MY TURN
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Dharma and Conflict of Conscience

Sureshwara, B. Conflict of conscience! Regardless of whether a person considers his or her conduct as right, wrong, good, or evil, the inner conscience tells the individual the appropriate code or behavior, consistent with the code of law prescribed by the society, and moral code ingrained within one's inner conscience. The total or combined code covering physical actions and mental reactions (or thoughts) consist of moral and legal components and is often defined or identified by the classical Sanskrit term dharma. The term dharma cannot be exactly and definitely translated or transliterated into any other language in the world. Dharma is a way of life that can be understood only when one leads a life of dharma. For many who are new or naive to the term dharma, it can be approximately identified as a total life composed of right conduct, duty, mercy and truth. Dharma is more of a moral force than legal law. Even if there is legal responsibility, but no moral accountability exists, dharma is not present.

It is often difficult, if not impossible, to live a life of dharma as defined and exemplified by rishis and early people...How each individual can deviate from dharma without completely engulfing himself in adharma (the opposite of dharma) is the challenge of life. This challenge results in conflict of conscience. There is no easy way out of this conflict, and each individual must set up his or her personal level of response to this conflict.

We are not the only ones to face the conflict of conscience. In the Hindu epic Ramayana, Rama and others faced the conflict a number of times, and a couple of events especially draw our attention to how they reacted to them. It is also important to note how karma is closely interrelated to dharma, and how the unwinding of karma is a pan of dharma. Dasaratha had promised or pledged two boons or gifts to Kaikeyi. Kaikeyi demanded that Rama be banished to a forest for fourteen years and that her son, Bharata, be made crown-prince. One can see here that regardless of maid Manthura's influence, the cycle of karma or fate was gradually unwinding. There is no doubt that Kaikeyi's gift-demand was not compatible with the dharma of the time. Therefore, it would have been appropriate

for Dasaratha to reject her demand. But even if Dasaratha had rejected her demand, it is doubtful that Rama would not have relinquished his right for coronation and not departed for the forest. The lingering legitimate doubt or question in one's mind is why Rama, knowing that Kaikeyi's demand was not appropriate, yielded to her wishes? Karma is the reason for the apparent paradox in which the adharma of Kaikeyi was aided by the dharma of Rama.

The next event that challenges the dharma of Rama occurs after his victory over Ravana. Rama demands that Sita confirm her purity before joining him. Rama's attitude is a classic case of conflict of conscience. Rama as an individual knows Sita's character is beyond question. But Rama as a ruler observing the tradition of the time had to demand that Sita prove herself to the world. It appears that Rama's demand to Sita was not dharma to the individual. On the other hand, it was dharma to the world...

Today it would be difficult if not impossible to find another Rama, yet dharma still implies certain minimum behavioral responsibilities towards one's parents and society. Dharma is both responsibility and obligation, and one must do whatever one can do to live up to these. How well one reacts is ultimately defined by the person's response to inner conscience. The inner conscience will never fail to draw a clear line between moral right and wrong. Are we listening to the inner conscience? If we are listening, our mind will be at peace. If not a disturbed conscience will prevail. The choice is there, but the important and appropriate decision is still ours.

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