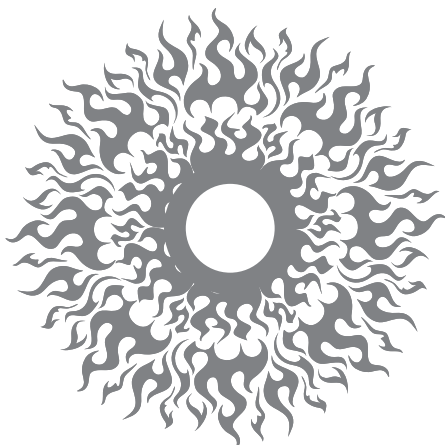


DHARMA

The Living Flame



DAAJI

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Between knowing and doing, there is seeing.
Yudhiṣṭhira called it *apramāda*, alertness.
Kṛṣṇa carried it beyond all forms and named it surrender:

सर्वधर्मान् परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।
Sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja.
When all dharmas are fulfilled,
Truth stands without a name.

~

May the book awaken rather than instruct.
May the pages return you to awareness,
rather than bind you to answers.
May the path the words trace lead you from many
meanings into the one truth that needs no name.

*Dedicated to the loving memory of my dear brother,
Shri V. K. Jhaver, whose life was an inspiring example
of enterprise, integrity, service and generosity.*

*He will always be remembered with deep love,
gratitude and affection.*

PART I

THE QUESTION

The Forgotten Question

धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः

Dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ

Dharma protects those who protect it.

—Manusmṛti 8.15

The Word that Lost Its Way

There is a word that holds the universe together. It is present in the movement of stars and the stirring of conscience, the rhythm of seasons, the responsibility of kings, the path of rivers and the purpose of a single human life.

That word is dharma (धर्म, that which upholds).

Today, dharma is treated as a marker of religion, community or identity, even on government forms. A word that once pointed to what sustains life is now frequently used as a label that separates people.

We still possess the word, but we have drifted far from its meaning. We argue over dharma, politicize it, make it into a banner, while the essence we claim to defend keeps slipping from our grasp.

To reclaim dharma is to remember something older than belief. It is to return to a truth so basic to existence that, when we lose sight of it, confusion naturally follows.

So, let us begin where the ancient inquiry begins.

Before Dharma, There Was Ṛta

In the oldest layer of Indian wisdom, before temples were raised or scriptures fixed, the seers perceived an underlying structure of reality they called ṛta (ऋत, cosmic order).

Ṛta is neither a god nor a commandment. It is the cosmic order through which existence holds itself together.

The sun rises by ṛta.

The seasons change by ṛta.

Rivers find the ocean by ṛta.

Ṛta is what makes the universe coherent. Without it, there would be chaos. Through it, galaxies move, rain falls, seeds germinate, blood circulates and each part of existence moves according to its nature.

The root of the word is *r* (ऋ, to move, to flow, to go rightly). Ṛta is Reality unfolding rightly from within its own nature. The cosmos is not governed from outside itself. It unfolds through ṛta.

The decisive transition comes when this cosmic order enters human life. When universal order becomes personal responsibility, *ṛta* becomes *dharma*.

Dharma: That Which Upholds

The word *dharma* comes from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ* (धृ, to hold, to sustain, to support).

Dharma is that which upholds.

But upholds what?

Everything.

Dharma upholds the individual, the family, the community, the kingdom and the cosmos itself.

When a person lives in alignment with *dharma*, they help sustain the whole. When they violate it, the damage may seem small, but it is real. Repeated often enough, such violations weaken the order that holds life together.

This is why the ancient seers spoke of *dharma* with such gravity. *Dharma* was understood first as participation in the order of existence, and only later as personal morality. Every *dharmic* act, however small, upholds the world. Every *adharmaic* (अधर्म, contrary to *dharma*) act, however hidden, diminishes it.

The individual is never separate from the cosmos. The cosmos is never indifferent to the individual.

Dharma is the living bridge between them.

What Dharma Is Not

To see what dharma is, we must first clear away what it is not.

Dharma is different from what the English word religion usually suggests. It cannot be reduced to belief, worship, community identity, formal affiliation or conversion from one faith into another. Ask a person their dharma, and no sect can answer for them.

Nor is dharma the same as a fixed moral code, where certain actions are treated as right or wrong in every circumstance. Dharma asks us to look not only at the action itself, but also at the context, role, intention, consequence and the truth of the moment.

Dharma is contextual, relational and alive.

What is dharmic for a warrior may be adharmic for a priest.

What is dharmic in war may be adharmic in peace.

What serves truth in one moment may betray it in the next.

This does not mean that anything can be justified. Dharma is more demanding than that. It asks us to discern what is right in this moment, with full attention to context, responsibility and truth.

Rules and commandments have their place, but they cannot replace wisdom. Dharma must be discerned in the living moment, with a presence that no rulebook can supply.

The Fourfold Expression

In this book, dharma may be understood through four interwoven dimensions. They are distinct, yet they constantly shape one another.

Svadharma (स्वधर्म, one's own nature) is the unique path. It rises from temperament, capacity, the stage of one's life and the inner calling. Each person's svadharma is shaped by their particular nature and circumstances. To imitate another's dharma, however noble, is itself adharma. The Bhagavad Gītā is unequivocal in this. It is better to perform one's own dharma imperfectly than another's perfectly.

Samāja-dharma (समाजधर्म, social order) is the dharma of living together. Roles exist for cohesion, not for hierarchy. The teacher, healer, builder and leader—each serves the whole in different ways. When a role is treated as a contribution, society flourishes. When it is reduced to status or entitlement, dharma begins to decline into its shadow.

Rāja-dharma (राजधर्म, the dharma of power) falls heaviest on those entrusted with authority. Those who govern must protect rather than dominate, uphold justice even when it is inconvenient and restrain themselves when power offers indulgence. The epics judge rulers severely because a ruler's adharma wounds not only the ruler himself but everyone he governs.

Ātma-dharma (आत्मधर्म, the dharma of the soul) is fidelity to truth, alignment with Being. When every outer dharma falls away, when social role and circumstance no longer

matter, this remains. It is the dharma that cannot be taken from you, the one that holds even when all the others conflict.

These four dimensions are not separate compartments. The person who knows their svadharma naturally serves samāja-dharma. The leader settled in ātma-dharma fulfils rāja-dharma without strain. Each dimension supports the others when the person is inwardly aligned.

Dharma and *Karma*: A Crucial Distinction

There is another word often paired with dharma, and the two are easily confused.

Karma (कर्म, action) concerns action and its consequences.

Dharma asks, ‘What is the right action now?’

The difference is decisive.

Remaining true to dharma may still bring difficult consequences. A person who speaks the truth may suffer for it, yet the dharma remains intact. The opposite is also true. A lie may bring comfort, silence may preserve approval and a small compromise may keep peace at the cost of truth.

Within the Sanātana Dharma tradition, an action is judged first by whether it is dharmic, not merely by the consequences it produces. Karma tells us that every action bears fruit, but dharma asks whether the action is right in the first place. An action may bring comfort, approval or success and still be adharmic. Another may bring difficulty, loss or suffering, and still uphold truth.

When Dharma Is Misused

This is where dharma becomes vulnerable to corruption.

Dharma is subtle. It asks for discernment and cannot be contained fully in any rulebook. For that reason, it is easily distorted.

Rules can be obeyed while dharma is violated.

Scriptures can be quoted while truth is betrayed.

The letter can kill what the spirit meant to protect.

Kabir saw this centuries ago and said it in two and a half lines:

पोथी पढ़ि पढ़ि जग मुआ, पंडित भया न कोय ।

ढाई आखर प्रेम का, पढ़े सो पंडित होय ।

Pothī paṛhi paṛhi jag muā, paṇḍit bhayā na koy.

Dhāī ākhar prem kā, paṛhe so paṇḍit hoy.

The whole world died poring over its books, and not one grew wise. Whoever learns the two and a half letters of love is alone learned.

This is why texts like the Manusmṛti (मनुस्मृति) may be read in the context of their time, place and society, with wisdom rather than applied mechanically. When dharma is reduced to rigid rules, its living spirit is lost. Wisdom remains alive only when it can respond to changing times without abandoning its deeper principles.

The opposite danger is just as real. In trying to adjust to changing times, one can also abandon dharma altogether.

Convenience may be mistaken for wisdom, and fear may be mistaken for flexibility. The real work is to preserve the principle while applying it with discernment.

This is also why Heartfulness gives the heart a central place in discernment. The intellect has its role, especially in weighing rules and precedents, but it cannot perceive the whole of a living moment on its own. The heart brings another kind of knowing, one that can sense what the situation asks before reasoning has fully arranged its arguments. Dharma asks for this awareness, because rules alone are not enough.

It asks for alertness.

Where Discernment Begins

Dharma begins in *ṛta*, the cosmic order, and becomes personal through *svadharma*. It is not religion, not a fixed moral code and not mechanical rule following.

If dharma is not a rulebook, then the real question remains. How does one know what dharma requires in a given moment? And if no text can simply give us that discernment, where does it come from?

Keep these points in mind as the inquiry deepens. Dharma is contextual and cannot be reduced to fixed rules. It lives through presence rather than mechanical practice. It asks for alignment and wisdom more than compliance. When reduced to rigidity, it loses its life. It gives greater weight to rightness than to outcome.

One of the most important clues comes in a single word. It comes from Yudhiṣṭhira, in the forest, beside the lake, when his brothers' lives are at stake. But that answer matters only after one has truly felt the question, 'What is dharma?'

The question echoes across millennia, and each generation must answer it again, not only in thought, but also in action.