

DANAM CONFERENCE 2007

SESSION DKM3

Theme: Beyond Dominant Perspectives: Reflections on Dharma, Karma, and Moksha

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ABSTRACTS

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The Non-Retributive Karma Doctrine

The popular version of the karma doctrine holds that the universe is intrinsically moral because it ensures that doing evil leads mechanically to suffering as punishment, while doing good leads mechanically to a reward. There is solid scriptural authority for this retributive conception of karma, e.g. the Chandogya Upanishad's promise of noble birth as an inevitable reward for pleasant conduct in the present life; or the Buddha's explanation of the massacre of his own Shakya tribe as a deserved consequence of their cruel treatment of sentient beings in a past life; or Tiruvalluvar's assurance that ultimate destruction follows the sinner just as the shadow follows the walking man. And yet, as we shall detail, it is open to serious criticism on logical, empirical and ethical grounds. Fortunately, there exists a subtler version of the karma doctrine, best articulated in Jainism, viz. as a "preservation law". At the time of death, the complex of wishes and aversions, of attachments and non-neutrality, is preserved and drives the individual back to the world, to fulfil his remaining desires through the next incarnation. A very graphic example is the Mahabharata narrative of the helpless girl Amba exacting revenge on Bhishma in her subsequent incarnation as the archer Shikhandin. The driving force in this case is not a balance of good and evil, but simply a psychological propensity, in some cases fostered by experiences of good or evil conduct but not in linear proportion to them. It is especially in the advanced stages of *sadhana* that this non-retributive conception of *karma* proves to make more sense than the moralistic one.

Henry John Walker, Bates College

Dharma and Duty in the Gita

Amartya Sen makes the interesting suggestion that in the Gita, Krshna represents a deontological approach to ethics, based on duty alone, whereas Arjuna takes a broader consequentialist approach. But Krshna is urging indifference to rewards, not to moral consequences, and throughout the Gita he promotes the idealistic morality of the Upanishads. He acknowledges that these ideals are not always possible in the "real world" and that war is sometimes necessary, but he distinguishes between a warrior's personal duty to fight (*svadharma*) and the overall justice of the fight (*dharmya yuddha*). A warrior may attain moksha by doing his duty, but that personal duty is part of a network of moral consequences that add up to a higher ideal of dharma. This is the dharma that Krshna promotes, and it transcends the division between deontology and utilitarian.

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A Search for Dharma in Secular World of Diaspora: Is sadharana dharma the only alternative?

“The truth of *dharma* lies concealed in a dark cave”¹ says the epic *Mahabharata*. It is even more difficult to discern the truth of *dharma* for those who live in diaspora. Can we imagine the practice of traditional *varnasrama*-*dharma* in the secular and ever-changing world of diaspora? Living in diaspora and following *varnasrama*-*dharma* are intrinsically incompatible. For those who straddle these two worlds tensions mount high and questions arise: the *Principle of Ethics* itself poses ethical problems. How are we to determine our *dharma* when culturally specific expectations change country to country? Can the principles of *sadharana* *dharma*, such as *ahimsa*, *satya*, *kshama*, etc. alone serve as a bridge to freedom?

This paper explores the fundamental questions generated by globalization in light of ancient narratives as well as the writings of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi, who struggled with the same questions, seems to offer a model. How does Gandhi, who himself was challenged in a foreign land, interpret *dharma* laws? In pursuit of political, social, and spiritual freedom (*moksha*) how does he redefine ancient laws for his own times? Can the religious texts themselves help us solve *dharmic* predicament while living in the foreign society?

Shiv Raj Pal, Toronto, Canada

Sukshma-Shareer, the Prime Body of the Atma, and its Relationship to Dharma, Karma and Moksha

The beautiful Rig Veda mantra:

*(dva suparna sayuja sakhaya samanam vriksham parishasvajaate,
tayorannyah pippalam svadvtyan shrannanyo abhi chaksheeti.)
(RV. 1-164-20)*

presents allegorically the relationship between the three *tatva*-s (entities): the *Atma-tatva* (soul), the *Parmatma-tatva* (Creator) and the *Prakriti-tatva* (nature). It is the conscious-being (*chetan*) *atma-tatva* that enjoys the ripe fruit of the *Prakriti*-tree while the other conscious-being *Parmatma-tatva* only observes from all directions. To interact with *Prakriti* (the matter) the *atma-tatva* has to be equipped with tools and rules of interaction. It is *atma-tatva*'s *sukshma-shareer* that enables a link between the matter and itself. It is the *sukshma-shareer*, made up of 18 fundamental elements of creation (13 *karans* + 5 *tanmaatras*), that the *atma* acquires at the onset of creation. Later the *sukshma-shareer* serves as the seed for building its own macro-body (*sthool-shareer*) from conception in the womb onwards for doing *karma*.

Though the subject of the *sukshma-shareer* falls within the realms of philosophy, karma, *dharma*, *moksha* (*Vedas*, *Darshanas*, *Upnishadas*, *Aranyaks*, *Smritis*, *Bhagwatgeeta*,.), the *sukshma-shareer* has direct relevance to the physical body that it acquires and it interacts as well with the physical world around it. *Atma* itself being a *nirguna* entity, remains a transcendent entity while

¹ On the last day of the Pandava's exile in the forest, Yudhistihira said in reply to the “riddle” question of the yaksha: “The scriptures are many and divided; the *dahrmashastras* are many and different. Nobody is called a sage until he holds a different view. The truth of *dharma* lies concealed in the dark cave (of the human heart?)...” *Ethics and Epics*, p. 41

doing karma with the help of its *sthool-shareer*, it is atma's *gunatmak sukshma-shareer* that carries the balance of karma from birth to birth until *moksha*.

Questions such as, why a soul acquires a *sukshma-shareer*, why the *sukshma-shareer* is unique to an individual soul, what are the implications of the *sukshma-shareer* being associated with the soul and when does the soul not have a need for *sukshma-shareer*, will be discussed in relation to karma, dharma and *moksha*, with references to Vedic literature and the *Sankhya, Vaisheshika and Yoga Darshana-s*.

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The Arya Samaj View of Moksha

According to the Vedas and Upanishads as interpreted by Arya Samaj's scholars, after the death of physical body, a select few souls totally devoted to God (*Eeshwar Pranidhaan*) are liberated from the cycle of rebirth for a very prolonged period i.e. attain *moksha*. The soul in the state of *moksha*, is always consciously aware of God who is *Anandswaroop* (Supreme Bliss), *Prakashswaroop* (Supreme Light that enlightens) and *Jnanswaroop* (True Knowledge) and with that awareness enjoys infinite bliss and deep enlightenment. Moksha **is not a physical place** like the descriptions of heaven or *swarga*. Instead, *moksha* is conscious company of God who is omnipresent and eternal but has no shape or form i.e. is formless. The soul in *moksha* has no physical body, the soul experiences the bliss and enlightenment in the form of *samkalp*. Other names for *moksha* are *Brahmlokam, Urumlokam, Amritam, Shaashvat Sukham* etc. When the soul achieves *moksha*, it aligns itself with God but does not merge with or become a part of God. It always remains a separate entity, and after an extremely long time is born again as a spiritually endowed human being.