfsame mouth, but with what a difference! The kitten, it fondles; the rat, it kills. The bite is neutral, it is the rat or kitten that decides how it behaves.

So too, knowledge can develop discrimination, inspire the springs of service, prompt inquiry into the Reality, promote the search for the Absolute, and even pave the way for becoming a sage (paramahansa). On the other hand, it might feed and strengthen the roots of falsehood, hypocrisy, cruelty, and injustice; it might teach people newer means of deceit and ruin the career of people on earth. It might turn love into poisonous hatred and truth into a bone of contention.

Adhere to the dictates of dharma

Therefore, whatever subject a woman might have studied and mastered, whatever the degree she has won, whatever the status of her husband or of herself, she must hold fast to these truths: real charm consists in good character, morality is the very breath of woman, modesty is the very life force, and adherence to truth is her daily duty. She must plant the seedlings of fear (of sin, of the Lord) in her heart and cultivate the charm of humility. In the religious, moral, and physical fields, she must adhere to the strict dictates of dharma and take that as the essence of all education (vidya). She must be prepared to sacrifice even her life for the sake of maintaining honour; she must nourish and preserve her chastity and her adoration of the husband. This is the chief dharma of woman.

6. Practise Dharma!

The principles of dharma will not change to suit the convenience of people. Dharma is immutable. Dharma persists as dharma then, now, and forever. Of course, the practices and rules of applied dharma might change according to changing causes; but even then, the practices have to be tested on the basis of the scriptures (sastras), not on the basis of advantage. There should be no such calculation. The scriptures may not always support rules that yield tangible visible advantage, nor can the Vedas etc. be expected to indicate only such acts. Dharma cannot be tested on those lines; direct or ocular proof is impossible. Mimamsakas state that dharma can be known only through the Vedic mantras and that the Vedas attempt to elucidate only truths that are beyond ocular demonstration.

If dharma is followed with an eye on the consequences, it might even be neglected when the advantage is not patent or immediate. Everyone will not have the same motive or the same standard. For example, each will have a different idea of the fruits of bathing, morning and evening prayers, repetition of the name, and meditation, which are prescribed. Some people cancel repeating the Gayatri in the evenings and instead recite the thousand names (sahasranama) of Siva or Vishnu. "Perform morning and evening prayers at the proper time (kale sandhya samachareth); that is the prescription." But, in spite of such directions, is it not a breach of dharma to cancel the evening prayers like this? Similarly there are prescriptions for every caste.

Chathurvarnyam maya shrishtham guna karma Vibhagashah
I created the four castes (varnas), dividing them on the basis of quality and activities.

says the Gita. The meaning is quite clear; that is the teaching. But, relying on all kinds of paltry arguments and dry reasonings, many follow the dharma

that appeals to them and, without any fear of God or sin, also drag the innocent and ignorant onto the wrong path.

The protection of dharma

The Lord comes down now and then to uplift the downtrodden and to reestablish dharma. This is the reason for the incarnation of the Lord, as has been said in ringing tones in the Gita.

Dharma samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge.
I create myself for the establishment of dharma in every age.

Here, one point has to be clearly grasped. Many who read the Gita take it that the Lord incarnates when dharma is destroyed and when the forces of a-dharma begin to prevail. But there is no basis to draw the conclusion that dharma gets destroyed. The Gita does not say so. The word used is diminish (glani); that is to say, when the indications are that dharma is in danger, "I will come in order to protect dharma from harm." He did not say that He will come down to protect it and preserve it after dharma has been destroyed! Of what use is a doctor after life has left? So too, after dharma, the very life-breath of humanity, has been destroyed, what is the need for the incarnation of the Lord (Bhavarogavaidya)? What is the Lord to protect? This is why the word decline is used to indicate not the destruction but the decline and weakening of dharma. The protection of dharma is the task of the Lord, for dharma is the very breath of the soul (jivi).

Falling into a-dharma

Dharma is not an ordinary affair. One who does not practise dharma is as bad as dead; one who practises it is of the divine nature. Now, there is need to turn people onto the dharmic path by means of the traditional methods of good advice, tempting them with the attractive consequences of following the

path, threatening to dissociate from those who do not, and inflicting punishment as a last resort (traditional methods of sama, dhana, bheda, and danda). In ancient times, people never gave up the practice of dharma, even when threatened with death at the point of the sword. Now, without even the slightest pressure from others, people slide down and fall into adharma.

Indeed, dharma is interpreted in various confusing ways, and those who strictly follow the real dharma are obstructed, laughed at, and treated as worse than dried-up grass. Those who anxiously adhere to dharma are branded as cheats, hypocrites, and ignoramuses. Such calumniators do not know what dharma is or what its principles are. Unfortunate individuals! They have no capacity to grasp the meaning of that word.

You can judge for yourself how dharma can be understood by people who do not know even the literal meaning of the word. What can people born blind know of the sun or its rays? Of course, they can feel the heat when the rays of the sun fall on their bodies, but they can't have an idea of the nature of sun, its form, its shape, its brilliance, etc. So too, for a person who has no conception of dharma, who has no faith in dharma, the joy derived by its observance is incomprehensible. To dilate on dharma before such people is as useless a venture as blowing a conch before people who are stone-deaf. They can only see the conch at the lips of the person blowing it, but they can't hear the least bit of sound. So, when dharma is taught to people or extolled, care must be taken to see that they have the faith, earnestness, and eagerness to practise it. Only such must be handled and sought to be corrected. Later, by the promptings of their own experience and the joy they derive therefrom, even the ignorant will plant the seedlings of dharma in their hearts.

Nowadays, many educated persons immersed in Vedic and scriptural (sastric) knowledge and classic scholarship have lost faith in the texts of which they are masters. They have become afraid to stick firmly to dharma, for it is laughed at by their cynical friends, They have yielded to the crooked arguments of critics and sold their heritage for trivial returns. They interpret the fast on the eleventh day of the lunar month (Ekadasi) as one of the means for regulating health, the waving of the camphor flame as a remedy

for asthmatics, breathing exercises (pranayama) as helping digestion, pilgrimages as educational tours, and charity as a means of self-advertisement, thus demeaning and desecrating the holy injunctions of dharma.

Such people only deceive the world; they are barbarians who do not know or heed the principles of dharma.

They can learn something from a perusal of Manu's text on dharma.

Arsham dharmopadhesham cha
Vedashasthra a-virodhina
Yastharkena anusandhaththe
Sa dharmam veda, netarah

Anyone who wants to know dharma can know it only by following a system of logic (tarka), that is not opposed to Veda and the scriptures.

Thus said Manu: No conclusion opposed to Veda can be logical. Dry logic is profitless, and Manu does not recommend it to those who want to study the Vedas, etc. Still, many today stick to this logical reasoning and follow a-dharma themselves, dragging others with them into the wrong path.

That is why Veda Vyasa declared long ago:

Na yakshanthi, na hoshyanthi, hethuvadha vimohithah
Neechakarma karishyanthi, hethuvadha vimohithah

Those who follow the path of causalism and logic, seeking cause-and-effect

connection,
will not offer sacrifices in the sacred fire, but will involve themselves in low
demeaning acts.

Veda Vyasa said this in Aranyaparva of the Mahabharatha, while describing
the conditions that are to be expected in this age (the Kali-yuga).

Follow dharma, as do the elements

Only by following the path of dharma or rectitude do the sun and moon
revolve unerringly in their orbits.

Only the call of dharma makes all divine powers adhere to their various duties
and responsibilities. Only dharma keeps the five elements bound to the
principles of their nature.

You should derive the greatest possible benefit from dharma and, while
following it, avoid causing any injury to yourselves or others. You must spread
the glory of dharma by making yourself a shining example of the peace and
joy it gives. Do not follow the trail of dry logic; do not confuse your brain by
cynicism and prejudice; do not get interested in what others do or believe in
and try to reform them or correct their footsteps. Have faith in the basic
Atma, which is your real truth; test all lines of conduct on that basis, whether
it will hinder the process of revealing the Atma or not. In the light of that faith
and that test, carry on your daily duties and rites. Then, you will never fall
into error. You will also derive great joy.

There are worldly maxims like "being engaged in a profession is the sign of a
human (udyogam purushalakshanam)", or "being engaged in a task is the
sign of a human (karmam purushalakshanam)." But the real maxim is,
"Observance of dharma is the sign of a human (dharmam
purushalakshanam)." Everyone must engage in tasks infused with dharma,

while putting into action the four goals of human life (purusha-arthas): dharma, wealth (artha), desire (kama), and liberation (moksha).

Dharma for men

Just as faithfulness to the husband (pathivratha-dharma) is for women, celibacy (brahmacharya) is for men. Just as woman should consider one person and one person only as her master and husband, man too has to be faithful to one woman and one woman only, as his mate, his wife. She has to consider the husband as God and worship him and minister to and follow his desires for the fulfilment of her duty of loyalty to the husband (pathivratha); so too, man should honour his wife as the "mistress of the home" and act in accordance with her wishes, for she is the Lakshmi of the home (Grihalakshmi). Then only can he deserve the status of "man".

Name and fame, honour and dishonour, vice and wickedness, good and bad are all equal and uniform for both men and women. There is no such thing as woman alone being bound and men being free; both are equally bound by the rules of dharma. Both will fall into a-dharma if they behave without consideration of the claims of the four pairs of attributes mentioned above. Men are bound in certain matters, just as women are; men have no right to do certain things. There are some important pledges between the husband and the wife.

7. Gayatri: Mother Of Mantras

All that is visible shines as Gayatri, for speech is Gayatri and all objects are speech, are indicated by speech, and are subsumed in speech. It is speech that describes them, declares them, and denotes them. All objects are also of the world. Nothing can go beyond it. This world is the body of mankind; one can't leap out of the body.

The breath (prana) that sustains a person is inside the heart (hridaya), and it cannot move outside and beyond the heart.

The Gayatri has four feet and six categories. The categories are speech, objects, world, body, breath, and heart (vak, bhutha, prithvi, sarira, prana, and hridaya). The Supreme Being that is extolled by this Gayatri is indeed exalted, sacred, glorious. As has been said, all this objective multiplicity is but a fraction of His body. The number and nature, the measure and meaning of the objects are beyond understanding; yet all this is but a quarter of His magnificence. The other three quarters are His effulgent immortal form.

It is impossible to grasp the mystery of that splendour-filled form. This Supreme Being indicated by the Gayatri is indeed referred to as Brahman.

He is the sky (akasa), beyond the comprehension of a person; He is spoken of as "outside the personality of people (bahirardha purushakashah)" - this is the mark of the waking stage. The Supreme Being is the sky, inside the personality (anthah purushakashah) - this is the mark of the "dream stage". He is the sky inside the heart of a person; He fills and fulfils it - this is the "deep-sleep stage". Whoever knows this truth attains fullness and Brahman. That is, the one who knows the three states of wakefulness, dream, and deep sleep (jagrath, swapna, and sushupti) is himself Brahman.

How ridiculous it is that a person, known as a divine being and bearing the name of this embodiment of the Atma, should become the repository of egotism and consequent impurity, busy in the unholy pursuit of injustice!

How calamitous! At least for being known even today as a "divine being", one should try to practise the path that will endow one with an atom of that glory.

Then what should we say of dharma for people? How can people who have not cared to earn even the infinitesimal glory of the Primal Supreme Being be expected to practise dharma for people? Not even the most diligent search will now reveal a fraction of it! As the ancient sage (rishi) said,

Samdhya heeno suchirnithyam, anarhah sarva karmasu
Yadh anyath kuruthe karmano thasya phala bhagbhaveth.

The twice-born who gives up the morning-evening (sandhya) worship falls into perdition.

Those who neglect the morning-evening worship have no right to any other type of ritual.

So say all the authoritative traditions (dharma) and Vedas. It is because the sages of ancient times performed the morning-evening worship for many years that they acquired long life, fame, glory, wisdom, and the splendour of Divinity; this is mentioned by Manu also. Therefore, from whatever point of view we consider, the brahmin who does not meditate on the Gayatri does not deserve that status.

Of course what is meant by brahmin in this context is the one who has realized the Brahman principle (Brahmathathwa) and who has purified himself by the practice of the ceaseless contemplation of Brahman. This has nothing to do with caste or even religion. Nevertheless, those who have inherited the name brahmin have a special responsibility to adhere to the morning-evening worship and the Gayatri.

The four duties of people

What exactly is sandhya? San means "well" and dhya is derived from dhyana, so sandhya refers to proper or intense meditation (dhyana) on the Lord. It means concentration on the Godhead. To fix the mind on God, the activities have to be controlled. For success in that process of control, one should overcome the handicaps of the qualities (gunas), the pure, passionate, and dull (sathwa, rajas, and thamas). When these forces of natural impulse predominate and try to direct along their channels, one must pray to God to negate their pull. That is the first duty of the one who strives toward God.

The rule of nature is that the morning is the period of pure (sathwic) quality, the noon of passionate (rajasic) quality, and the evening hour of dusk of dull (thamasic) quality. At dawn, the mind is awakened from the comfort of sleep liberated from agitations and depressions, so the mind is calm and clear. At that time, in that mental condition, meditation of the Lord is very fruitful, as everyone knows. This is why dawn worship (prathah-sandhya) is prescribed. But, ignorant of the significance, people continue doing the ritual in a blind mechanical way, simply because the ancients laid down the rule. The second duty is to perform the dawn worship, after realizing the inner and the deeper meaning of the same.

As day progresses, one is infused with the passionate quality (rajoguna), the active effortful nature, and one enters the field of daily work and toil. Before one takes the midday food, one is directed to meditate on the Lord again and to dedicate the work, as well as the fruit derived through it, to the Lord Himself. One can start eating only after this act of devotion and grateful remembrance. This is the meaning of the noontime (madhyamika) worship. By observing this ritual, passion is kept in check and is overpowered by the pure (sathwa) nature. This is the third duty of all people.

Then, people are possessed by a third nature, the dull (thamas). When evening descends, one hurries home, eats one's fill, and is overpowered by sleep. But a duty still remains. To eat and sleep is the fate of idlers and drones. When the worst of the qualities (gunas), the dull (thamas), threatens to rule, one must make a special effort to escape its coils by resorting to

prayer in the company of those who extol the Lord, reading about the glory of God, the cultivation of good virtues, and the purposeful nursing of good rules of conduct. This is the prescribed evening worship (sandhyavandana).

Therefore, the mind that emerges from the vacancy of sleep has to be properly trained and counseled; it must be made to feel that the bliss of meditation and the joy of being unaware of the outer world are much grander and more lasting than the comfort one gets by means of the daily dose of physical sleep. This bliss, this joy, can be felt and realized by all; discrimination will bring this home to you. This is the fourth duty of people.

People who, as long as they have life in them, observe the thrice-a-day worship are indeed of the highest type; they are ever glorious and attain all that is desired. Above all, they are liberated, even while alive (jivanmuktha).

Cultivate the soul-force

Care must be taken to see that the morning-evening prayers are not taken as a routine ritual, one among many laid down for observance. This is to be carried out while one is aware of the significance and dwelling on the inner meaning. One should clearly grasp the sense of the Gayatri Mantra. It is necessary to feel the identity between the effulgent Being (Atma-swarupa) mentioned therein and oneself. Only those who are ignorant of its meaning will neglect the Gayatri.

Manu lays special stress on just this; he has declared the Gayatri to be the very life-breath of the brahmin.

It is not only his declaration: it is the truth. What is more efficient for spiritual uplift than meditation on the effulgence that illumines and feeds the intellect? What is more vitally fruitful than the prayer that pleads for saving the mind from sinward tendencies?

For a person, there is no better armour than the cultivation of virtues. Manu states that brahmins won't lose status as long as they hold on to the Gayatri

and are inspired by its meaning; Manu says that if they are too weak to pursue the study of the Vedas, then they must at least recite the Gayatri and adhere to it till the very end. The authoritative tradition (smrithi) also says that there is no treasure richer than the Gayatri.

Soul-force can accomplish all the tasks of the world; and, since the Gayatri confers inner strength, to foster that force the Gayatri has to be cultivated with care at the right moment, without neglect. For the growth and development of the body, pure (sathwic) food is necessary, isn't it? So too, the effulgence of the Sun has to be drawn, to reinforce the inner effulgence in the form of creative thought (bhavana).

When soul-force waxes, the senses are activated and directed along fruitful lines. When it wanes, the senses fail and fail you. So, if the solar energy is drawn at that very juncture, it will be as seeds planted in season, and the harvest is assured. Can darkness hide and confuse when the sun has risen and bathed the earth in splendour?

Can sorrow prevail when one has infused oneself with that effulgence? How can one be devoid of strength, the strength derived from the very fountainhead of Brahman? The technique of this process has been laid down by the ancients for the benefit of all aspirants. Learn and practise it, and, by your own experience, you will be able to witness the truth of their path.

Of what purpose is the sacred thread (upanayana) sacrament? Which mantra are you initiated into that day?

Why was that mantra alone taught then? Why are other mystic formulae not given equal prominence? Reflect on these matters, and you will find that the Gayatri is the mother of mantras. You will also find the rituals shining with a new meaning, the rules and restrictions will be full of purpose; the deeds and activities of the ancients will seem worthwhile. If you do not try to know their significance, you will interpret them as your fancy leads and land yourselves in tricks and stratagems to escape the obligations of life. You will be caught in injustice and negation (anyaya and a-dharma).

The real meaning of Gayatri

Well, what is the real meaning of the word Gayatri? Does anyone try to know it today? The word is taken to mean either a Goddess or a formula. Gayatri is that which protects (thra) the life breaths (gayas or pranas) or the senses (indriyas), beginning with speech. Besides, it is said,

Gayantham thrayathe yasmath Gayatri, thena kathyathe.

That which saves those who sing it, revere it, repeat it, or meditate on it is called Gayatri.

That is to say, it is this sacred mantra that transformed a royal sage (rajarshi) like Viswamitra into a brahmanical sage (brahmarshi). The mother that is the Veda (Vedamatha) will confer all boons on all those who worship Her. That Goddess is described in glorious terms in the Brahmanas and in the texts on dharma (dharmasutras); if you understand these clearly, you can realize it, unaided.

Dharma, imbued with such deep mysteries, is today rationalized and interpreted wilfully in various paltry senses. That is why the decline of dharma has come about. So, it is imperative to revive the eternal religion (sanathana dharma) and the principles of interpretation natural to the Atmic truth, which is the basis of dharma.

Otherwise, the meaning will be changed out of all recognition, and the whims of individuals will prevail. Every act will be stamped as dharma, whatever its nature!

8. The Householder Stage

The stages of life (asramas) regulating man's life are four: student, householder, forest dweller, and renunciate (brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, and sanyasa). They are all based on the householder stage of life.

That is the chief stage, because the householder fosters the other three. The householder is the most important of all.

Just as all living beings depend upon air for their existence, the other three stages are dependent on the householder. Householders not only feed and clothe the others, they also provide facilities for the study of the Vedas. Manu, in his texts on dharma (Dharma Sastras), has emphasized this point very clearly. He has declared that householders also attain liberation, but they must follow strictly the dharma laid down for their stage of life.

There is no doubt that everyone who adheres to the dharma of their stage of life, no matter which stage it is, will attain liberation.

All four stages lead to liberation

In the Manu texts (Manusmriti), in the Narada ascetic Upanishad (Parivrajaka Upanishad) and other such texts, it is mentioned that in some instances the householder who adheres to dharma is reckoned as the highest type of person, while in other texts it is laid down that only sages who have renounced everything deserve worship. Therefore, doubt may arise whether one can adopt the householder stage of life, which is the base and support of all, or whether one has to take up the universally honoured stage of renunciate, the inward path of detachment (nivritti). There is an intimate relation between the worship-worthy householder and the saintly sage (paramahansa). So, to whichever stage of life you may belong, you do no wrong. All four stages will lead you to liberation (moksha) if you follow strictly the dharma as laid down for each and devote yourself steadfastly to your

uplift. Each stage is important at that stage; the conduct of the individual, their practice, that is the essential test.

If one is engaged in good conduct, every stage is holy and commendable. That is the judgment of the scriptures (sastras).

Those who are endowed with the knowledge of the Atma as their basic truth do cross the ocean of birth and death and without doubt attain liberation. On the other hand, those who are ignorant of the vows and rites prescribed for them, as well as those who have not studied the Vedas, Upanishads, and Gita but satisfy themselves with mere external purity and show, will surely suffer grief.

The rites and vows prescribed for daily adherence (nithya-anusthana) are very important among the disciplines.

They are the highest austerity (tapas), the highest dharma. Have you noted what the Gita, the essence of all Upanishads, has to say on this point? Those who are ever active in the spiritual field, in whatever stage of life they may be, whatever their caste, they attain the Lord. Manu also says, "They are endowed with the highest wisdom (vi-jnana)." The person who is free from all desire, who has not even the slightest inclination to possess or enjoy the sensory world, who has no trace of egotism or property, who is ever in the bliss of Brahman-consciousness, who is far from any tinge of sorrow - that person is established in supreme joy and peace. At least, one who is fixed at the last moment in the knowledge of their basic nature, which is Brahman, can successfully merge in That, beyond doubt.

The stage of the "person of steady wisdom (sthithaprajna)" is quite natural for such people. The constant feeling "I am Brahman (aham Brahmasmi)" is the panacea for all ills. Liberation comes through this "I am Brahman" idea itself. The real duty is to cultivate that feeling and enter into that experience. The ignoramus (a-jnani) who is moved by the inert (jada) principle, believes that the body is himself! The pundit who is capable of a little ratiocination and enquiry feels that the individual soul (jivi) in the body is "I". But the wise ones

who can see the an-Atma as separate from the Atma know that the truth is "I am Brahman", and they don't stray from that conviction.

Castes like brahmin, colours like white and black, stages of life like student, etc. - these are physical conditions and not the characteristics of the Atma. They are conditioned by time and place. They belong to this world of bondage and are governed by reasons related to this world. They are ordained by the divine will for the orderly functioning of the world. They have to be observed by everyone who is bound by worldly limitations. For those who are untouched by the limitations and extensions, that is to say, who are beyond worldly ties, they are unimportant.

That is why people who are ever engaged in the contemplation of Brahman (Brahma-nishta), those who have grasped the basic reality, do not observe them so much! They are not bound to caste; they see everything as the basic reality itself. How then can they pay attention to what is called caste? But until that stage is reached, you have to follow the rules of caste and stage of life without exception. This is the dharma for the body-conscious.

Adhere strictly to dharma

The great sages who grasped the divine dharma (Atma-dharma) declared that being, awareness, and bliss (sat, chit, and ananda) are the basic characteristics of the Self. Therefore, those great wise ones (vijnanis) can be said to have attained Brahman, which is being-awareness-bliss Itself. For liberation, clearness of vision to see the Atma is enough; that is the essential thing, not caste or colour.

How to get that clear vision? The answer is through the practice of dharma, the dharma that is conditioned by caste and stage of life! Dharma enables the Atma to be realized, without any mist or fog hiding it from view.

The practice of dharma fills you with experience; through that experience, truth is established; the truth reveals clearly, and the vision grants liberation. People who are free from such inner encumbrances hiding the Atma may

belong to any caste or stage of life; that does not matter; they do attain liberation. This mental purity (anthahkarana suddhi) is what the scriptures extol when they speak of salvation.

Those who have attachment and hatred, even if they dwell in the forest, cannot escape harm. Those who have conquered the senses, even if they are householders, can be ascetics (tapasvis). If engaged in acts that are not harmful or condemned, they are entitled to be called spiritually wise people (jnanis). The home is the hermitage (thapovana) for attaining non-attachment. Liberation cannot be won by progeny, charity, riches, sacrificial rites (yajna), or yoga; what is wanted for liberation is the cleansing of the self.

In order to decide what is right action and wrong, the scriptures alone are the authority, whatever the stage of life. People who have the realization of Brahman as the goal and who seek to realize their own real reality (swaswarupa) will succeed in removing the veil of ignorance and know themselves as Brahman. Attention fixed on one's Atma - that is the means of liberation.

Understanding this lesson of the Vedas, practising the principles of living laid down for the particular stage of one's life, anyone, whatever the caste, can attain the highest stage (paramapadha). If there is the will and strength to adhere strictly to dharma, if there are no difficulties in acquiring wisdom (jnana), one can remain a householder and yet be liberated, without entering the stage of renunciation.

Kingly sages like King Janaka, Aswapathi, and Dilipa reached the goal while continuing in the householder stage; while in that stage, they struggled and succeeded in removing all obstacles that hindered the winning of the grace of the Lord; they had as the goal the Godhead they wanted to reach. Therefore, do not doubt it; the stage of householder is no hindrance.

Harmony in the household

Moved by the desire to cross this ocean of worldly existence (samsara), the

husband and wife must both have harmony of mind. The resolution to reach the goal must be equally strong and steady in both. Otherwise, renunciation is the refuge! See, even the midday sun is associated with His consort, shadow (chaya); the sixteenfractioned moon is closely associated with the cool rays of light, acting like nectar. The mistress of the home must be bright, patient, calm, and good and must have all the virtues; then, the home will shine and be a home of victory in the spiritual field also.

There is no rule that people should become renunciates and flee when they meet with difficulties in the spiritual field at home. It can never be fruitful for the husband to become a renunciate without full approval of his wife. The best that he can do is to leave home with his wife and be a forest dweller (vanaprastha), adhering to the dharma of that new stage. If there are children who need attention and care, even forest-dwelling at that stage is not favoured by the scriptures.

One has to make the children independent of one's care and then leave them to themselves. The scriptures (sastras) therefore require that a person has to be in the householder stage till the age of 48, whether it is favourable or not. One has to be in it and struggle to perform one's duty (swa-dharma), without hindrance. If hindrances come, dedicate them too to the Lord, take them quietly as His play (leela) and as His plan; that is the way to follow the householder discipline, the path for both men and women.

9. All May Seek Spiritual Wisdom

High and low, rich and poor, male and female - all are affected by illness, and all have the right to seek the drugs that cure illness. So too, all people are affected by the illness of birth and death and all have the right to the drug, named knowledge of Brahman (Brahma-vidya), that is its effective cure. That is the heritage of all.

According to the stage reached by each, the degree of development attained in spiritual discipline, and the extent of assimilation of the drug, each person will improve in health, that is to say, in peace and equanimity. But one thing has to be specially mentioned: along with the drug, the regulations regarding the mode of living have also to be strictly adhered to.

The drug, Brahma-consciousness, has to be supplemented and strengthened by the appropriate dharma as well as by cultivation of devotion, wisdom (jnana), and discrimination (vairagya). Dietary and other restrictions are essential components of the treatment of illness; so also mere initiation into knowledge of Brahman (Brahmajnana) is not enough. Without equanimity (sama), self-control (dama), and the other moral and spiritual excellences, no one, be they emperor or bondsman, high-born or low-born, can reach the goal. Though everyone is entitled to the heritage of knowledge of Brahman, only those who equip themselves with the qualifications can receive it. One must be strong enough to undergo treatment and to digest and assimilate the medicine, right? If the strength is not there, the great physician Himself will not certify that the patient can take the medicine. Some physicians, seeing the plight of the patient, give drugs free to those who are in dire need and are too poor to afford them; what then of the Lord, the greatest physician of all, the source of mercy and grace? He takes into consideration the capacity and need, and He arranges for the supply of the drug.

Women may seek knowledge of Brahman

Now, there is one question: are women entitled to seek knowledge of

Brahman (Brahma-vidya)? This question has already been answered. If women don't deserve this knowledge, how did Vishnumurthi teach Bhudevi the mystery of the Gita? How did Parameswara teach Parvathi the Guru-gita? "Dhara spoke (Dharovacha)", "Parvathi spoke" - such statements reveal that Dhara and Parvathi took part in the discussions and put questions to clarify the points. The meditational scriptures (yoga-sastra) and the sacred-formula scriptures (mantra-sastra) were both taught to Parvathi by Iswara. This must therefore be correct, authorized by the scriptures (sastras), right? In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, it is mentioned that Yajnavalkya taught the knowledge of Brahman to Maitreyi.

The Vedas consist of two parts: the portion on rituals or actions (Karma-kanda) for beginners (a-jnani) and the portion on spiritual wisdom (Jnana-kanda) for the wise (vijnani). Even when the scriptures (sastras) alone are taken into consideration, they have also two sections; the words of the scholars and the words of the wise, coming out of their experience of knowledge of the Atma (Atma-jnana). Of these, the words of those who have given up all idea of doer-ship as a result of their realization of the identity of Brahman and Atma, of those who know and feel that the same Atma is inherent in the multiplicity of life, of those who have lost all distinction between mine and thine, of those who seek the welfare of all animate and inanimate creation - the words of such knowers of Atman alone are genuine and valuable.

In the Brihadaranyaka, there is mention of such effulgent women-sages as Gargi and Maitreyi, and in the Mahabharatha, the names of Sulabha and Yogini are found. Women should be inspired by their moral rectitude and their steadfastness and then walk in that path; then only does the question of reaching that height arise. Chudala, Madalasa, and other such women attained knowledge of Brahman while in the householder stage of life itself. Women can, by spiritual practice, attain that unwavering unequalled auspicious Brahman; this is made clear in the Yoga-vasishta and in the Puranas. Doubts will haunt only those who have not studied the scriptures properly. Novitiates, householders, recluses, all among women, have attained the goal by their pure hearts and holy conduct. All women should strive to

acquire these two.

The spiritual guide (acharya) is ten times worthier than the teacher of arts and sciences.

The father is ten times worthier than the spiritual guide.

The mother is thousand times worthier than the father.

This is the declaration of Manu in the law text Manusmrithi. This law text is the binding text for all scriptures on dharma (dharma sastras); it is the very basis. See what a great honour it pays to the mother!

Lakshmi, the patron of wealth, is a female deity. When addressing letters to women, it is customary to begin, "To ..., who is equal to Lakshmi in every way". Women are entitled to universal respect. Causative appearances of Godhead like Rama and Krishna, religious teachers like Sankara, Ramanuja, and Madhwa, bearers of wisdom like Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Mohammed - were they not all born of women? Their mothers were embodiments of holy glory, and they gave the world sons who transformed it. Women who follow in their footsteps and lead pure, consecrated lives can claim the right to knowledge of Brahman (Brahmajnana), and no one can deny it to them.

In fact, the Atma is devoid of all differences as between men and women. It is eternal, pure consciousness itself, and self-illuminating (nithya, suddha buddha, swayam-jyothi). Women can reach the status of those holy women only when they become aware of the nature of the Atma.

The patron deities Saraswathi of education (vidya), Lakshmi of wealth, and Parvathi of spiritual wisdom (jnana) are all women! Therefore, it is unbelievable that women have no right to spiritual discipline, leading to merger with Brahman and to the final emancipation from bondage.

Practise the spiritual injunctions

A lion asleep is unaware of its nature; so too, people asleep in the coils of delusion (maya) are not aware of being the splendourful Atma. In this stage of ignorance, they elaborate more on their prejudices and give their likes the stamp of scriptures (sastras)! The scriptures will not declare so at any time.

Scripture is an eye to humanity; it is the eye that leads and illumines and guides. Follow its directions - that is one's whole duty. That is the big task before the world today. If the scriptures are fully understood, no doubt will arise, no discussion will be needed.

It is not proper to select and superimpose on the scriptures things that are congenial to you, nor should you go against the injunctions of the scriptures. Even to challenge them and talk lightly of their commands is sinful.

The world has come to this sorry pass mainly because the scriptures have been neglected in practice. This is the tragedy, the moral fall.

Aspirants for liberation must first practise the rules and restrictions prescribed in the scriptures for the elevation of character and the consecration of feelings. Devoid of this liberating quantum of knowledge of Brahman (Brahmajnana), mere scholarship acquired by laborious perusal of the scriptures is just so much exhausting burden!

Scholars who practise such mere scholarship are like the spoons that turn round in sweets and savouries but do not taste either! The Mundaka Upanishad has compared scholars who have not assimilated the essence of the scriptures but guide others, in spite of their own ignorance, to the blind leading the blind, with the result that both the leader and the led fall into the well!

Even without the knowledge of the scriptures, if you have wisdom (jnana) gained through experience and practice, you can attain the goal and also lead others along the path you have become familiar with. The dull find no need

for scriptures; so too, the holy person who is immersed, always and under all conditions, in the contemplation of Brahman and in the sweetness of that bliss, has no need for scriptures. Of course, strict adherence to truth and practice of dharma may entail great hardship, but, having in view the bliss that awaits you in the end, you have to put up with all that and bear them gladly. Only the intelligent can save themselves by knowing the truth; the rest will remain bound.

Classification of the four ages (yugas)

The ages (yugas) are classified on the basis of the dominant mental role. In the age of truth (Kritha-yuga), it is said that dharma walked about on four legs, happy and safe. In the second age (Thretha-yuga), dharma had only three legs, while in the third age (Dwapara-yuga), it had to totter about on just two! In the present Kali-yuga, dharma has only one leg, according to this tradition.

The four legs are truth, compassion, austerity, and giving (sathya, daya, tapas, and dana). A person with all four can be said to be in the Golden Age (Kritha-yuga), whatever the age in the calendar. If truth is not steady but one has the other three qualities, one is in the Thretha-yuga. If truth and compassion are absent but austerity and giving persist, one is in the Dwapara-yuga. If only giving remains out of the four, it is as if dharma is standing on one leg, and the person sticking to giving, in spite of everything else having disappeared, is in the Iron Age (Kali-yuga) - even if it is chronologically the Golden Age.

The ages (yugas) change only with the change in dharma, not with the mere passage of time. The wicked Hiranyakasipu and the pure-hearted Prahlada lived in the selfsame chronological yuga; the same yuga saw Dharmaja, the personification of righteousness and peace (santhi), as well as the arch cheat Duryodhana. So, dharma is what makes the yuga for each; one can always be in the Golden Age (Kritha-yuga), if only one has all four qualities of dharma. The conduct of man makes and mars history and changes the Golden Age to the Iron Age.

10. The House Of God

Next, about the house of God, the residence of the concretized formful aspect of Divinity, the temple (alaya or mandir) and the rules of dharma relating to it. Rules have overgrown and overwhelmed these institutions, following the whims and prejudices of various authorities. They have led people away from dharma and Brahman and even away from proper action; they have confounded the devotees by their variety and unreasonableness. The rules are insisted upon blindly, so they have done much harm to the welfare of the world itself. In fact, the rules and formalities form the first steps in the retreat away from God and have fostered atheism in great measure.

Functions of the temple

Think deeply over the functions of the temple. Temples are centres of discipline, where the aspirant is guided step by step to attain a vision of the truth. They are schools for the training of the spirit, academies for the promotion of scriptural studies, institutes of super-science, laboratories for the testing of the values of life. They are hospitals for the treatment and cure not only of the "birth-death disease", which has persisted in the individual for ages, but even the much more patent "mental disorders" that trouble those who do not know the secret of acquiring peace. Temples are gymnasia where people are reconditioned and their hesitant faith, waning conviction, and upsurging egotism are all cured. Temples are mirrors that reflect aesthetic standards and achievements.

The purpose of the temple is to awaken the Divinity in humanity (Madhavathwa in manavathwa), inducing people to believe that the physical frames in which they live are themselves houses of God. Therefore, all the formalities, rites, and rituals of the temple emphasize and cultivate the spiritual truth (Brahmajnana) that the individual (jivi) is just a mighty ocean of God.

Devotion is the queen

The scriptures teach that all actions and activities must lead ultimately to non-attachment, for this is the best qualification for the development of knowledge of Brahman. Of the three, devotion, wisdom, and renunciation (bhakthi, jnana, and vairagya), devotion is the queen. The rules and rites are the maids-in-waiting; the queen treats her maids with kind consideration and favour, no doubt, but if the ceremonies, which are only "servants" and "aides", disregard the queen, they should be mercilessly dismissed. All the formalities and rituals in the temples must therefore subserve the glorification of the queen, devotion; this is the sum and substance of the dharma that must direct and govern all temples. Only then can man reach the goal.

Devotion helps the attainment of the bliss of merger with the basic Brahman most easily by canalizing toward the Lord the mental agitations, the sensory reachings-out, and the emotional urges of people. It is in this direction that all the details of the worship of the Lord in temples took shape. In the temple, all the various ceremonies, from the "awakening of God in the early dawn" to the "laying in bed" late at night, are intended to heighten and promote the devotional trends of the mind. In turn, each incident helps the sublimation of the appropriate emotion, in a peculiarly charming manner. In the sublimity of that experience, the agitation of the lower emotions declines and disappears. The vulgar feelings of ordinary life become elevated to the status of worship and dedication to the Almighty Presence.

The Lord will evoke in each the emotion that the person associates with Him. If He is conceived as a monster (bhuutha), He will terrify as a monster; if pictured and believed as the master of the five elements (bhuthanatha), He will manifest Himself likewise. Perhaps, you might ask, how? Why perhaps? The fundamental foolishness of the age is this very attitude of doubt.

It has now become a fashion to distribute advice, a fashion indulged in by those who know and those who don't. They do not care whether the advice is followed or not. People jump into this superior attitude of giving advice just to feel important and show off their status. They are blinded by their own conceit, and they have to be pitied more than condemned. For no one can lay

down "thus and thus only", as far as the Lord is concerned.

Moreover, though wisdom (jnana) and detachment (vairagya) might have some standards of measure, devotion has its own measure. It will assume many a form, adjusted to the attitude of the devotee. Kamsa, Jarasandha, Sisupala, Hiranyakasipu, etc., took up an attitude of hostility to the Lord, so the Lord manifested Himself as their enemy and finished their careers and struggles. If the Lord is conceived as the Most Loved One, as Jayadeva, Gouranga, Tukaram, Ramdas, Surdas, Radha, Meera, and Sakkubai conceived Him, He manifests Himself as the nearest and the dearest and showers bliss. The little child takes the sun to be similar to the vermilion (kumkum) dot on its mother's forehead, but the knowing adult sees it as a sphere of effulgent heat. This shows the effect of the mental picture on the process of comprehension. In case of Godhead as well as of the temple, the same law applies.

It is proper for people to have an exalted attitude toward the Lord as well as toward the habitation of the Lord, viz. the temple. This attitude yields great good. While it is quite natural and appropriate for people to picture God (Madhava) in human form, it is not desirable to assume that He is just an ordinary individual. The principle of devotion states that He is conceived as an extraordinary person, with a figure of sublime splendour.

Arousing feelings during worship

Feelings aroused by and during worship must be sweet and melodious and must, imperceptibly, transform the low desires and cravings of matter-bound people; they must not awaken or inflame the latent animal instincts of people. Take this example: Thyagaraja forgot that he should go to bed in his enthusiasm to see that Rama was put to bed. Here, you should infer not that Thyagaraja made Rama sleep in a swing but that Rama seated Thyagaraja on the swing of devotion and gently swung him to sleep (or the forgetfulness of all things material).

Instead of remembering your child in its cradle when you swing your chosen

Lord (Ishta-devatha) in the silver or golden cradle, you must cultivate the attitude of seeing your chosen deity, Rama or Krishna, in the cradle when you swing your own child in it. So too, when you stand before the installed God, you must get confirmed in the installation of Brahman in your own heart as the real base of your existence, knowledge, and bliss. It is to instil this feeling that the rites and ceremonies of temple worship have been organized.

So, do not take the divine couples Sita-Rama, Radha-Krishna, Lakshmi-Narayana, and Parvathi-Parameswara in the temple as "pitiable couples" eking out a miserable existence in the cramped sanctorum, subsisting on food given by the worshipper and slaking thirst with the drinks that the worshipper offers. The worshippers say, "the Lord is sleeping", "the Lord is taking food", while refusing to open the door of the inner shrine. This is absurd.

They sometimes even enforce silence, for "the Lord is asleep and He might be awakened too soon by the noise." There will be no chance at such times even for emergent pleadings.

Statements such as these may cause wrong conclusions in the minds of people. They raise many ridiculous queries, like the problems of the Lord answering calls of nature while shut up in the niche, and they promote atheism among people. The worshippers and the carping unbelievers are both ignorant of the real principles of temple-worship. That is the reason for their conduct. You should be cultured enough to avoid the lower worldly path. The temple should not be valued on secular principles at all; only the attitude of devotion can ennoble and beautify feelings that drag you down to the lower worldly path.

Temple rules should not conflict with highest conceptions of devotion

Today, on account of newfangled views, temples have become objects of derision. This is a sad state of affairs.

Therefore it is necessary to reveal publicly the real objective of temple

worship and elevate temples to the status that is their due. The temple must prosper once again.

How stupid it is to be under the impression that the Lord sleeps as you do when a lullaby is sung, or that He wakes up as you do when someone calls on Him aloud, or that He feasts when some food is placed before Him, as you want to do, or that He becomes weaker and weaker when not given regular meals, as happens to you. Filling up the entire universe down to the minutest part of the atom, unreachable by time, effulgent beyond imagination, merciful above all expectation, the Lord has to be conceived as the vital energy that pervades and inheres everywhere, forever. How foolish to subject the Lord of that stature to the carping criticisms of cynics and the false theories of the ignorant.

Can you bind the Lord to a timetable as you can a devotee? Travails don't fall upon the devotee at a fixed time, do they? Does the devotee have to wait till the Lord is awakened from sleep? Oh, the foolishness of it all!

The infant can cry for its mother's milk at any time; the mother will rise from sleep and feed it at her breast. She won't push it off, angry that it yells when she is sleeping. Well, the Lord, who is the Universal Mother, must be getting disturbed and awakened at least a million times, if He really slept.

It all depends on the progress of your mental faculties! They must reach the supreme level. The Lord is immanent everywhere; He is capable of everything; He is the Universal Witness; there is nothing He does not know. These truths must be taken as axiomatic, and all rituals and disciplines (sadhanas) must be arranged and interpreted in conformity with those truths. No low, demeaning, feeling must be associated with the worship of the Lord or with His name and form. Therefore, the highest devotion and rites that can supplement it are very essential.

To say that the Lord's sleep will be disturbed, that one should not interrupt Him while eating, and that at such times the doors of the temple must remain closed is, to say the least, infantile. It does not indicate a broad or correct

attitude. When the emotion of devotion gets ripe and blossoms more fully, these low secular feelings melt away into nothingness.

One small incident comes to mind now. Once in Calcutta, in the Kali Temple constructed by Rani Rasmani, a Gopala idol fell down, and its foot was broken a little. Since many elders declare that according to the scriptures a broken image should not be worshipped, Rani Rasmani made arrangements to get a new one made by sculptors.

Ramakrishna heard of this and reproached her, saying, "Maharani, if your son-in-law breaks his leg, what will you do? What is the correct thing to do? Bandage the foot and set it right or discard the son-in-law and get another in his place? The elders and pundits were dumbfounded. The broken foot of Gopala was set right, and the image was installed and worshipped as before. See, when devotion is purified and is ascendant, the Lord will be patent. This, too, is the dharma declared in the scriptures (sastras).

When the doors are closed, the rules might say they should not be opened; but that is only a general direction.

For, when persons like Sankara, Sananda, Jayadeva, Chaithanya, and Gouranga come, it becomes impossible to follow the rule, isn't it? Lord Krishna turned round at Udipi to give darshan to His devotee; Siva yielded before the intensity of Nandanar's devotion. The reason for closing the doors is not connected with the Lord; such rules have been prescribed by elders for reasons unconnected with Divinity.

The rules must not conflict with the highest conceptions of the devotee. If the temple servants have no fixed timings and if everything is left to their whim and fancy, the temple will not be able to instil devotion in the mind of the ordinary man; certain limitations and regulations are needed even to arouse the awe and respect that are the roots of devotion. That is why certain hours are laid down for entry into temples and for opening the shrine for worship. Such restrictions are not repugnant to the main principle. For the aim of the temple is to promote dharma, to develop the inner culture and spiritual

discipline.

Human behaviour, actions, attitudes - all have to be subservient to the overall need to grow in the consciousness of God as the living Presence. So, certain rules are necessary, no doubt, for the correct performance of temple rites. Otherwise, ordinary men will not learn steadfastness, faith, and discipline, and they will not grow in devotion.

The responsibility of the worshipper (archaka), of those in charge of temples, and of the worshipping public is great indeed. Everyone must be aware of the purpose of temples and the need to carry out temple rites; they promote faith and devotion (sraddha and bhakthi) more than anything else. Therefore, the doors of the temple can be opened for allowing worship by ardent seekers. No one should forget or ignore this basic fact: Temples exist for the progress and welfare of humanity.

11. Three Eras

The eras, classified according to the principles and practices of spiritual progress as laid down in the Hindu dharma, are three:

1. The Vedic era, during which great importance was laid on rituals (karma).
2. The Upanishadic era, when spiritual wisdom (jnana) was emphasized more than all else.
3. The Puranic era, when devotion (bhakthi) was declared and described as all important.

The Vedic age Vedic literature consists of hymns (samhithas), Brahmanas, forest texts (Aranyakas), and Upanishads. Of these, the first three deal with actions (karma) and are known as Karma-kanda, and the last, the Upanishads, are concerned with spiritual wisdom (jnana) and are therefore called wisdom texts (Jnana-kanda).

The groups of mantras in the Vedic texts (samhithas) are full of hymns (stotras) glorifying Gods like Indra, Agni, Varuna, Surya, and Rudra. The Aryans in ancient times earned peace and contentment and the fulfilment of their desires by sacrifices and rituals, which were addressed to these Gods through the mantras. They realized that the Absolute Principle, the Paramatma, is one and only one, and they also knew that it manifests nevertheless as varied and manifold, under different names and forms.

In many Rig-vedic mantras this is clearly announced:

Ekam Sath viprah bahudha vadanthi, Agnim yamam mathariswana mahuh.
There is only just One; those who have seen the truth praise it in many ways: Agni, Yama, Mathariswan.

This Brahman, the One without a second, is designated in the Rig-veda as Hiranyagarbha, Prajapathi, Viswakarma, and Purusha. The Hiranyagarbha hymn (sukta) and the Purusha hymn are classical examples of this vision. The way of living of the ancient Aryans is designated "dharma". It can also be called "holy ritual (yajna)".

Their daily disciplines were marked by rituals, worship (puja), praise, surrender, and dedication. So, their life was full of devotion. The word devotion might not be used as such in the Vedic texts (samhithas), but isn't the word faith (sraddha) found there?

Shraddayagnih samidhanthe sraddha - huuyathe havih,
sraddham bhagasya muurdhani - vachasa Vedayamasi).

It is only through faith that the flame of the sacrificial fire is lit and fed.
Through faith alone do the offerings reach the Gods who are called.
Let us praise faith, which is the highest form of worship.

See how mighty the power of faith is!

The simple spontaneous disciplines of the Vedic Age gradually became complex and confused by the overgrowth of rituals and formal rules; with the passing of time, it was declared that dharma consisted of ritual (yajna) and oblation (homa) and that heaven could be gained only by the performance of such rites! Though the ritual was really a method of worship of the gods, value was shifted from the gods to the ritual itself. "The gods were only the means; those who desired heaven must do rituals." Such was the turn the declaration took.

The Upanishadic Age

Meanwhile, the Upanishad Age dawned. The Upanishads rejected material objectives as devoid of permanent value; they condemned them as inferior. In fact, the ritual portion (Karma-kanda) of the Vedas was transformed and revalued in the Upanishads as vehicles for the liberation of people from the bondage of birth and death and as vessels for crossing the ocean of worldly existence (samsara). The vision of the Upanishadic aspirant (sadhaka) breaks through this "external sensory objective world" and centres itself on the "inner world".

The Upanishadic sages (rishis) collectively confirm the nature of the highest Principle thus:

In the basic depth of this name-form world of change (nama-rupa jagath) there is the One eternal permanent being (Sat).
That is the Absolute, the Highest Brahman (Parabrahman).
The Highest can be grasped by means of the wisdom of yoga (jnanayoga).
Therefore,
Inquire into That; That is Brahman (Thadhvijijnasasva; thadh Brahma).

This is knowledge of Brahman (Brahma-vidya) taught by the Upanishads (the Vedanta). Besides, the Upanishads also declare:

The Vedas, though mainly concerned with the human objective of attaining heaven, also provide the basic training for achieving liberation (moksha). The attainment of the Absolute does not depend entirely or solely on mastery of this knowledge of Brahman (Brahma-vidya). It is beyond the reach of study, scholarship, or intellectual conquest.

Only by devotion (upasana) it can be realized.

If the scholar, with all the weight of learning, also gets immersed in devotion, his life is indeed sanctified!

Before such aspirants, the Lord will be manifest in His real glory. This is the meaning of the following declaration in the Brihadaranya Upanishad about the bond between the individual and the Universal (jivi and the Paramatma) :

Eshosya parama gathih-Eshosya parama sampath;
Eshosya paramo lokah-Eshosya paramanandah.
The Universal is the individual's highest goal,
highest wealth, highest elevation, deepest joy.

The Taithiriya Upanishad proclaims thus:

The Highest Atma (Paramatma) is the source of contentment,
for He is the embodiment of the purest emotion (rasa).
Attaining Him, the individual (jivi) can be immersed in joy.
If the Highest Atma is not shining in the firmament of the heart,
who is to taste, who is to live? He feeds all, with bliss (ananda).

The Puranic age

The seeds of devotion found scattered in the Vedic texts sprout in the Upanishads and begin to grow with many a blossomful branch in the Puranas.

Well, many are yet confused when it comes to deciding what exactly devotion (bhakthi) is, what the nature of the attitude called devotion is! It is impossible for anyone to demarcate what exactly devotion is and what it is not. Devotion

has infinite facets. Only pure, tender, tolerant, calm and loving souls, the very cream of spiritual aspirants (sadhus), the swans (hamsas) sporting ever in the company of kindred devotees, can understand its purity and depth. Others will find it as difficult to discover devotion in a person as discovering softness in rock, coldness in fire, or sweetness in the margosa (neem) tree. Devotees hold the Lord dearer to themselves than life, and the Lord is attached to them in equal measure.

Some great people even declare that the devotee is superior to Bhagavan; the farmer loves the clouds more than the ocean, though the clouds only bring the ocean waters to their fields. The ocean does not come directly over their crops. This is how Tulsidas describes the relationship between the devotee and God: The clouds bring the mercy, the love, the grandeur of the ocean, and the fragrance of the atmosphere and shower them over the entire land; so, too, devotees carry these great traits wherever they go. Just as gold is dug out of mines, these virtues are part of the divinity in humanity.

The sage Durvasa arrived one day in the court of Ambarisha to test the efficacy of devotion to God. For this purpose, he created out of his anger a demoness, Krithya, for his destruction. But the Lord's discus (chakra), which demolishes the fear in the hearts of devotees, destroyed Krithya and started pursuing Durvasa to the ends of the earth. He fled over hill and dale, lake and stream, and leaped across the seven seas; he tried to take asylum in the heavens, but the foe of a devotee could get asylum nowhere. At last, he fell at the feet of God (Narayana) in Vaikunta, an exhausted penitent. However, the Lord declared that He was always on the side of His devotee and that He would never give up the devotee who relies on Him as his only refuge. "I follow the devotee as the calf follows the cow, for the devotee gives up for Me all that is considered desirable by the worldly-minded." Once, Krishna told Uddhava thus: "Austerity, wisdom, renunciation (tapas, jnana, vairagya), yoga (communion), dharma, vow-keeping ritual (vratha), pilgrimage - the merit acquired by these is acquired by My devotees with even greater ease." Reflect how great true devotion is! By its means, an outcast can excel even a brahmin!

A devotionless brahmin is inferior to an outcast endowed with devotion. This is elaborated in the Puranas. That which is described in the Vedas as simply, "Not this, not this (nethi, nethi)", that which is declared as "beyond the reach of the words, far out of the grasp of the mind", that which is unreachable by the senses, the mind, or the intellect - such an entity is capable of being felt and experienced by those immersed in meditation. Devotion brings it into the consciousness easily and fills the devotee with bliss.

The Bhagavan described in the epics (Puranas) is not only the quality-less, change-less One (nir-guna -nirvikaradwaitiya) Brahman, the Thing-to-be-known, the origin of the universe, and pure consciousness (chithswarupa).

He is also the repository of all the noble, elevating, and attracting qualities. He is the reminder and refuge of all that is beautiful and loving. He lifts, energizes, and purifies. The unmanifested quality-less Brahman cognized at the climax of the path of spiritual wisdom (jnana-marga) cannot be grasped by the sense-centred individual without great travail and trouble. This is why the Puranas dwell so much more on the with-qualities (sa-guna) aspect than on the quality-less (nir-guna) aspect of Godhead.

First, aspirants have to practise the spiritual discipline related to the with-qualities aspect of God; this will endow them with concentration and, later, according to the law of procedure from the gross to the subtle, they can merge their minds in the quality-less Brahman itself. The mirage leads the thirsty person far away from the tank; the person then turns away and returns to the place where water is available; reaching the tank, the person becomes competent to drink and slake the thirst (sthula-souram-bhika-anyaya). So too, aspirants after liberation (moksha) get the desire for meditation and worship of the formless Supreme (nir-gunopasana); the Lord, who is attached to the devotees, takes up the forms that the aspirants and great souls seek. Out of His bounty, He grants all four goals of human life (purusharthas).

12. Temples

The ancients considered temples not only as temples of God (deva-mandirs) but also as temples of spiritual wisdom (vijnana-mandirs).

They knew that God can be attained by service done consciously and with full knowledge of meaning. They felt that temples are academies of higher learning, where man develops the real culture of the mind. They knew that the house of God in the hearts of people would be as clean and holy as the house of God was in the hamlet where they lived. You could guess the nature of the inhabitants of a village simply by observing the village temple and its environs. "If the temple is kept clean and pure, with holiness in the atmosphere, you can infer that the villagers are full of the fear of sin, that they walk along the path of goodness" - so thought the ancients.

Today, such institutions of spiritual inspiration (divyajnana- mandirs or Atmopadesalayas) have degenerated into places where "offerings" are distributed and picnic parties revel. Idlers gather in the precincts and play cards or dice or such other games. The evil spirit of Kali (Kali-purusha) sports in glee when such groups gather in the temples. This is contrary to dharma.

The temple is the heart of the village

The temple is the heart of the village; it should therefore be preserved, nourished, and nursed as befits the heart. Believe that God walks about in the temple; it is His residence. All have a responsibility to preserve the holiness of that atmosphere, which confers the joy of serving the Lord. Believe that the temple is the heart of all.

The day this is done, the God principle (Madhavathwa) in man will shine forth as a jewel. This is the truth; this is the reason for all the cost and pain incurred in the construction of temples.

Village authorities, government agencies, or devotees themselves must make

all arrangements needed to develop spiritual discipline and wisdom. Then only can people shine forth in divine splendour.

This is not all. Some ultra-modern critics condemn the decorated gate of the temple (gopuras), etc. as so much waste of money. This reveals a total absence of farsightedness; no one with a high ideal or an upward vision would make such a remark. If you dwell upon the significance of the entrance gate to the temple, you can realize how holy, how mysterious, how revealing its purpose is. The entry gate beckons to wayfarers who have lost their way and who wander away from truth,

"O ye mortals! Blinded by the fog of physical attachments and self-aggrandizing urges,
overcome by the miasma of worldly desires, which are fleeting and false,
you have
forgotten Me, the source and sustenance of you all.
Look up to this eternal, ever-pure, ever-full tower of joy.

Forgetting Me, you are wallowing in grief;
you are pursuing the mirage in the desert sands.
Come; have faith in the everlasting Me.
Struggle out of the darkness, enter the realm of light,
and come to the royal road of peace (santhi).
That is the path of dharma. Come, come, O come."

Thus does Gopala call on all, with raised hands, from above the line of house tops in every village.

So, when seen through this more elevated insight, entry gates to the temples can be respected as conducive to the raising of human ideals and conduct. This is the principle underlying the construction of decorated gates to the

temples. Such high ideals inspire these structures. This is the true meaning, a meaning that can be experienced and felt. The light on top of the gate is the symbol of the light that is the refuge of all, it is the representative of the unflickering inner lamp, lit at the self-same flame; it is the inner illumination gained by merging in God (Hari).

Temples are oases in desert wastes. For those who have lost their way in the hot sands of grief and greed, they are peace temples (prasanthi mandirs), welcoming you to cool joyous peace. The entry gates are guides to stricken wanderers; they hold aloft the flag of the name of God; all should be thankful to them for the service.

The reason for the misery

Many dull-witted moderns are puzzled at the purpose of all the constructions and conditions, conventions and customs that revolve around the temple. They cannot grasp the significance of any reply that is beyond their limited understanding. A patient suffering from high fever will find even sweet things bitter; so too, those afflicted with the high fever of worldliness can never taste the real sweetness of truth. The fever must subside; then, they can appreciate the value of the things of the spirit.

What is the goal of human life? What is the objective that one must realize? Is it just eating, drinking, sleeping, tasting a little joy and grief, and finally dying, like any bird or beast? No, certainly not. A little thought will reveal that it is not so. The goal is the realization of the Absolute, of Brahman (Brahma-sakshatkara)! Without that, no one can attain peace (santhi). One must win that bliss of divine grace. However much one strives to extract happiness from the multiplicity of worldly things, the quantum of satisfaction is very little; as for peace, one finds it impossible to get it through things of the world. The mind can have peace only when it merges in the Absolute Consciousness, the Primal Cause, the Unchanging Existence.

Even the most comfortable house, equipped with all the luxuries people crave, even heaps of treasure, are helpless to endow one with peace. Peace

can be won only by surrender to God, who is the very core of one's being, the very source of all life and living. Consider this: Do those lucky enough to possess wealth, gold, property, and comfort have peace? Nor is this all. Are highly learned people, people of extraordinary beauty, people of super-human physical strength - are they at least at peace with themselves and the world? What is the reason for the misery of even these?

The reason is that they have forgotten the divine basis of creation; they have ignored the one absolute underlying principle. All lives lived without faith and devotion to the one supreme Overlord are despicable lives spent without tasting the nectar of the divine Principle; they are all wasted chances.

It is really a strange turn of events! Your genuine basis, the fountain of your joy, your ultimate fundamental (paramartha) principle has become for you something outside and beyond, unnecessary, unsought for. The world, with its tinsel tawdriness, has become near and native, necessary and desirable.

Denying themselves the bliss derivable from surrender to the Lord, people run about madly in the name of devotion, pursuing sacred spots, sages, and sacred rivers. A modicum of devotion will awaken them from this delusion. It will teach them that one can attain peace only by returning to one's native home, viz., God. Until then, homesickness will haunt one.

Temples are invitations to and reminders of God

Temples are invitations to that home, signboards directing people there. On one occasion, Sri Ramachandra spoke thus to those assembled to hear Him on the Chitrakuta Hill: "Dawn breaks and dusk falls. With dawn, greed awakes in people; with dusk, lust gets hold of them. Is this to be your way of life? Is this to be your goal? With the passing of every single day, people have wasted one more precious chance. They have taken one more step towards the cave of death. But do they ever bewail their lot? Do they sorrow over the wasted day?" Note how worthy of remembrance this message is!

It is because of such reminders that the culture of India (Bharatha-varsha) has

God as its central theme.

"Bha-ra-tha" means the land that has attachment (rathi) to Bhagavan or God. If westerners renounced everything, in their single-minded devotion to the discovery of the laws that govern the objective world, here in India (Bharathavarsha), people renounced everything for the discovery and experience of the Absolute, which is the Prime Cause of the universe and which, if known, confers unshakeable peace.

Westerners renounce for the evanescent; here, the renunciation is for the eternal. This is for wisdom (vijñana); theirs is for ignorance (ajñana). This is austerity (tapas); theirs is ignorance (thamas). That is why even today, the splendour of the sages (rishis) and yogis shines through the corridors of centuries on the faces of people; if sometimes the shadows of despair, despondency and discontent flit across those faces in this land, it is forewarning of the decline of faith in dharma itself.

Temples are intended to instruct people in the art of removing the veil of attachment that lies over their heart.

That is why Thyagaraja cried in the temple at Tirupathi, "Remove the veil within me, the veil of pride and hate." The fog of illusion (maya) melted away before the rays of grace, so he could discern and describe the image of divine charm in the song "Sivudavo Madhavudavo" and drink deep the sweetness of that form. The churning of his heart by the divine formula produced the spark of wisdom (jñana), and it grew into the flame of realization.

Not only in this present age of Kali-yuga but even in the earlier ages (yugas), the Kritha, the Thretha, and the Dwapara, remembrance of the name (namasmarana) was the secret of liberation from bondage. The temple is the place where remembrance of the name is natural, automatic, and undisturbed. Therefore, going to it is imperative, especially in the Kali age, when the air is full of wicked and ungodly thoughts.

That is why Krishna, in the Gita, declared that "Among sacrifices (yajnas), I

am the repetition of the name (namayajna), the sacrifice that has the sacrificial beast offered in the sacred fire, the animal ignorance (a-jnana) itself." For the cure of grief, for the earning of joy, temples where the name of God can be remembered are very essential. "For bliss, remembrance of the name (smarana); for remembrance of the name, temples." That is the series. There is nothing more fruitful than this, nothing more blissful or more charming. " Having the greatly simple name, the ever available tongue, and the temple where His enchanting image is installed so people can sing His glory in an exalted voice ... why should people hasten toward the gates of hell?" wondered Vyasa. His wonder was born out of his own experience of the efficacy of the name and its remembrance.

So too, Tulsidas, who lived constantly in the temple and sang of the joy he tasted. "Alas!" he lamented, "When people give up the name and the temple and seek peace and joy in other places, I am reminded of the foolishness of those who forsake the rich and tasty fare on their plates and beg with outstretched hands for the leavings on the plates of others." Even in Vedic discipline, the name and the need to make the mind stay on it are emphasized as of utmost importance:

Om ithyekaksharam Brahmanam
Om - that One Word is Brahman

declare the Aryan sages.

Examine, if you like, whether any saint was saved without the name of the Lord or the house of the Lord! For Gouranga, the Vishnu temple (Jagannatha mandir) was the inspiration and refuge. For Jayadeva, it was the Radhakrishna temple. For Nandanar, the temple at Chidambaram provided the source of realization. Vallabhacharya, Kabir, Nanak, Meera, Radha, Ramanuja, Madhwacharya, Sankaracharya, Namadev, Tulsidas, Thyagaraja - all attained divine vision and, what is more, divine wisdom itself in and through temples.

What need is there to dilate more? Even in recent times, was it not in the Kali temple built by Rani Rasmani that Ramakrishna Paramahansa tasted divine bliss and discovered his identity?

Seekers find temples indispensable

To misuse such temples, to spoil the sacred atmosphere of their precincts, to forget their holy mission, to decry the conventions and customs prevalent there, and to pave the way for their decline and desecration - undoubtedly, this is not dharma. Those who do these things have neither inner nor outer light; they are in utter darkness. Temple worship, the company of sages, recital of the name, adoration of the image or symbol - these are external sources of light. Meditation, austerity, reflection (dhyana, tapas, manana) - these are the sources of inner illumination. Devoid of both, how can men experience the vision of divine glory?

No wonder Tulsidas Goswami once declared, "Do you require light inside the house as well as outside? Then place the lamp on the doorstep! So too, do you desire to spread the illumination of peace (santhi) outside yourself as well as inside? Then place the name of the Lord on the tongue, which is the doorstep of your personality! The lamp on the tongue will not flicker, fade, or be put out by any storm. It will confer peace on you as well as on all whom you meet, the entire world." Therefore, for the salvation of the individual, evoke the vision of the form. The very memory of the name will evoke the vision of the form. That form, in all its enchantment and glory, is depicted in temples for the inspiration of the aspirant. Whether the ordinary eye sees it or not, the seekers of the Atmic truth find temples indispensable.

13. The Dharmic Person

Dharma has no prejudice or partiality; it is imbued with truth and justice. So, people have to adhere to dharma; they have to see that they never go against it. It is wrong to deviate from it. The path of dharma requires people to give up hatred against others and cultivate mutual concord and amity. Through concord and amity, the world will grow, day by day, into a place of happiness. If these are well established, the world will be free from disquiet, indiscipline, disorder, and injustice.

Whatever you are dealing with, you must first grasp its real meaning. Then, you have to cultivate it daily, for your benefit. By this means, wisdom grows and lasting joy is earned. The two basic things are dharma and action (karma). The wise, who are impartial and unprejudiced, who are confirmed in dharma, walk on the path of truth (sathya), as instructed in the Vedas. That is the path for all people today.

Three stages to knowledge of dharma

The knowledge of dharma is reached in three stages:

1. You must receive training under wise people (vidwans), who are also imbued with dharma.
2. You must aspire to attain self-purification (Atmasuddhi) and truth (sathya).
3. You must realize the value of knowledge of the Vedas (Veda-vidya), the voice of God (Parameswara).

When these three are completed, then one understands the truth and how that truth is to be separated from untruth. This enquiry into truth has to be done in amity and cooperation; all must be equally eager to discover it for the benefit of all. Everyone's opinion must be tested on the touchstone of

dharma, of universal good (sarvalokahitha).

The principles that pass this test have to be specially kept apart, used, and spread in the world for the advancement of human welfare. By this means, all will develop joy and happiness in equal measure. " "All are the same (samithih samani)", says the scripture. All have the same claim for spiritual wisdom (jnana) and for the means of attaining it, like education. Therefore, all must do noble and pure deeds.

Keep mind and conscience on the path

The renouncing of evil deeds, the giving up of desire - these two are accomplished by the same instrument, the mind (manas). The objectives of human life (purusharthas) have to be gained only through that. As a result of persistent training, the mind will learn to obey your interests. On the other hand, the memory (chittha) presents past and present experience before you and invites you to see things in perspective, to judge them against that background. Equanimity has to be attained in and through this process, which goes on in the mind. That is to say, become single-minded.

Remember also that both of these - the mind and the conscience - have to be kept straight on the path of welfare of all mankind (sarva-manava-sukha). Dharma will shine and illumine only in the person who serves all and confers joy on all. Such a person will receive not only the grace of the Lord but also the unique privilege of merging in Him. Whenever you give anything to anyone or take anything from anyone, see that you do not transgress the boundaries of dharma. Do not go against its commands. Follow it at all times, believing this to be your bounden duty. Fill every ounce of your energy with the essence of dharma and endeavour to progress in that path, more and more, with every passing day.

The dharma person will reveal decision and enthusiastic exultation in every act of theirs. Their adherence to dharma must be of that order. An attitude of fear that the Lord is seeing everywhere and everything, an ever-present apprehension that one might slide into sin, a natural bent toward truth, a

leaning toward right conduct - the mind (manas) is endowed with such virtues. Your task is to direct it and utilize it for the welfare of all mankind.

Dependence on dharma will ensure happiness and increase it. It can remove the spite that one develops toward others. It will not allow you to swell with pride when another suffers or grieves. Can such wickedness confer happiness on you? Remember, you can be happy only when all are happy! Always love and follow only truth; falsehood is never beneficial.

People respect and disgrace, but you will find no one who honours falsehood, deceit, and injustice. All will respect truth, straightforwardness, and justice. The dharma as prescribed in the Vedas is tested and capable of being tested. It is impartial and just. Faith in it grows with practice. The worship of the gods has to follow the rules prescribed in the Vedas; by this means, people will get strengthened in dharmic practice. This dharma is the command of the Lord; it is the authentic voice of God, so it can well be followed by all. For who is a divine person (devatha)? It is just a name for a person who observes truth as their vow (vratha) in daily life.

Consider how much talent the Lord has given to people. With that endowment, seek the four goals (purusharthas) and move forward on the path to the Lord, adhering strictly to the demands of truth. That is the use to which the talent has to be put; that is the purpose of the gift. Only those gifted with eyesight can see things; the blind have no such luck. So too, only those gifted with truth, longing for the four goals and adherence to dharma, can see the Lord; all others are blind. The Lord has also given people instruments for developing their intellect and discrimination. If they use them well and try to realize themselves, the Lord will add unto them fresh talent and new sources of power, for He is full of grace toward the struggling. When people seek to follow dharma, the truth will also reveal itself to them.

The discipline of truth (sathya)

If you are careless about the discipline of truth, every duty laid on you by dharma and every action prompted by dharma will hang heavy as a burden.

Search for the reality behind all these phenomena and that search will make all dharmic actions light and pleasant. The Lord has shaped people so that they are inclined toward God and is delighted at the expansion of their vision and happy when they are moral and virtuous. So, people must serve their best interests by adhering to their basic nature, by concentrating on Brahman, by cultivating truth, and by practising dharma.

Truth has to be sought and tested by all the canons of reasoning. The discipline consists of:

1. The heroism to observe dharma rigorously (ojas).
2. Fearless self-control (tejas).
3. The discarding of all feelings of joy or sorrow at the ups and downs of life, with equanimity.
4. Having unshakable faith in truth and dharma (sahana).
5. Mental and physical health of the most excellent kind, earned by discipline and celibacy (bala).
6. The desire and ability to speak sweetly and straight, won by the practice of truth and love.
7. Withdrawal of the five senses of wisdom (jnanendriyas) and the five senses of action (karmendriyas) from vice and sin and the sublimation of all the senses for the service of truth (indriya-moha).
8. The winning of the overlordship of all the worlds by the self-won domination of the inner world.
9. The destruction of one's prejudices and the pursuit of truth at all times (dharma).

The prayer one has to make is, "May all this be conferred on me" as found in the "Chamaka hymn".

Dharma brings good to all; it confers bliss (ananda) here and hereafter. It is essential that all humanity today see the glory of this universal dharma.

The traits of the castes

Brahmins are known by their significant traits: knowledge (vidya), virtue, action of the most exalted and beneficial kind, and the spread of virtue by example. One who promotes these and cultivates these and develops these is a brahmin, whoever one is. That is the qualification and the authority exercisable by the brahmin. Only the highly learned person and the person who conducts themselves as befits that learning can deserve the status. Earning these qualifications is the effort to be made by those eager to justify that position.

Now for the signs of protectors (kshatriyas). They are efficient in all undertakings, have heroism, courage, adventure, and an eagerness to punish the wicked and protect the virtuous. Those endowed with such qualities are entitled to the status of warriorhood. They have to take up all tasks with that attitude and establish at home worthy rules for all.

Next the business people (vaisyas). They have to try to make the currents of commerce flow smooth and fast, to forge communication links that tie the nations into one commonwealth and make wealth multiply in the world.

That is their task. They must ensure that the concord between peoples is unbroken and undiminished. They have to aspire for "the fame of great deeds and noble achievements" and "the splendour of having helped in the spread of education and health by the erection of schools, hospitals, and the like". They must devote their wealth to the promotion of all worthy causes. By this means, virtue and righteousness are fostered.

Now for the labourers (sudras) and their ideal characteristics: They have to produce and gather things of value, not deviating from the path of dharma. Always earnest to realize the objects of human existence and always striving for the same, they must intelligently store and protect things produced and try to produce more and more, for the common benefit. The things thus collected have to be liberally utilized for the spread of genuine knowledge (vidya) and for the sustenance and support of the virtuous.

In this way, by the cooperative effort of these four types of human endeavour, wealth will become much and manifold and mankind will be rendered happy. The four castes (varnas) have to feel that the social order has been designed with the overall aim of maintaining worldly dharma (loka-dharma). If each caste adheres to its duties, the welfare of the world will doubtless be assured; besides, each will be able to win what is even more important, the bliss of the Atma. On the other hand, if all feel that there is but one caste, one code of duties, and one set of rules for all, the welfare and security of the world will be endangered.

If all enter the field of trade, who will purchase and consume the goods offered? If all start teaching, who will learn and practise? If all command, who will obey? If all produce and grow, who will seek the products of their toil?

It is to create the diversity that will contribute to unity, through the practice of truth and dharma in every individual and social act, that the Lord has ordained the way of living according to the duty of caste (varna-dharma).

It is believed that occupation (vritti) was based on the caste (varna). No, castes were so named on the basis of the occupations only. Today, there is neither caste nor occupation. One profession today, another tomorrow; a caste today, another tomorrow - this instability lies at the root of the disturbed atmosphere of the world, of the discontent that has spread.

Infuse every profession and occupation with inner morality, with constant attachment to truth, with the unperturbed equanimity of fortitude; then, follow the duties of the caste (varna) with its prescribed professions - that is the summum bonum, the supreme blessing. If you fail to do this, your lot will be misery and chronic poverty. The choice is between the first, the Sri Rama saviour (raksha), and the second, the worldly punishment (lokasiksha) of distress (dhurbhiksha). Your saviour from the punishment is to learn dharma (dharma-sikshana)!