

## 12. Four Values for Sustainable Societies in *Sanātana Dharma*

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In the wake of depleting resources and increasing population, much is being discussed these days about sustainability of the planet and human race. *Is there a solution to this problem in sanātana dharma?* is what we are going to understand today. Generally, when we hear about sustainability, we are often given to understand three words - reduce, reuse and recycle. But this apart, our *sanātana dharma* provides the fourth and the most effective solution to this problem, which is to 'refuse' what we don't need. In today's use-and-throw culture driven by mindless spending and endless consumption, *sanātana dharma* teaches us how to lead our lives so that while we live, we let others live too.

In the *brhadāraṇyaka upaniṣad* there is a story that when the three-fold progeny of Prajapati Brahma namely gods, men and demons approached him for advice and instructions, he replied 'Da', which was understood by each of them differently.

Gods are endowed with tremendous powers and therefore must restrain themselves from using them lest they should harm others, and thus they understood the utterance 'Da' as '*dama*' which means self-control or restraint.

Men or humans interpreted the utterance 'Da' as '*dāna*' which means charity, and that is because humans by nature are greedy and therefore charity is the way to reign in their excessive greed.

The demons who also heard the same instruction of 'Da' inferred that their father was asking them to practise '*dayā*' or compassion, as demons are said to be inherently cruel.

Accordingly, the lessons for the three kinds of personalities were – '*dama*', '*dāna*', and '*dayā*' - control, charity and compassion.

This symbolic story from the *upaniṣad* carries a deep lesson for all. In every human being, there are godly qualities called *sātvik* (state of selfless serenity), human qualities called *rajasik* (state of selfish activity) and demonic qualities called *tamasik* (a state dominated by survival instincts), representing the three sons of the Creator. Inevitably, every human being needs to practise all the three virtues. In today's world divided between the haves and have nots, where a handful of humans own and control most of the world's wealth and resources, these values are of even greater significance. But how do these three values correlate to the popular formula of sustainability, that of reduce, reuse and recycle?

A deeper thought would reveal that restraining oneself from consuming incrementally even though one may have the wealth and power to do it, is nothing but 'reduce'. Think of the wealthy nations of the world who have within their reach whatever they want, but if they spend endlessly and consume excessively, they would create artificial demand and price rise, which would then make the same things inaccessible and unaffordable to the people in poorer nations. Is it not then expected of them to 'reduce', by restraining themselves or in other words practise *dama*?

Now, think of those who have finished using an item or an object which is no longer required by them. For example, clothes and shoes that don't fit anymore, or a bicycle that is too small to use now, or for that matter any other thing of utility, including excessive wealth that they may never need. Unable to get rid of the attachment to such things, people generally pursue storing them or simply discard them without minding the environmental hazards of such waste; in either of the cases, the resources haven't been utilised in the best way. Instead, if they chose to share it with those who may need them, would it not lead to better distribution of resources and a more equitable society? And that is precisely practising – *dāna* or charity. In other words, it is 'reusing' resources by giving others who need them more but cannot afford or access them.

The third value of *dayā* or compassion is equivalent to 'recycle'. When we consume, we essentially use up earth's resources that belong to all including, insects, birds and animals. For production of utilities, we use natural resources like water that flows in the rivers where many creatures dwell, air that is breathed by one and all for their sustenance, and earth and space that shelter all beings, flora and fauna. When we use these resources, they gradually diminish and become less available to other life forms and also get polluted in the process – like clearing a forest or diverting a river or disposing effluents into the water systems or discharging harmful exhausts into the atmosphere. All this is a form of cruelty, wherein knowingly or unknowingly, we are causing harm to the numerous other co-dwellers of our planet earth, both seen and unseen. Therefore, when we consume carefully and also ensure that we don't pollute the environment by thoughtlessly eliminating our wastes, but instead recycle them to extend their usability, we are showing compassion to all and that is *dayā*.

In Indian households, we always practised these values from ancient times, as no one bought anything more than what was necessary even if they had the money to do so, let alone borrowing and buying. No one discarded things after one use, instead found ways to reuse them, like the old clothes of the older child were used by the younger ones and likewise, plus everyone practised charity to the poor and the needy. In fact, most of the households cooked an extra meal for someone hungry or donated to the temples where the destitute were fed. We as Indians also were very careful not to discard things mindlessly as we considered all life sacred and worshipped earth, rivers, trees, animals and even mountains with gratitude. Most of the Indian societies used supplies that were naturally and organically produced starting with their food, all the way to their houses. Thus, these could be bio-degraded easily, without causing any harm to the ecosystem. Ergo, these three values of '*dama* , '*dāna* , and '*dayā* -reduce, reuse, and recycle - were in action in our daily lives.

But that was not all. Another much greater value that was taught by the sacred texts of *sanātana dharma* was that of *tyāga* or sacrifice which we may call 'refuse' all that which is not needed. *īśopaniṣad* which is a part of the *Yajurveda*, proclaims in it's very opening verse:

*īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat |*  
*tena tyaktena bhun̄jithā mā ḡḡdhaḡ kasya sviddhanam | |*

The meaning is: all that you see in this changing world, is all enveloped by the Divine. Therefore, consume with sacrifice and do not take any other person's wealth.

However simple this may sound it is very profound and deep. Since *sanātana dharma* taught that one must consider everything and everyone as Divine, it was imperative for everyone to think of others before oneself and sacrifice for the sake of others before consuming. It taught that one had to be mindful of others who may be in greater need, and one ought to think of anything before consuming that might be required more by others than oneself as rightfully belonging to others who needed them more. As a result, the need defined what truly belonged to whom, and not the purchasing power.

These four values of *dama* (reduce), *dāna* (reuse), *dayā* (recycle) and *tyāga* (sacrifice) can be seen mentioned in the *Yoga Sutras* of Patañjali, albeit in different terms in the basic spiritual practises of *yama-niyama*, that one must undertake to realise one's divinity. Sage Patañjali asks the seeker to practise - *santōṣha* or contentment which is to reduce one's wants and desires, which is nothing but *dama*; *aparigraha* or not hoarding what is not necessary which is to give away in charity or *dāna*; *ahimsā* or non-violence which is to not cause harm, in other words to practise *dayā*; and finally, *asteya* or non-stealing, which is to not take anything that belonged to others as they may be in greater need - which is to practise *tyāga*.

When the world at large thinks about sustainable societies, more often than not, the solutions are based on capitalistic or socialistic ideas, very different from the spiritual fundamentals that *sanātana dharma* teaches us. So far, we have tried every other theory of social sustainability but haven't succeeded much; why not try these eternal values taught by *sanātana dharma* now?

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