

# Viveka, what do I really want?

An Article by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

What is discrimination, *viveka*? One has a certain discriminative knowledge with reference to what one wants. Because you seem to want a lot of things, you have to discriminate about what you really want. For instance, you may want money. This desire for money may simply be due to a pragmatic need or it can be based on a value attached to it beyond its actual worth. Money does have a certain value. But if, due to the fear of insecurity, you attach a value beyond that, then there is some confusion, some need, something to prove. If you are seeking security through money, then definitely the problem is not money, but insecurity. Seeing that fact is an example of discrimination.

Money is only one possible end that we seek. There are various ends that have a certain legitimate value. When you attach to them a value over and above their worth, it is called *adhyāsa*, superimposition. You are imposing something upon something else. For instance, when you mistake a rope for a snake, there is a superimposition of one object upon the other. When you mistake a mother-of-pearl shell for a silver coin, again there is a superimposition. Why do we use these two examples? They describe all of our life's pursuits. When you superimpose a snake upon a rope, there is fear.

Thus there is withdrawal from that. When you superimpose a silver coin upon a shell, there is a positive pursuit. So, you are getting away from a snake that is not there and you are going after silver that is not there. Thus, in each example, one object is mistaken for another. In the first example, there is fear in your perception. Because of your fear, you want to get away from the object. That is how you deal with your fear. Yet, in fact, there is no need to have fear in the first place, because there is no snake. Therefore, the problem is not due to reality; the problem is due to perception—a misperception. You are running away from something that doesn't need to be a source of fear. In the second example, you are after something—a silver coin that is not there at all. Both cases illustrate one type of *adhyāsa*.

Then there is another type of *adhyāsa* called *śobhana-adhyāsa*, a value superimposition, or seeing a value that is not there. In this type of *adhyāsa*, the object—money, for example—is not mistaken for something else. What is not money is not mistaken for money. Money is perceived as money, but you are adding or superimposing a value, an attribute. This type of *adhyāsa* is the basis of all psychological problems.

The whole field of psychology is based on the dynamic of *adhyāsa*. For instance, when there is transference, you may have anger towards someone who has not done anything to warrant your anger. You may really be angry at how your father or mother treated you in

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childhood. And now that anger is directed to a person in your life who you like and trust. Thus, you destroy your relationship with the very person you like. This person is not mistaken for some other entity, but you are superimposing upon him the qualities or reasons that incite your anger. Thus, you are superimposing an attribute upon him that he does not really have. *śobhana-adhyāsa* is an amazing phenomenon and it plays a very important role in a person's life. Unfortunately, people are not aware of being caught in the process. They blame another person when the problem is mutual. Most of the arguing between a couple is because of *śobhana-adhyāsa*. They don't have a clue that they are superimposing attributes on each other. And good relationships are broken for that reason.

In the same way, when I think that money will make my life different and very secure, it's not totally true. Money can give me some sense of security and economic freedom, which is desirable. But that doesn't mean it will make an insecure person secure. And if that insecure person is after money at the cost of others' happiness and his own sense of right and wrong, then he is going against himself. And that means there is an overvaluation, an overestimation, of what money can do. Due to that overestimation, one is constrained to go against one's own knowledge of what is right and wrong, *dharma* and *adharma*.

We can see that *śobhana-adhyāsa* is born of a certain internal pressure and a possible confusion with reference to objects and their value. That is why discriminative knowledge is needed. The word 'discrimination' has gained a certain negative connotation, due to racial discrimination, gender discrimination, age discrimination, nationality discrimination, religious discrimination, and so on. Therefore, we have to be very careful in using the word 'discrimination.' Why do we use that word in *Vedānta*?

We use the word 'discrimination' to express the fact that two things are mixed up together. What you want is freedom from insecurity. Yet what you seek is another insecure thing, such as money. A lot of Indians realized this long ago, especially, those who came to America earlier and put all their money in real estate, thinking real estate is real estate. But then it proved to be a false estate, and they got their fingers burned. Some of them even lost their shirts. Indians learned the hard way the lesson that money does not equal security. They saved all the money they earned, even going without holidays. Then, in order to fight inflation, they invested in real estate. The real estate market went down. Or they bought stocks which took a nose-dive. All their life savings were lost. It was only from that point that they came to understand that money doesn't alleviate your sense of being insecure. Money—an insecure thing, subject to inflation, subject to loss—cannot remove a sense of insecurity. Yet it has been mixed up with the

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idea of security. What you really want—security—and what you are seeking—money—are mixed up. Thus, you have to understand this problem by discriminating between the two. That is called ‘*viveka*’. It means I can see that one thing is one thing, and the other is the other. I don’t mix them up.

In the *Gītā*, this is very beautifully said: *vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ* [Chapter 2. Verse 44] *Buddhi* here is knowledge. The knowledge is *vyavasāyātmika*, very definite. Definiteness can come only when it cannot be negated further. Upon scrutiny, upon further inquiry, with the help of someone who can inquire, it should stand all scrutiny. Then we say it is definite. If further inquiry dismisses something that was considered very dear, then that which was considered very dear was not really worth the value that you placed upon it. *Vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ* is what we call ‘*viveka*’ with reference to what one wants.

In our Scriptures, we have looked at human needs and human pursuits, *puruṣārtha* and brought them under three broad categories. The first is *artha*, security. Anything that provides you with a certain security is *artha*, such as your home, real estate and money, which includes gold and all investments. Name, influence, and power are *artha*. If, in addition to giving you a sense of security, they give you ego satisfaction, they are then also considered *kāma*. And then there are certain special pursuits that are meant only for satisfaction, like listening to music, or learning music. If you learn music to become a professional, then it is a pursuit of *artha*. If you do so, and at the same time, you enjoy music, then it is both *artha* and *kāma*. *Artha* and *kāma* are sometimes mixed up. We have to understand all these things through discrimination. All sense pleasures, all gratification, such as the pleasure of eating, are called *kāma*. When you go on a holiday, definitely it is not for *artha*. While you may intend for it to be a pursuit of *kāma*, it proves not to be the case. A holiday is to spend money. It is not for pleasure. Once you are there, you fight. Although it is a more leisurely fight than usual, still you fight. Before the holiday, there was a hurried, rushed fighting—half an hour here and half an hour there. Now you’ve got the whole day to fight. “Didn’t I tell you?” “Didn’t I tell you?” “Didn’t I tell you?” So, we have varieties of pursuits that are *artha* and *kāma*. Playing tennis is *kāma*. Watching a football game is entirely a *kāma* pursuit; there is no *artha* there.

*Kāma* is a major pursuit—in fact, the *kāma* industry, such as cosmetics, is very big. You want to appear differently. You want people to ask you, “What did you do? You look so good.” Why should you feel flattered by that? The question means that you look better—now. What does that imply about how you looked before? Sometimes it can be tricky to discern whether an end is *artha* or *kāma*. For instance, is getting your eyebrows plucked *artha* or *kāma*? You may

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say it is *artha*. But it is not done for the sake of security, because you have to spend money to have your brows plucked. Is it *kāma*, pleasure? Well, spending is not that pleasurable for most people. And when somebody pulls your hair out, it is pain rather than pleasure. But there may be delayed pleasure when, afterwards, somebody says, “You look so good. What did you do?” Of course, you don’t tell them, “I got rid of my God-given eyebrows.” So, the ultimate end there is pleasure.

And, of course, the billion-dollar entertainment industry is purely a *kāma* industry, as is the entire holiday travel industry. Thus, *kāma* is not an insignificant pursuit in our lives. The pursuit of both *artha* and *kāma* is common to all human beings. It is also the basis of culture-hopping, when people of one culture explore another culture. They jump cultures; they jump oceans; they jump countries. They even jump planets by exploring outer space. All *artha* and *kāma* explorations give some give you some satisfaction.

The third pursuit is *dharma*, right and wrong. It is a very important pursuit. Although when we narrate these ends, it is considered the third human end, *puruṣārtha*, many people put *dharma* first. Since *dharma* is meant for one’s own growth, it should be a value. Giving the first place to *dharma* is purely deliberate. By one’s own initiative, one must discover the value of *dharma* and place it first. *Dharma* is necessary for a human being, since he is not totally programmed in his behavior. He is endowed with choice. He has choice in terms of everything. For example, in terms of eating, there is choice in what to eat, when to eat, how to eat, and how much to eat. In clothing and hairstyle, there is choice. There is choice in one’s manner of speech. You can talk pleasantly; you can talk unpleasantly. You can shout; you can scream. Or you need not talk at all. In any situation, how you respond is a matter of choice. Although sometimes it seems that we don’t have a choice, we usually do. And with some help, we may be able to exercise this choice. If you feel you have no power to choose, then you need to ask for help so that you will be able to choose. For instance, one of the first steps for an alcoholic to regain his power of choice is to accept that he has no power over alcohol. Then he can seek some help. With that help, he may begin to discover a certain degree of choice over drinking. It may be surprising to see the choices you actually have.

When it comes to interacting with others, you must have a basis for your choice of action or response. A choice can be right, and it can be appropriate. A choice can be wrong and inappropriate. What is appropriate is right, but what is right need not be appropriate. Thus, we can say that what is appropriate need not be right or wrong in an absolute sense. It is only in the context of a given culture that behavior is appropriate or inappropriate. Different cultures have

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different forms of cultural expressions. There are social customs. There are manners, such as eating etiquette. All these manners and customs of a people living in a certain culture are appropriate in their own setup, in their own culture. And when I enter that setup, I try to see what is appropriate so that I don't disturb the people there. While it is not a matter of right or wrong to eat in your own manner, it may be appropriate or inappropriate within a particular cultural context. And if it disturbs a group of people, then we can say it is wrong. Thus, ultimately, propriety is linked with what is right and wrong. So I must learn what is appropriate and inappropriate in a given situation. Right and wrong are already fairly well known to me. I have no confusion at all about whether hurting another person is right or wrong. Since I don't want to get hurt, I know no one else wants to get hurt.

What is right and wrong is clear to me. I know for sure that I don't want to be cheated by anybody, and that no one wants to be cheated by me. What may not be clear is how much I lose if I go against *dharma*. This is where *dharma*—right and wrong—enters the picture. I may go against *dharma* in order to gain something, such as money, which I hope will give me security, prestige, and so on. In order for me to do this, I must calculate that obtaining the extra something is worth more than the value of *dharma*. I will have weighed the value of *dharma* against *adharma*, and since I chose *adharma*, we can say that I have not completely assimilated the value of the values.

Everyone knows about values but not everyone understands and assimilates the value of these values. All religions talk about values, such as the ethics of not hurting others, and so on. They instruct us as to what we should and should not do. However, we already are aware of these do's and don'ts. But why a value is considered valuable—why a value is a value—is not discussed by religions. This is because they have not looked into that question. But that may be the most fundamental question, for it is only through understanding why a value has value for me, that I can live according to *dharma*. If I can understand the immensity of the personal loss that underlies violating the value structure, then I know I have assimilated the values. That is to say, whatever advantage I gain by violating my value structure is less valuable to me than the value structure itself. If this is clear to me, then I won't go for those things that violate my values.

That kind of growth is necessary, and it is purely cognitive, a matter for understanding. My failure to live up to my value structure has nothing to do with a lack of instruction on do's and don'ts. I don't require any external mechanism to control a tendency to go against *dharma*. My own knowledge is the greatest controlling agent, the greatest controlling power. Even though the tendencies can be there to go against *dharma*, we can disempower them and make them

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useless. For instance, you can enjoy great power when you walk through a shopping mall. A shopping mall is usually a place that makes you a helpless individual, a weakling in the face of so many attractive items that call to you, “Come on, pick me up, buy me.” And you go on, picking up this and that. But sometimes, you simply say, “No.” Now that’s power—your power. That’s a capacity you have. If you can enjoy a similar capacity whenever you feel a tendency to cut corners, to compromise your value structure, then in that area there is growth. That is proper living; that is *dharma*. So, you keep growing. How far you can grow? When everything you like to do happens to be what is right, and everything you don’t want to do happens to be wrong, then you can grow no further.

Thus, everything that you like to do is exactly what you have to do. What you don’t want to do is what you should not do. *Dharma*—what is right—has become your *rāga*—what you like to do. *Adharma*—what is wrong—has become your *dveṣa*—what you dislike. Then you can live a life without conflict. And that certainly is not easy, because often things do not conform in that way. It requires living a deliberate life and being able to draw boundaries. Being able to do so can be a very difficult thing. In the process, there is growth. And there is always room for growth. Without being judgmental towards others, one can keep growing in this area. Thus, in your pursuits of *artha* and *kāma*, follow *dharma* and avoid *adharma*. That is what human growth is about. This is why *dharma* is placed first among the human pursuits.

*Dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are human pursuits. But are they enough? People who think that *dharma* is enough do not understand that to be a dharmic person is not a great accomplishment. It is only what is expected of you as a human being. It may be considered saintly behavior only because many people do not reach that kind of growth. If *dharma* is simply what is expected of you, why do we consider it a value? It is a value because it depends upon your initiative. In that sense it is a *puruṣārtha*, an end to be accomplished. *Dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are accomplishments in the sense that they are pursued and gained due to your initiative. Yet none of them, including *dharma*, are ends in themselves. *Dharma* is pursued simply to make one a mature human being; it allows you to grow as a person. And the maturity you have gained has a purpose. The self-conscious person, becoming a mature adult, has to discover something. What is that something that he is heading towards?

That end we are seeking is called *mokṣa*—freedom from the sense of insecurity, the sense of being small, the sense of being insignificant, the sense of being imperfect, the sense of being unhappy. The sense of being a mortal, of being one who is subject to disease, of being persecuted by the world—that sense has to go. Until it goes, no one is going to be satisfied with

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*artha*, *kāma* or *dharma*. One must discriminate between these relative ends and the ultimate end that one is really seeking—to be free from the notion of being limited. The pursuits of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are, at their core, based on the sense that “I am insecure; I am unhappy; I am mortal; I must become somebody.” As a limited person, I must fulfill that urge to become bigger than I now take myself to be. How can that urge be fulfilled? By more *artha*, *kāma*, and *dharma*.

I must discern that simply adding more *artha*, *kāma* and *dharma* will not alter my basic sense of limitation. An example given by the texts of Vedanta illustrates this point. Around a broomstick, you tie an elegant silken string, then you add a shimmering silver string, next, a bright golden string. Finally, you garland the broomstick with a dazzling diamond necklace. You admire the decorative flourishes. What are you left with? A broomstick. A decorated and bejeweled broomstick though it may be, it still is a broomstick.

Unless I can see this example as an intimate description my own experience, I have no *viveka*, discrimination. When I have *viveka*, I see that all of my accomplishments still leave me high and dry. I must be able to see through all of these relative ends to the ultimate end that I seek, which is freedom from all of my limitations. That end is called *mokṣa*. Since I already am a free, complete being, I need not become free or complete. I am already whole—in fact, I am the whole. The Upanishads reveal an equation: “*tat tvam asi*”—you are the whole. Thus, *mokṣa* is not freedom from bondage but freedom from my notion of bondage.

When this is discerned, though all the other ends remain, they subserve the main end. We need not remove all of the relative ends that are a natural part of life. However, we must understand the ultimate end of life itself. I can have *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* and keep the end, *mokṣa*, always in sight. I keep this as the prime value, the prime goal. How do I pursue other relative ends necessary to life, such as security, and so on, while never losing sight of *mokṣa* as the end? It is like drawing a line on paper, and without doing anything to this line, making it shorter. How is it done? You draw a longer line next to it. So too, the relative ends, such as *artha*, are put in their perspective when the end of *mokṣa* is in sight. When you know the ultimate end to be accomplished, you become objective toward all other ends. If *mokṣa* is not your prime goal, then you will be subjective toward the other ends. If the main end is missed, then other things become important. In that case, life is going to be miserable because the other things can't give you what you really want. You will have the feeling that, “I've done so much, yet nothing was gained.” And that feeling will never leave. But if the ultimate end is in view, you

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won't have *śobhana-adhyāsa* with reference to *artha* and *kāma*.

And it will be easier for you to live a dharmic life when *mokṣa* is the priority. Then your whole life becomes *karma-yoga* because the end is discerned. You realize that *mokṣa* is not an option since it is what you are really seeking.