

Dharma

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Dharma is the sustaining law of right relation. The word can mean duty, law, righteousness, teaching, or the nature of a being; its meaning depends upon context. In the Theosophical treatment, these senses converge upon a demanding question: how may self-conscious life cooperate with the truth of the whole? Dharma becomes the discerned obligation through which understanding takes form in conduct. It gives action a direction deeper than preference and a responsibility wider than personal advantage.

The *Bhagavad Gita* gives the classic dramatic field for Dharma. Arjuna stands between action and refusal, duty and grief, fear and insight. His problem is not a lack of information. It is confusion in the very center of moral life. He sees obligations that conflict, love that binds, duty that frightens, and action that seems stained before it begins. Krishna does not solve the crisis by giving him permission to escape. He teaches him how to see, and therefore how to act.

This is one of the deepest lessons of Dharma. Right action is not always simple, comfortable, or immediately pleasing to the personality. Dharma is not whatever one wants to do, nor whatever avoids pain. It is not merely obedience to convention, because convention itself may be confused. Dharma requires discrimination. It asks the mind to become clear enough to distinguish fear from conscience, attachment from love, pride from responsibility, and passivity from peace.

This is why Dharma is inseparable from Karma. Karma is lawful causation, the continuity of action and consequence. Dharma is right relation to that law. Karma teaches that nothing is isolated, nothing disappears, and every cause returns through the field of life. Dharma teaches how to act within that field so that action becomes clarifying rather than binding. To live dharmically is to stop scattering causes through ignorance and to begin generating causes that serve awakening.

This does not make Dharma cold. Law in the Wisdom Tradition is not dead mechanism. True law sustains, educates, balances, and restores. Dharma is compassionate because it protects beings from the chaos of *adharma*. It gives direction when desire fragments the mind. It gives proportion when fear exaggerates. It gives obligation when selfishness would isolate. It gives courage when comfort would become betrayal.

This is where *Manas* must turn toward *Buddhi*. The lower mind alone cannot reliably discern Dharma, because lower *Manas* is entangled with *Kama*. It argues for what desire wants, fears

what the personality fears, and calls self-protection wisdom. *Buddhi* brings another light: intuitive proportion, compassion, impersonality, and the quiet recognition of what is true. Dharma becomes clear when *Manas* is made transparent to *Buddhi*.

Svadharmā, one's own Dharma, is especially delicate. It does not mean simply doing whatever one is inclined to do. Nor does it justify inherited social rigidity or spiritual laziness. It means the right action appropriate to one's actual nature, capacity, karma, stage, and responsibility within the whole. Another person's Dharma cannot simply be copied. Imitation may be easier than discernment, but Dharma requires one to find the line of truth in one's own field.

This is why Dharma cannot be separated from Universal Brotherhood and Human Solidarity. The duty of the human being is not merely private moral tidiness. To live dharmically is to recognize participation in one human family, one planetary field, one karmic atmosphere. The welfare of others is not external to one's own path. The order that sustains oneself must also sustain the whole. A Dharma that ignores suffering becomes incomplete; a spirituality that forgets the common life becomes *adharma* in subtle form.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception allows *Manas* to discover the reach of duty. One may first think Dharma means "my duty." Then one sees that duty belongs to relation. Then relation widens: family, community, humanity, nature, ancestors, future generations, invisible beings, and the whole evolutionary pilgrimage. Dharma is not narrowed by this widening. It becomes more exact. The larger the circle, the more precise the action must become.

The contemplative use of Dharma is simple and severe. Before action, one may pause and ask: is this aligned? Is this true? Is this necessary? Is this kind? Is this mine to do? Is this for the whole, or for the hungry image of myself? Such questions are not sentimental. They are forms of meditation in action. They help prevent the mind from rushing into karmic entanglement under the pressure of desire or fear.

Imagine a colleague asking us to conceal an error in a shared account. Loyalty seems to pull one way and truthfulness another. Dharma requires attention to everyone affected: the colleague, those relying on the account, and the trust that makes their work possible. A responsible course may be to speak privately, help correct the error, and ensure that those affected receive accurate information. Humiliation serves no necessary purpose; concealment leaves others exposed. The task is to unite truth with proportion, accepting the discomfort of action without making that discomfort the measure of rightness.

Such discernment grows through practice. Before deciding, we can separate established facts from assumptions, listen to an unfamiliar standpoint, and examine the wish to appear righteous. Afterwards, we can review what the action actually sustained. A sincere intention does not settle

every practical question. The willingness to learn from consequences belongs to fidelity itself. Duty becomes more intelligent when it can receive correction without abandoning its concern for truth.

This does not mean harsh self-judgment. Dharma must be learned through repeated correction. Human beings often discover Dharma by noticing where they have violated it. A lie reveals the value of truth. A selfish act reveals the wound of separateness. A failure of courage reveals the need for inner strength. A careless word reveals the power of speech. If met without self-condemnation, error can become instruction.

Professor Iyer's insistence that metaphysics and ethics must be joined is central here. Dharma is the bridge between knowing and being. Without Dharma, metaphysics becomes a beautiful abstraction. Without metaphysical depth, ethics can become rigid or moralistic. Dharma unites them by asking that truth be embodied in conduct. It says: let what you know become how you live.

This is also the meaning of action without attachment. To act dharmically is not to control outcomes. Results belong to a larger field of karma. The individual is responsible for motive, clarity, effort, and fidelity to truth, not for possession of the fruits. This frees action from anxiety and self-claiming. It also prevents despair, because one may act rightly even when outer results remain uncertain.

Dharma is therefore a path of freedom. At first, duty may feel like limitation. But when duty is understood as alignment with truth, it becomes liberation from the tyranny of whim. The personality wants to do what it likes; the soul wants to become what it is. Dharma serves the soul. It makes freedom exact.

Dharma, then, is not a burden laid upon the soul from outside. It is the soul's own law becoming conscious. It is the music of right relation heard through the noise of circumstance. It is the sustaining truth that asks to be lived. To follow Dharma is to let *Manas* become quiet enough to receive *Buddhi*, strong enough to discipline desire, and generous enough to act for the welfare of all.

Glossary

Adharma — Departure from sustaining law or right relation; disorder expressed through thought and conduct.

Bodhichitta — The awakening or wisdom-seeking mind dedicated to the welfare of beings; here, the union of meditation, duty, and compassion.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

Dharma — Sustaining law, duty, or right relation; the precise meaning depends upon the context.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Kama — Desire; the principle associated with personal craving and the psychic use of mind.

Kamadeva — The deity of love; in the quoted symbolic account, linked with the relation of desire, cosmic order, and manifestation.

Karuna — Compassion; linked with meditation and duty in the cited Theosophical account.

Manas — Mind; the human principle of self-conscious thought and moral choice.

Rta — Cosmic order or truth; in the quoted passage, considered with dharma as an expression of sustaining law.

Shraddha — Faith or steady confidence joined to a willingness to test the teaching through practice.

Svadharmā — One's own duty or rightful work; in Professor Iyer's account, an inwardly understood and self-consecrated responsibility.

Tat — That; a designation of the universal Reality beyond finite description.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — "The Descent of Manas" — pp. 164–165

"The marriage of meditation and duty gives birth to the Bodhisattva ideal of renunciation through service. This is the sacred and archetypal meaning of *dhyana*, dharma and *karuna*, which are all magically fused in *bodhichitta*, the jewel in the lotus, God in Man as in the cosmos. Originally anchored in the notion of 'that which holds', dharma is the self-sustaining factor in Nature through which self-conscious beings in a world of change are able to support themselves in the realm of action by a sublime idea common to a variety of simple tasks, and relevant to humane relationships of every sort."

Meditation thought: Allow meditation, duty, and compassion to inform one another. Which immediate obligation becomes clearer when all three are held together?

2. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Descent of Manas” — p. 165

“When the power and potency of dharma are invoked through voluntary sacrifices and sacred pledges, through self-chosen obligations and consequent trials, duty becomes a self-validating principle shining by its own light, independent of anything outside it. Those alone who are unequivocally committed to dharma, and who have passed through preliminary initiations, can profit from the secret teachings proffered to them. Each and every sincere aspirant on the path of duty can truly hope to discover the guiding light and sovereign talisman of selfless service.”

Meditation thought: Consider the depth of a freely chosen pledge. How can its inward purpose remain alive within a familiar daily task?

3. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Descent of Manas” — p. 165

“Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* stressed the critical shift from a sense of duty supported by social structures to a self-consecrated conception of dharma, whereby human beings are continually defining themselves and shedding the light of self-conscious thought within the radius of their obligations to others and to themselves.”

Meditation thought: Let duty become an understood commitment. What would help you perform a necessary action with greater inward consent?

4. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Descent of Manas” — p. 165

“Virtually all the practical difficulties encountered in the daily performance of duty – such as trivialization, routinization and staleness – may be traced to the force of habit and the hypnosis of automatism on the astral plane. Whenever one is passive, one is far from spiritually awake, and hardly functioning from a universal standpoint in the local habitations of particulars. But, if through joyous meditation one secures an elevated basis for one’s emanations into the world, then one’s words and actions directed toward other beings reflect a reverence for them as immortal souls.”

Meditation thought: Notice where routine has become mechanical. Renew attention to the person or purpose that first made the work worth doing.

5. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Descent of Manas” — p. 165

“One can also help to enhance the latent self-consciousness in all the life-atoms of the seven kingdoms of Nature. Such capacities are not superogatory gifts in rare human beings at this stage in evolution, but rather basic obligations for all. Since the commencement of the Fourth Round all the lower kingdoms of Nature have vitally depended upon man for their continued development and collective evolution.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate the long preparation implied by human responsibility. Let the capacity to choose become a reason for greater care.

6. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume I — “The Descent of Manas” — p. 165

“Occultism begins when one ceases from all complaints, tortuous games and cowardly delay, and instead silently resolves to come to terms with the manifold karma of an incarnation. Rather than infecting and polluting the elementals of one’s astral photosphere by excessive statements of intention, idle speculation and resentment of supposedly external duties, one must embrace the initially painful recognition that duty is inherent to one’s status as a human being.”

Meditation thought: Set aside one unproductive complaint long enough to recognize the duty it obscures. What useful action is available now?

7. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “Kriyashakti” — p. 198

“Something of the supreme self-confidence of self-existence is conveyed in the hymn of the *Atharva Veda* which portrays *Kamadeva* as the offspring of Dharma and *Shraddha*. Dharma in this sense refers to supreme necessity, flowing forth from precosmic harmony or *Rta* as its architectonic embodiment in abstract space. On the one side, it is the stern decree of necessity, imposing harmony upon the relations of all manifested beings; on the other side, it is the compassionate fitness of all things and the vital sense of everlasting right.”

Meditation thought: The passage joins cosmic order to spiritual love. Reflect upon how sustaining another being’s dignity gives ethical form to that relationship.

8. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “Kriyashakti” — p. 198

“In this dharma there is a solemnity and sacredness which far transcends all derivative notions of destiny and faith, all earthly promises and prospects. Standing prior to all of these, and serving as the root of all legitimate aspiration, dharma is the unwavering and authentic imperative of the truth of Self-Existence. It is the abstract principle of integrity and the fount of all obligation and its fulfilment.”

Meditation thought: Consider dharma as fidelity to the sustaining truth of being. How might a particular choice become more consonant with that truth?

9. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “Karma and Transmutation” — p. 371

“A relevant and accessible example of this process of voluntary Manasic self-evolution can be found in the practice of taking daily mantrams or seed-thoughts for meditation and application. In this practice depth will follow upon continuity and continuity will follow upon resolve. The aim is to employ potent ideas in order to blow away mental misconceptions which are bound up with the limitations of the lunar astral form.”

Meditation thought: Take one generous idea into the day as a seed for action. Notice where it can become a concrete act of service.

10. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “Karma and Transmutation” — p. 371

“One must learn to go at a speed which is governed by the needs of many other beings, but also amidst the clutter of objects and the narrow corridors through which one must move with patience and humility, stopping at each counter until one finds what it is that can be used to feed one’s child and family. Again, it is the micro-approach to daily obligations which is the basis for deepening the powers of concentration and meditation.”

Meditation thought: Let an ordinary errand become a lesson in proportion. Can patience remain present when another person’s pace differs from your own?

11. R.N. Iyer — *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III — “Karma and Transmutation” — p. 371

“Owing to the enormous elasticity of the mind, it is capable of tremendous expansion as well as intense focus, but its wings will be clipped if it is weak in the embodiment of dharma. To understand in any degree the ubiquity of TAT is simultaneously to realize one’s obligation to every point of life and to find within oneself the resources required to fulfil one’s dharma.”

Meditation thought: Allow a larger conception of duty to loosen a rigid response. Which neglected relationship belongs within the decision before you?

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy* — p. 131

“Duty is that which is due to Humanity, to our fellow-men, neighbours, family, and especially that which we owe to all those who are poorer and more helpless than we are ourselves. This is a debt which, if left unpaid during life, leaves us spiritually insolvent and moral bankrupts in our next incarnation. Theosophy is the quintessence of duty.”

Meditation thought: Reflect upon duty as something due to others. Name one obligation that can be honoured through a specific, considerate action.