

# Swadharma and the Parable of the Sadhu

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In 1983, the *Harvard Business Review* published a story of an American manager, Bowen McCoy who took a sabbatical leave for six months from his job to go on a trek to the Himalayas, accompanied by a group of five climbers. The group was in the middle of its sixty-day trek and was about to cross an 18,000-foot pass when some of them were showing signs of altitude sickness. If they could not complete the climb on that day, they would have to give up their quest and return to the plains.

Just then on the mountains, they came across a half-naked, middle-aged man, a sadhu who was all by himself and had fainted due to cold and exhaustion.

The group provided him with basic warm clothing and some food and then discussed whether they should accompany the sadhu down to the plains (an eight-hour climb) or leave the sadhu there and carry on with their mission.

This story is a classical ethical dilemma and has been taught to classes on business ethics around the world.

Some of the most common theories used to analyze this case are as follows. First, the theory of utilitarianism propounded by the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the early 19th century, suggests that individuals should strive for the greatest good of the greatest number. According to the theory, the climbers being numerous

should strive to maximise their own happiness even at the cost of the sadhu's misery because only then would the overall happiness be maximised.

The second theory of ethical reasoning was deontology described by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in early 19th century. According to Kant, individuals should only perform those actions which if generalised could become a rule for society. In other words, we should only act out of a sense of duty towards others and never use others as instruments for our purposes. This is often expressed in the common injunction- "do unto others, as you would have them do unto you."

The application of this is clearly illustrated in the Biblical Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) where a poor traveller is robbed and left half dead on the highway. He is rescued by a Samaritan who cares for him, takes him to the city, puts him into a comfortable inn, and pays for his lodgings.

According to this theory, the climbers would have to ask themselves--what is our duty towards the sadhu? Moreover, what if they had to weigh on the one hand their humanitarian duty towards the sadhu with their duty towards each other as team members? Kant does not offer any solution in this respect.

The third theory which can be applied to this case, is that of a contemporary American philosopher, John Rawls. According to Rawls, rules governing society should be determined under a "veil of ignorance." That is, if we are ignorant of our place in society, the rules that we form under this ignorance are likely to be fair to all concerned. Another thumb rule provided by Rawls is that those actions are acceptable which ensure that the least well off individual in society is better off because of the action. In the context of the sadhu, this would mean that even doing the bare minimum to ease the sadhu's misery would be better than doing nothing.

Each of the western ethical theories provides some arguments for whether the climbers should help or not help the sadhu. However, there are two limitations of these theories. First, none of these theories clearly indicates why the climbers should help the sadhu. Why should we strive to maximise universal happiness? Why should we do our duty? Why should we make the least well off person better off? Second, none of these theories takes into account the nature, temperament, or circumstances of the climber.

The concept of Swadharma defines an individual's personal duty based on the place, time, and circumstances that present themselves before a person. Prof. J. B. P. Sinha defines Swadharma as the task which comes to us naturally or the code of conduct which ought to govern our actions based on our temperament and our station in life. In other words, Swadharma consists of duties that arise out of one's being part of a

community or duties appropriate for a given time.

According to Vinoba Bhave, in order to fully relinquish the fruits of our actions (i.e., become completely selfless), we must only take up those actions that are obligatory. In other words, we must not go out of our way and seek out opportunities and actions, which may appear attractive to us nor give up those actions, which are naturally ours by virtue of being born in a particular family at a particular point in time.

Vinoba argues that only by doing those actions which are obligatory can we easily give up the fruits of our actions and strive towards the ideal of Karma-Yoga. Swadharma constitutes the innermost purposes of an individual, which forms the core of his or her personality. Thus, Indian philosophy ordains a customised personal moral code for each of us depending on our unique life circumstances. Swadharma requires that we do our duty as defined by us

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depending on the circumstances that we find ourselves.

In a sense, each one of us is a climber and we are often confronted with a sadhu who mindlessly and helplessly strides into our path when we least expect him. What is our duty at that time? Do we continue to climb on or do we stop our expedition to help the sadhu?

Unlike utilitarianism, deontology, or Rawlsian ethics, Indian philosophy does not prescribe a clear-cut answer to this dilemma. The solution to this dilemma is left to the climber's discretion. For different climbers, different actions are recommended. Depending on the climber's Swadharma (which is defined by the climber himself), the climber can decide what constitutes the ideal action for him in the circumstances.

For a climber who considers it his duty as a human being to help the sadhu, it is imperative that he help the sadhu even at the cost of losing the peak. For a climber who feels it is his duty as a good citizen to help a holy

man, it is his Swadharma that he help the sadhu irrespective of whether someone praises him or blames him. For a climber who considers it his duty to fulfill his obligation towards his sponsors (i.e., those who are paying for the trip) or his profession (i.e., mountain climbing), his Swadharma is to spend minimum time in helping the sadhu and continue with the expedition "selflessly" indifferent to praise or blame. Moreover, for the climber for whom it is essential to scale the peak because it constitutes his innermost desire without satisfying which he will be unable to progress in life, merely helping the sadhu physically while inwardly hankering after the peak is not recommended by Indian philosophy (Gita, Chapter 2, verse 59).

Swadharma enables us to channelise our (selfish) desires into (social) values for constructive personal growth. Irrespective of our stage of development, each one of us can strive to achieve the highest

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ideals of selfless action through the concept of Swadharma. The concept of Swadharma and its relationship to selfless action (or Karma-Yoga) can be illustrated using the case of Arjuna in the battlefield. Throughout his life, Arjuna had dreamt of fame and glory (a desire). This can be translated into a personal duty or Swadharma of "being an ideal warrior- a role model for others." After Draupadi's insult by Duryodhana and Karna in the court (and other atrocities committed by Duryodhana), Arjuna had a strong desire for revenge. Through his own intellect and support from Krishna, this was converted into a Swadharma of "justice" or "making the world a safe place to live in." In the middle of the battlefield, when Arjuna (whose

Swadharma includes "being an ideal warrior" and "dispenser of justice"), is overcome by aversion to fight (desire to avoid), Krishna once more helps him focus on his Swadharma and enables him to fight- not for revenge or glory but as a Swadharma without desire.

Irrespective of whatever your stage of life or whatever our circumstances; we must all strive towards the Upanishadic ideal of realising oneness by introducing a little bit of selflessness into our lives. We must start with those individuals who are closest to us and serve them with full devotion without expecting any praise or material rewards. We must do those activities, which are naturally ours and try to do them as perfectly and as selflessly as possible.