

The Speaking Tree - Life is a Game of Trivial Pursuit.

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As human beings, we see ourselves as incomplete, lacking in something. Our constant, compulsive pursuits make our sense of inadequacy evident. To escape from this deficiency, we struggle for a large number of things in life which fall under four main headings: dharma or ethics, artha or securities, kama or pleasures, moksha or liberation. All four are collectively called purusartha, that which is longed for by human beings.

The four basic human pursuits can be subdivided into two sets. One set, the pursuit of security and pleasure, is shared in common with other living beings; the other set, ethics and the pursuit of liberation is peculiar to human beings. The second, the human set of pursuits, arises because a human being is a self-conscious person. A self-conscious being is a thinker, with the capacity to reach conclusions about himself or herself. Hence the universal human conclusion: I am a limited deficient being who must struggle for certain things through which I hope to become complete.

It is not necessary to be religious to be ethical. Ethical standards which specify the right and wrong means of achieving security and pleasure are based on common sense. An irreligious person can be completely ethical by common sense standards. To be ethical is to be fully human - not controlled by mere instincts. With a mind capable of rationalisation, we can always abuse the freedom of choice; we can ignore common sense ethical standards. When we do so, we do not fulfil our role as a human being in society. Society establishes rules to prevent such abuse of freedom of choice by instituting criminal and civil laws.

Sometimes we abuse our freedom without transgressing man-made laws or, at least, take care not to get caught. At this point religious ethics enters the picture. Religious ethics confirm common sense ethics and more. Religious ethics or dharma, found in the Vedas, confirm common sense standards, specify further religious do's and don'ts, and add the concept of punya and paap - results produced by good or bad actions, now or hereafter.

According to dharma, human action yields both unseen results as well as an immediate tangible result. The unseen result of an action accrues in subtle form to the account of the 'doer' of the action and, in time, will fructify, tangibly, for him as a 'good' or 'bad' experience - something pleasurable or painful. The subtle result of good action fructifies as pleasure; the subtle result of bad action, as pain. Paap can be defined as sin. Sin

is to choose wrong means to pursue an acceptable goal. This choice will bring an undesired result; paap is paid for in terms of undesirable experiences. The word punya has no suitable English equivalent. It indicates the result of a good action which is not seen, but which will bring later a desirable experience, something that is pleasing.

Dharma occupies the first place in the four categories of human goals, because the pursuit of security and pleasures need to be governed by ethical standards. Striving for security comes second, because it is the foremost desire of everyone. I want to live and live happily; and both pursuits, the struggle for security and the search for pleasure, must be governed by ethics.

The last category is the goal of liberation, moksha, ranked last because it becomes a direct pursuit only when one has realised the limitations inherent in the first three pursuits. Moksha, like dharma, is a peculiarly human pursuit not shared by other creatures. Even among human beings, liberation is the concern of only a few. These few recognise that what they want is not more security or more pleasure but freedom itself - freedom from all desires.

When I do not want anything to be different, I know that I have fallen into place with what is. I know fulfilment. I need make no change to be content. I am, for the moment, free - from the need to struggle for some change in me or the circumstances. If I fall into place permanently, requiring no more change in anything, my life would then be fulfilled, the struggle over.

Moksha becomes relevant when we realise that behind our struggle for security and pleasure is the basic human desire to be adequate, free from all incompleteness, and that no amount of security or pleasure achieves that goal. So when as a mature person we analyse our experiences, we discover that behind our pursuit of security and pleasure is a basic desire to be free from all insufficiency, to be free from incompleteness itself, a basic desire which no amount of artha and kama fulfils. This realisation brings a certain dispassion, nirveda, towards security and pleasures. As a mature person we turn dispassionate towards our former pursuits and we are ready to seek liberation directly.