

Handout on the *Caturvarnashramadharma*

1. *Caturvarnadharma*

This is a rather long word for the duties (*dharma*) pertaining to the four (*catur*) classes (*varnas*) and stages of life (*ashramas*) (Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 316-21).

There are four *varnas* (literally 'colors') (Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 317): the ***Brahmana varna*** (priests, scholars, intellectuals); ***Kshatriya varna*** (warriors, kings, politicians, jurors); ***Vaishya varna*** (merchants, traders); and ***Shudra varna*** (servants, laborers) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp. 49-51).

Your place in this class structure is decided by *at least* two factors: (i) your parentage or lineage and (ii) your behavior in this life/birth (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp. 49, 51).

One's birth into a given family, and the associated class status, is seen to be the result of karmic forces (see *Course Pack*, pp. 11, 12, 16). Good karma leads to better and better rebirths. This is manifested in the Terrestrial realm through, among other things, successive births in higher and higher *varnas* (see *Course Pack*, pp. 11, 19).

Each *varna* has its own duties, rights, and responsibilities (this is in addition to the duties arising from *sadharana dharma* [summed up as the avoidance of killing other beings, telling the truth, the avoidance of stealing, cultivating self-control, and maintaining one's purity (*Manusmriti* X.63; see page 12 of your *Course Pack* and page 51 of your *Asian Philosophies*])).

2. A brief philosophical reaction to the *varnadharma*:

Positive comments:

(1) There is nothing (morally) wrong with recognizing and categorizing *character types* within the human community. There is even some psychological sense to it.

(2) There is even nothing (at least obviously) wrong with recognizing and categorizing people *according to their aptitudes*.

Negative comments:

(1) There is no good reason to think that differences in aptitude, intellectual skill, cognitive health, or behavior come down to an individual's genetic makeup. Genetic makeup is a necessary condition for *certain* aptitudes, intellectual skills, or behavior, but it is not sufficient.

(2) Consequently, though it *might* be the case that some people are just 'natural' leaders, philosophers, poets or artisans, there is no good reason to think that this is determined by their lineage.

(3) *Even IF* there are some people who are just 'natural' leaders, philosophers, poets or artisans (whatever that might mean), there is no good reason to think that one social category is *more* important, significant, or (spiritually or morally) pure than another.

3. Where does the *Gita* stand on the *varnadharma*?

(1) The author(s) of the *Gita* do(es) not reject the *varnadharma*. Several passages make this clear (see 4:13 or 18:40-47).

(2) It is interesting, however, that the *Gita*'s outlook on the *varnadharma* differs in certain significant ways from what is found in either the *Dharmasutras* or such *Dharmashastras* as the *Manusmriti*.

(i) Krishna does not concern Himself with the 'purity' of class marriage.

(ii) He does not appear to link the *varnas* to parentage. Instead He explicitly associates character traits or aptitude with each *varna*.

(iii) When parentage does come up, Krishna does not assure those of noble character that they will be born in the homes of those well versed in the *Vedas* or mature on any Path to *moksha* (see 6:41-42).

(iv) It gets even more interesting. In at least one place Krishna suggests that there are three possible destinations for those possessing the various characteristics associated with the three *gunas*. Those who possess sattvic characteristics do not remain in the terrestrial realm (our realm), instead this is 'promised' for those possessing the characteristics associated with *rajas*. *ALSO*, all humans qualify for this promise, not just those from among the twice-born (see 14:18).

(v) One more observation is noteworthy. Unlike the *Manusmriti* or even the *Dharmasutras*, Krishna does not advocate treating individuals differently based upon caste or class (or even species) (see 5:18-19, 25; 6:29-32; 12:4, 13, 17-19; 14:19-25).

4. Caturashramadharmā

There are, traditionally, four *ashramas*: student (*brahmacarya*); householder (*grihastha*); forest dweller (*vanaprastha*); recluse/renunciant (*sannyasa*) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 51; *Course Pack*, p. 12 or 13).

Ideally each *ashrama* represents a stage in the life of a **devote twice-born Hindu male** (though you do find attempts to allegorize these stages so that women from the twice-born classes can be said to enter the *ashramas*) (*Course Pack*, pp. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 20).

It is important to recognize that different duties and responsibilities fall on individuals depending on their stage of life (see *Course Pack*, pp. 13-17).

Together the four *ashramas* facilitate the pursuit of the *purusharthas* (or the aims of humanity) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.52).

5. Purusharthas

There are four *purusharthas*. *Dharma* (righteousness, right living), *artha* (wealth, property, 'worldly' success), *kama* (pleasure, love, eros, enjoyment), and *moksha* (liberation) (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, pp.47-49).

Neither *artha* nor *kama* can be pursued without regard for (what is required by) *dharma* (Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, p.48).

Note that the four *purusharthas* nicely connect to the four *ashramas*. As a student, Hindu males of the three highest *varnas* learn, among other things, *dharma*. During the household stage Hindus pursue *artha* and *kama* (within, of course, the confines of *dharma*). For both forest dwellers and recluses the primary pursuit is *moksha*. See Koller's discussion of this in your *Asian Philosophies*, p. 51.

6. Where does the Gita stand on the ashramadharmā and purusharthas?

By implication the value of the student and household *ashramas* are recognized. The student *ashrama* is necessary to gain knowledge of Vedic scripture, and thus, *dharma*. Arjuna is a householder.

The recluse *ashrama* is explicitly mentioned, though not always favorably. When it is mentioned favorably it is so only within the context of pursuing one of the *yogas* or *margas* conducive to *moksha* (see 2:58-61, 68; 4:26, 28-30; 5:2-29; 6:1-4, 17, 46).

Krishna seems critical, from time to time, of those who pursue pleasure or wealth (see 2:45 or 6:8). In saying this, His human persona is a king from a neighboring kingdom, and so someone of wealth. Also, He promises birth into a family of wealth for those among the righteous who spend a long life in heaven (see 6:41). *Perhaps* it is best to see His criticism of lives geared towards pleasure or wealth as criticisms of those who are *attached* to these *purusharthas*.

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