



LIVING DHARMA  
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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# Living Dharma in the 21st Century

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# 1. A First Step

**W**HEN we set out on this task to realize the Self, perhaps a logical first step to take would be to analyze the people who have achieved this in the past. Where did they start? What did they do? Did they leave any tips or clues behind? What can we learn from them and apply in our own lives? Do these people even exist?

After some searching, it becomes evident that not only did these people exist, they left so many clues behind that it is in fact confusing to even find a starting point! There are nonetheless some broad categories we can classify them with: the ancient sages of India, or “rishis,” who were the first seers, and who came up with the idea of realizing the Truth in the first place; the great men and women of the time of the rishis, who followed their advice and became enlightened through their own actions; the saints who followed the time of the rishis, but who are still in the distant past, like Buddha, Shankaracharya, Christ, etc.; and the “modern” gurus who guide us even today through the medium of institutions, talks, and writings.

Naturally, there are those realized masters who will never be known, but since we cannot learn much from them unless we have personal interaction with them, I will not write about them here.

Unfortunately, when choosing who to follow or learn from, we must consider some hard facts - the age of the rishis is long gone, so trying to find the abode of a rishi or “gurukula” in the forest where he or she might be teaching is impractical; many of the great men and women of the past left no legacy behind, and their actions were simply recorded by admirers (or much later), so trying to follow their “example” may also not be the most practical step to take; the saints of the distant past and modern gurus seem like viable options, because we can find their own personal writings or relatively valid and accurate accounts of their lives.

But now, we come to another crossroads - how do we choose which saint or guru we want to follow? How do we know which one will be best for us, or cater to our needs? The fact is that we don't, until we dive into the writings associated with that particular guru. Therefore, my experience has been thus: if we keep an open mind and accept the examples, advice, and writings of every guru we come across, we can ultimately make an informed decision about where we stand. Even then, we may find that we can learn equally from all of them!





## 2. Common Teachings

**S**UPPOSE we decide that it is not as simple as finding a teacher and sticking to him or her. We may realize that every teacher has something good or unique to offer, and all are more or less equally appealing. Moreover, when we try to turn to one teacher, we begin feeling a restless desire to be with or learn from another teacher too, stemming from the idea that we may be missing out. Because of these feelings, we are at a loss for what to do: we cannot commit to one teacher, and in the process we are failing to learn. What a conundrum! If this is the case, what do we do?

Logically, we can make one conclusion that may help us keep an open (and a peaceful) mind until the end of our quest. With a little exposure to each teacher, we begin to see a certain pattern within all of their teachings and a realization comes to us: every teacher has certain principles and teachings that are the same as certain principles and teachings of every other teacher! Whether it be a rishi, a Buddha, or a modern guru, there are teachings that run common among all of them. If we can extract these common principles and try to practice them, then we are neither caught between teachers, nor are we failing to learn.

The next question is, what are these common teachings that we can extract and how useful will they be in achieving my goal? It appears that there are two basic concepts expounded by almost every master about the road to and the nature of Self-realization. The first is a sense of duty towards righteousness or a sense of righteousness in duty - either way, it is some combination of duty and righteousness. The second is love. Love yourself, love the world, love everything and you will be realized. Perhaps these two teachings are inextricably linked, or perhaps one leads to the other. Perform your duty out of love, or take love to be your duty. Whether we take one route or another, maybe both duty and love merge into one path. But what is duty? And what is love? How do we know we are doing either correctly? We must experiment and see for ourselves! And yet, our minds are so desperate for an explanation before we begin...





### 3. Righteousness and Duty

**W**HAT is righteousness, and what is duty? Why do we have a duty towards righteousness? How will performing my duty and being righteous bring me to my goal of Self-realization, or ultimate bliss? By what connection are duty and bliss related? To seriously analyze these questions would take several volumes of textbooks and a deep personal experience, but perhaps here we can outline a few key points as we begin our journey.

First, what about righteousness? As a matter of terminology, it may be helpful to understand that the Sanskrit word denoting a specific combination of righteousness and duty is called “dharma.” While the definition of dharma goes way beyond simply righteousness and duty, we will leave it at those two for now and keep coming back to dharma as our understanding of the word begins to expand. In this instance, righteousness implies good conduct in every field of life. This means outward cleanliness, truth in speech and action, clean and noble thoughts, and a generally positive outlook towards life. In the context of living life in a value-based manner, “dharma” means combining this definition of righteousness with an inherent sense of duty towards it. This means that at all times, we must be aware of the necessity of acting righteously, and conduct ourselves accordingly.

The next question naturally arises: what is duty, and why is it given so much importance? Duty implies the manifold “obligations” that we have in life, e.g. obligation to our parents, obligation to our teachers, obligation to our family and friends, obligation to nature (including plants, animals, and the ecology thereof), and obligation to humanity as a whole.

The obligations mentioned above refer to the fact that without any of the things listed, we would not be who we are, and therefore out of gratitude towards them we are “obliged” to contribute towards their propagation. If we look closely, this natural law of obligation is geared towards the propagation of the above-mentioned recipients, but with the ultimate purpose of our own propagation in mind. If we help sustain and develop that without which we would not be who we are, then we are ultimately helping to sustain ourselves! This is the logic behind duty.

The next logical question should be, “How do I perform my duty?” How can we be righteous and perform our duties if we don’t even know what to do? The answer to this question lies in a general attitude of giving, also known as service. Giving in all situations without expecting returns is the key to righteousness and duty (as opposed to taking/receiving).

So how does this relate to Self-realization and bliss? There are generally two kinds of happiness - satisfaction and bliss. It is the difference between these two that holds the key to this question’s answer and the key to the relationship between righteousness, duty, and bliss.



When we receive something, our happiness is dependent upon that which we receive. Therefore, so long as the received object lasts, our happiness lasts. For example, suppose we buy a car. The happiness we get out of the car then depends on the car itself. So long as the car is in good condition, we are happy, but as soon as it needs a tune-up or as soon as we have a desire to upgrade it in some way, we limit our happiness by shifting the source of our happiness to that new object of desire, and until we get it we are restless. This is a rather fleeting happiness, and it is known as “satisfaction.”

When we give, or perform service of some sort (here, service implies a lack of desire for any sort of return), the happiness that we derive from giving no longer rests on an object, but rather rests on something that cannot be taken away, does not deteriorate, and does not go stale. After performing service, the happiness we get just by remembering the act is just as much as when we actually did it. Therefore, this happiness is a permanent happiness, and just by doing more and more service and giving more and more away (in charity, not just for the sake of giving) without expecting returns, we can continuously add to our happiness without losing any. This is known as “bliss.”

Clearly, the more desirable form of happiness is bliss, and the path to this happiness is by giving. This is exactly what righteousness and duty prescribe, which is precisely why they are so important - by following our duty and acting righteously (viz. service), we can establish ourselves in bliss, and therefore free our minds from unnecessary tension to focus our thoughts on our ultimate goal, realization of the Self!

Naturally, everyone must experiment for oneself to truly discover the difference between satisfaction and bliss. Just by reading about it does not give one the actual experience, and therefore one must go out and put forth one’s own effort to find for oneself the truth in these words.



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