

## Achāra—the Hindu Guide to Conduct.

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“What am I? What may I hope for? What ought I to do? What shall we choose and what shall we refrain from?”—are the vital problems which will have to be faced by every individual if he wishes to make his life worth living. Morality etymologically signifies customs or habits. Customs are not merely habitual ways of acting; they are ways approved by society. In a genuine sense all morals are merely customs that matter. Morality thus is our social attitude towards the human environment; and character means the organized capacity for efficient social functioning.

Duty, which “holds” society together in integrated unity, resides in the individual, but arises in society, and works for social solidarity. But what is the criterion which settles for me what my specific duties are? The answer of the Hindu thinkers to this question is—‘ĀCHĀRA’. It is the name given to those principles of conduct which regulate people in their relations to each other, and have become a matter of habit and second nature. It thus comprises the social conventions, and rules of manners, and constitutes the source of instruction regarding conduct. Without it the individual would be practically helpless in determining the right course of action in various situations. Manu says that the four essential characteristics of duty are

conformity to Holy Scriptures, the codes of Law, the conduct of respectable persons (*Āchāra*) and personal conviction:

श्रुतिः स्मृतिः सदाचारः स्वस्य च प्रियमात्मनः ।

एतच्चतुर्विधं प्राहुः साक्षाद्दर्शनस्य लक्षणम् ॥

The whole of man’s life, all its purposes, all its meaning and all its value receive their tone and colour from the moral habits, ideals and institutions of the group. The influences of heredity, education and social living are embodied in the *Āchāra*.

*Āchāra* is indispensable to morality which is the interrelation of human individuals with one another by action, thought and emotions. The operation of *Āchāra* implies the existence of a relatively stable society which has had continuous life of its own for a long time, and which has developed and established institutions peculiar to itself. *Āchāra* is inseparable from institutions. The institutions provide areas of moral life in which individuals meet, respond, interact and hold intercourse with one another and that is the very substance, structure and composition of morality. *Āchāra* is the way in which men learn by experience how to live together; it is therefore a framework of moral goodness.

Āchāras are the expressions of the common life of a society. They at once imply and create a community

of moral attitude in a plurality of moral agents. Behind all Āchāras lies some exercise of reason; they are the characteristic manifestations of the life of reason. The effect of following the Āchāras is thus to cultivate and encourage the consciousness of rationality in the individual and of community of reason between individuals. Bradley, the great English philosopher, points out that "the wisest men of antiquity have given judgment that wisdom and virtue consist in living agreeably to the ethos of one's people". He even goes to the extent of asserting that "the man who seeks to have a higher morality than that of his world is on the threshold of immorality".

Society is an unconscious and gradual formation; it is characterized by inevitable unity and continuity in its evolution. It conserves in its Āchāras the achievements of the past and the unrealized aspirations of the future. The fundamental safeguards which the *Āchāra* provides against individual impulse and passions, the conditions of close association, interdependence and mutual sympathy which the group affords, the habituation of certain lines of conduct valued by the group—all these are the roots on which the stem and flower of personality naturally grow and thrive. As Bradley says "the morality already existing ready to hand in laws, institutions, social usages, moral opinions and feelings is the element in which the young are to be brought up. It is not wrong; it is a duty to take

the best there is, and to live up to the best. We should consider whether the encouraging oneself in having opinions of one's own in the sense of thinking differently from the world on moral subjects be not, in any person other than a heaven-born prophet, sheer self-conceit".

Āchāras thus constitute the social heritage which a man acquires without testamentary title. To fall in with them is to enfranchise the individual as an accepted, participating member of an established order of human life. He becomes an acknowledged shareholder in the accumulated moral substance of the society. To take the line of *Āchāra* is to take the high way of orderly and reasonable way of living. As *Āchāra* represents the capitalized experience of men, to accept its prescriptions is to draw interest from the funded moral capital of the past, and to enjoy as an inheritance an unearned increment of moral advantage in the present. It is fortunate for progress that this is so; for, without these rules, each would be thrown on his own resources. Such a course would quickly reduce social life to chaos. If everyone had to start anew to frame all his ideals and make his laws, we should be in as melancholy a plight morally as we should be intellectually if we had to build each science afresh.

It may be said that nothing is left to the individual's initiative and independence if he should be guided by the Āchāras in his everyday conduct. *Āchāra*, however, only empha-

sizes one factor in moral life—the indissoluble continuity of the moral life of the individual with the past of his society. Institutions which live through *Āchāras* are constantly being modified. *Āchāras* themselves are subject to the criticisms of experience; and sometimes they pass away. “God reveals Himself in many ways lest one good custom should corrupt the world.” The moral life of the individual has to do with the future as well as the past; the purposes and needs of individual lives give rise to institutions, modify them, and, if necessary, extinguish them. In all these spheres there is ample room for the initiative of individuals. And this may be admitted without losing sight of the profound importance of *Āchāra* in the individual life or of the need for cultivating respect for *Āchāra* as an essential factor in moral experience.

Thus it should be borne in mind that the *Āchāra*, *i. e.*, the ethos of a people is not a stationary thing. It develops by the constant effort of the best members of the community to reach a higher standard of life than that in which they find themselves. In every society we have a set of people, the chosen few, ‘श्रेष्ठाः’, who are the best exponents of the culture and ideals of that group. They have no vested interests, and their main concern is the welfare of society (‘लोकसंग्रहं, सर्वभूतहितं’). They are not only the custodians of achieved culture, but the ready sponsors to the forward march of that society; and it is to them that the individual members look up for light, life and guidance. They

are called the *Āptas* whose judgments bear the stamp of *Pramāṇa*. They see into the life of things, and are great fountain-heads of spiritual wisdom. They are the inspired teachers of humanity who through years of self-restraint and self-culture so purified their intellectual and moral nature as to recognize in their fullness and glory the invisible spiritual realities around. They are the true reformers, since by spiritual intuition they see things *sub specie aeternitatis*.

स्वकर्मण्यभिमुक्तो यः रागद्वेषविवर्जितः ।  
निर्वैरः पूजितस्सद्गिराप्तो ज्ञेयः स तादृशः ॥

The *Gītā* proclaims the influence of the personal example of great men well-versed in *Śāstras* in the following terms:

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।  
स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥

Whatsoever a great man doeth, that other men also do; the standard he setteth up, by that the people go. Thus the responsibility of effecting salutary and necessary reforms rests on these natural leaders. It needs the alchemy of personal lives of these great men to transmute the lead of old ideas into the gold of compelling motives. A society can only pursue its normal course by means of a certain progression of changes; and these have a definite origin and ordered antecedents and are in direct relation with the past. The burden of transvaluation of values and of the revision of the existing *Āchāras* thus is gladly undertaken by the *Śreṣṭhas*.

Thus if a man is to know what is right, he should have imbibed by precept, example and experience the ethos of his community. He should grasp the meaning of these Āchāras, and guide himself by their true value and significance. Therefore when Bradley asks us to realize ourselves in "our station and its duties", because "there is nothing better nor anything higher or more beautiful than it", what he wants us to do is to identify ourselves with our society and its Āchāras; for, the Āchāras comprise functions exerted in the interests of the conservation of society. People who act in the same way in similar circumstances feel like-minded in relation to one another; and like-mindedness is one of the essential achievements of the moral life at its best.

It should not be thought the Hindu ethical writers were ignorant of the essentially mobile and progressive nature of morality. They knew that change was the primal law of life; but they were wise enough to emphasize that the path of progress must be evolutionary, and never revolutionary. The ideals of progressive society and mobile social order are concretely embodied in the conception of *Yogakṣema* which is personally guaranteed by God in the *Gītā*. *Yoga* is progress and *Kṣema* is order;

the one connotes steady growth and progressive realization of the goal, and the other signifies the conservation of what has been achieved. Śrī Śankara defines *Yoga* as 'अप्राप्तस्य प्रापणम्' and *Kṣema* as 'प्राप्तस्य रक्षणम्'. Thus it is wrong to think that we are tied down to an effete, dead and antediluvian tradition. It is a growing, developing ideal of all-round social development.

The consciousness of *Āchāra* is peculiar to the Hindu ethical system; and its function is to conserve the social organization in which man works out his characteristic destiny. Man looks to the future as well as the past; and *Āchāra* is the way in which in social life he looks backwards, and avails himself of the experience of others to assist his own in the present. He cannot escape from it if he wishes to realize his capacity for intimate social intercourse with his fellows. It is on account of this great value that the Śāstras declare that 'आचारः' is 'परमो धर्मः'. Hence the remark of the wisest man of Greece that "to be moral is to live in accordance with the social order of your own country"; and hence too the wisdom of the answer of Pythagoras, when someone asked him what was the best education for his son, "make your son a citizen of a people with well-established institutions."

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Sing with *Bhakti* the hallowed Name of the Lord, and the mountain of your sins shall vanish, just as a mountain of cotton will burn to ashes and disappear if but a spark of fire falls on it. —Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

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