

Dharma Concepts in Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

Hindu scriptures prescribe various interventions to improve the level of ethics in professional life. Living in accordance with dharma (natural order) propels an individual towards personal liberation (nirvana) and naturally invokes ethical behaviour, which turns out to be beneficial for society. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is based upon neuroscience and is also a natural order. This article examines the need for spirituality, the stages of development of compassion and the natural progression towards transcendence, all the while connecting with the concepts of Emotional Intelligence, mirror neuron systems and the parts of the brain involved in social intelligence. The article observes the areas of overlap between characteristics described under dharma and by Emotional Intelligence practices. Habits based upon Emotional Intelligence can be inculcated at an early age and practiced to help a person evolve. Collaboration between teachers of dharma and modern teachers who apply recent findings of neuroscience can lead to holistic development of executives and managers.

Key Words

Anger, Compassion, Dharma, Emotional Intelligence, Empathy, Mirror Neurons, Neuroscience, Oneness, Spirituality

The Natural/Biological Basis of Emotional Intelligence

The biological basis of how we feel each other's pain and read each other's thoughts and feelings was discovered between 1980 and 1990 by Giacomo Rizzolatti, working with Leonardo Fogassi and Vittorio Gallese, at the Parma University, Italy (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2008). They called the newly discovered cells 'mirror neurons' and since then, their existence has provided explanations for abilities we took for granted but are pivotal in our development as a species. Dr V.S. Ramachandran, who has worked extensively on mirror neuron research, hails the discovery as the single-most important discovery of the decade and attributes the 'Great Leap Forward' (Ramachandran, 2004) in the evolution of humans to the species having developed a critical mass of these very neurons. Mirror neurons are units of social intelligence. When mankind functions successfully as a society, progress is ensured, as there is no need to reinvent the wheel and we can pool collective intelligence to spark higher levels of synergism. Mirror cell systems facilitate the ability to get along with others that hinges on attributes of empathy and compassion.

Mirror cell discovery has demystified empathy, emotional contagion, attunement, trust and learning through mimicry (Goleman, 2006). Dr V.S. Ramachandran (2011)

credits mirror neurons with the ability to create a theory of other minds. In fact, growing children first learn to create a theory of other minds—read other people's thoughts—before they become conscious of their own. Children below the age of two may not be able to distinguish someone else's distress from their own. So, if one baby cries, all the babies in the crèche begin to chorus. Above the age of two, a child cries less at another child's apparent distress but spontaneously initiates action to help. The ability to separate your hurt from mine rests on the signals sent by our own skin as feedback to assure the person that his own skin is intact. This ability to differentiate the self from 'other' is, thus, learned.

The concept of the self depends on skin and brain circuitry. Once learnt, it is hard to shake it off as we have observed in the phenomenon of the phantom limb (Ramachandran, 1999) that persists even after amputation. Health workers who spend all day surrounded by people in pain and distress can be grateful to their sense of separateness so that they don't become overwhelmed, and are able to go about the business of caring and treating with a clear head. But then this separateness can overshoot its utility and make a person hard hearted and lacking in compassion. Some people are able to fine-tune this attribute and maintain equilibrium between empathy and professional distance, while others lean towards extreme ends of the spectrum.

The learnt attribute of separateness has an emotional component. A child may find solitude painful and uncomfortable or insecure, or find that being alone with one's self could be boring. When he comes across unpleasant people, feeling separate from those persons would be quite like relief. Eventually, the separateness could be seductive, drawing attention to one's personal progress and development, each achievement fuelling the need to do more in the realm of self. Somewhere along the way, 'connectedness' is forgotten and the 'self' enlarges to fill all the attention span. The equipment that informed individuals about what others are thinking is used recursively to decipher one's own thoughts. It is an essential step in learning, but it is not the ultimate truth.

Examination of the sense organs tells us that the senses, though wondrous as they are, are limited. Only a short section of light is visible to the human eyes and many frequencies that other species hear elude our ears. Our perceptions do not always depict reality. We tend to take things like air and water for granted until we are starved of them. Realization of significance of ordinary things is real knowledge or enlightenment. Our senses—designed for survival—tell us that creatures are separate but new knowledge of mirror neurons shows that creatures are wirelessly connected through emotion and thought (Goleman, 2006).

Contemplation of Oneness

Time and again an individual has withdrawn from social life, deeply contemplated reality and returned 'enlightened' to share the knowledge. Once enlightened, the sages return because whatever their path of enlightenment, the knowledge they return with has been similar, told in different languages and ways. The essence of their teachings has been 'connectedness', having transcended the message of the senses, they have evolved a full circle, having passed through the stage of 'separateness', only temporarily for the sake of personal development, so as to become meaningful contributors to the connected whole.

Bruce Lipton (2005), a cell biologist, has drawn attention to the innocuous cell membrane, by demonstrating that the cell's 'intelligence' lies in the membrane as it is equipped with receptors to sense the environment and meaningfully respond to it through effector proteins. A single cell will move away from noxious substances and towards nutritious surroundings. During the process of evolution, maximization of this intelligence was achieved by cells colonizing, then differentiating—distributing functions through specialization. Eventually, 'intelligent' processes were left to the nervous system and immune systems. When nervous systems of different individuals began communicating wirelessly, social systems were established. The species was no longer dependent on the intelligence

of one but could tap into collective wisdom for its development.

Modern science and 'enlightened' scientists are bringing the message of 'connectedness' of the species to the consciousness of people who have developed a great deal individually, and are capable of synergism through teamwork, but not quite making the leap of faith to embrace 'oneness'. Perhaps, knowledge of mirror neurons will propel more individuals towards transcendence of the sense of separateness.

It might be useful to be able to step away from oneself to be able to see this connectedness. Human brains are capable of this feat. Persons in dire circumstances, such as Dr Livingstone—recounted that after being mauled by a lion, or becoming victims of severe trauma such as being part of war or having suffered rape—have described their experience as being fully conscious of the event, rather hyper-alert, but of feeling no fear or pain, just as if the individual was turned into an observer. The mechanism for this shut down lies in the cingulate cortex and the phenomenon is called a 'mini-Cotard' event (Young and Leafhead, 1996). Others recovering from epileptic seizures and under experimental conditions have reported 'Out of Body Experience' (Blanke Olaf, 2004) or OBE that can be brought on by stimulation of the angular gyrus. Hence, the human brain is equipped to step away from the self and contemplate the self in a detached way. Only, we have to learn to do this voluntarily to be able to detach from discomfort. If that is possible, we could learn to detach from pleasure as well and then contemplate the 'connectedness' of the species, and enlarge the canvas to include all creatures. The purpose of people being able to experience connectedness would be to realize that there is also interdependence, and those who reach this higher state of consciousness would spontaneously refrain from destroying the planet.

Experience of connectedness could be overwhelming, so the Dalai Lama describes stages on the path to developing higher levels of compassion.

Levels of Compassion (in ascending order)

The basic level of compassion as the Dalai Lama (2001) puts it is 'At least don't do any harm' (*Primum non nocere*—Hippocrates).

- If one has ability, use it to be helpful
- Recognize suffering both obvious and subtle
- Cultivate compassion in steps:
 - For friends
 - For neutral persons
 - For those who have harmed you
 - For all sentient beings

Mirror cell discovery provides the scientific basis for what the sages have been saying for the longest time—‘Connectedness of people is a fact of life’ (Swami Vivekananda). ‘Experience Oneness [*ekatmanubhuti*] Embrace Unity, Ethics will flow from love’ (Pandey and Mohan, 2010).¹

Experience of the stepping away from the self and merging in oneness with others is known as a spiritual experience. Like the step by step increments in compassion, we can experience spirituality in steps. Some people describe being in love as a spiritual experience and others describe bonding with children in a similar way. It is the first step in eliminating ‘separateness’ and a lowering of ego that had grown due to the need for personal advancement (Sen, 2006).

Why Spirituality?

The *Bhagavad Gita* (a section of the epic *Mahabharata*) recommends the merging of all desires in one supreme desire for the development of spiritual life. Why such single-minded pursuit of moving away from the self? Think of this as a win-win proposition for the individual and the planet. But how can one benefit the self by shifting the focus away from it?

Spiritual growth results in a feeling of bliss (*ananda*) and this is an independent sort of *ananda* that can be invoked at will and will not fade. We are all familiar with the *ananda* of material life. Spirituality does not exclude the joys of material comfort; on the contrary, it enhances other pleasures as it is pure pleasure itself. (Recall sharing chocolate ice-cream with the person you love.)

The experience of oneness releases large amounts of calm purposeful energy, as no energy drain occurs due to negative hang-ups of the ego. To experience this, try to remember the time you truly forgave someone and felt liberated yourself.

Spiritual life provides power to the mind and access to wisdom and creativity. This extra brain fitness provides solutions for the world’s problems. Experience of oneness changes attitude, especially towards wealth. The attached person accumulates and possesses wealth. It becomes a source of stress. The transcendent person is unattached (*anasakta*) and has the luxury to enjoy and relish the fruits of wealth.

Apart from experiencing and embracing oneness of all sentient beings, spirituality involves communion with the inner self, the wordless sub-conscious depths of the mind. To develop this communion, certain parts of the brain need to be exercised and strengthened, especially the insula, which acts as the interface between emotion and cognition. The practice of meditation in various forms contributes to this directed brain development and heightens the ability of

the person to maximize potential by dipping into the wisdom that lies in the subconscious (Davidson et al., 2003). Working at full potential is also a source of happiness that is pure and sustainable.

In short, a spiritual life leads to unfettering of talent, enriches the world and gives the individual fulfilment, lasting joy and happiness and protects from stress without adverse effects. A person who lives a life of love and oneness gets respect and love in return from others. Neither love nor respect can be got on demand.

Spiritual pursuit hinges upon an ability to experience and recreate an attitude at will. This demands high levels of discipline, expanded thought and maturity and these are facets of emotional intelligence.

Comparing Guidelines of Dharma and Emotional Intelligence

Narrowing down the search through the vastness of texts on dharma, and relating these to modern-day management, the following requirements have been listed (Pandey and Mohan, 2010) as essential to bringing fulfilment and lasting happiness so as to banish the stress of daily living. Please note that in this paper the word ‘self’ is used in the context of the ‘individual’ and not as synonymous with *atma* or soul.

1. Worldly knowledge
2. Self knowledge
3. Empathy
4. Self management
5. Unity with all
6. Relationship management

Compare this list with the Emotional Competence Framework popularized by Daniel Goleman (1998) and accepted by other practitioners of EI:

1. Self awareness
2. Self management
3. Empathy and social awareness
4. Relationship management

The overlap is complete.

The study of neuroscience and Emotional Intelligence is greatly enhanced by modern imaging techniques (fMRI and PET Scan). This knowledge is being applied by modern management gurus, using the Emotional Intelligence construct popularized by Daniel Goleman, to inculcate ethics into interpersonal interactions and to develop inspirational leadership for the future. Indian scriptures say that ethical behaviour is rooted in dharma and prescribe various interventions that lead to ethical behaviour. Dharma can be

defined as behaviours that are considered necessary for the maintenance of Natural Order (Bowker, 1997). Emotional Intelligence is the one of the multiple intelligences named by developmental psychologist Howard Gardner (1999) (Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Intelligence) that is active at birth and is like all neural functions, hence all the intelligences, a thing of nature. Here we examine some interventions suggested to be inculcated as characteristics of dharma mentioned in the *Manusmriti* (Shastri, 1997) and look for content that is related to Emotional Intelligence with its neurological basis.

1. Patience (*dhriti*)
2. Control over the mind (*dama*)
3. Control over sensual pleasures (*indriya nighrah*)
4. Intellect conscious thinking prevails (*dheeh*)
5. Spiritual knowledge the knowledge and acceptance of oneness (*vidya*)
6. Truth (*satya*)
7. Non-cheating (*asteya*)
8. Anger management (*akrodha*)
9. Forgiveness (*kshama*)

Patience (*Dhriti*)

The ability to delay gratification is—we know from the Marshmallow experiment (Mischel et al., 1989)—available to four-year-olds. The part of the brain that participates in the process is the Orbito-Frontal Cortex (OFC) and is present and active by this age and grows more robust and healthy with use. OFC is called into play in other aspects of emotional regulation, adaptability, improved interpersonal interaction, the ability to turn around negative moods and to be able to steer oneself towards optimism. These are just a few processes the OFC participates in, apart from the one big function it has of balanced decision making. Patience features first among dharma concepts that need to be inculcated from an early age by developing the OFC brain tissue through practice and repeated use.

Control Over the Mind (*Dama*)

In EI parlance, *dama* would constitute the ability of the brain to prevent being hijacked by the attention-drawing amygdala (emotional brain centre) and to prevent distraction by the much faster processes mulling about in the subconscious brain. The ability rests upon the dominance of the Pre-frontal Cortex (PFC) (Bechara et al., 1994) with some communications passing via the OFC. Processes that require brain circuitry to be viable and vitalized through use are actions that require practice. No amount of teaching is useful until one actually goes down to experiencing the phenomenon and repeating it until perfected. Like learning

how to ride a bicycle, people get better at emotional regulation and self-control only by doing it over and over again. This ability allows some of the following concepts to take root, and forms the foundation of dharma. It allows the individual to focus and remain centred.

Control Over Sensual Pleasures (*Indriya nighrah*)

Another aspect of self management is the avoidance of excesses. Also, to be considered are unmet needs. Some people just need more than others—food, care, attention, assurance, intellectual stimulation, presence of other people. If we examine the pyramid of needs, we see that humans rise quickly above the physiological and security needs in most societies but get hung up somewhere in the middle where one finds the need for significance taking up a lot of space. When we speak of the senses, we think of the five special senses but forget to include the sense of self. The self demands a lot of importance (ego).

The sense of self develops perhaps when a child realizes that someone else's distress is not his own. It is a powerful sense and involves a great deal of neurological systems and circuits. The cingulate cortex feels physical pain but gets almost identically stimulated when a person undergoes the pain of rejection. The brain confuses physical and social rejection of the self—more commonly known as an ego problem—and the reaction to both are physiologically identical (Kross et al., 2011). How then does an individual alter their reaction without awareness of such a phenomenon? Differentiation between physical and ego threats can only be processed at the level of the intellect—which brings us to the next characteristic of dharma.

Intellect: Conscious Thinking Prevails (*Dheeh*)

Subconscious processing in the brain is many times faster than the slow thinking cortex. In general, the subconscious is capable of taking attention away from the thinking process, especially when it perceives the slightest threat and most threats are ego threats in the civilized world. This process fixes the attention upon the threatening situation or person and serves a survival role. Since the brain confuses physical and ego threats, the frequency of distraction is high (amygdala-emotional brain-hijack). The thinking cortex has the ability to override such distractions and focus attention to work or the present activity and the moment. Once again, this ability like many other neurological processes only gets better with practice—strengthening of the OFC. The ability to maintain unwavering focus and attention allows the slower analytical processes to flow unhindered and uninterrupted. Without

this characteristic of dharma, we observe some very smart people doing stupid things and losing respect that would otherwise have been due to them given their IQ and knowledge.

Spiritual Knowledge: The Knowledge and Acceptance of Oneness (*Vidya*)

Worldly knowledge brings with itself a package of aggrandizement of the self (ego), fuelled by labels of accomplishment and qualification. Dharma appreciates all form of knowledge, including self-knowledge, but advocates that all knowledge be topped with the knowledge that all sentient beings and the environment are connected. This is superior knowledge because it does not come out of what our senses tell us, but out of deep contemplation of the universe. The discovery of ‘mirror neurons’ gives the biological mechanism by which the connectedness is established. Worldly knowledge from neuroscience labs, thus, contributes to this superior knowledge. Once this fact is accepted by an individual, aggrandizement of the knowledgeable ceases and the real importance of aspects of nature take its place. It brings seriousness and discipline to pursue the ‘yoga’ of action. Acceptance of the importance of the self within the framework of the universe removes the blindfold of ego and shows one his real worth. Confronted with reality, the individual tries to improve his own contribution, pushing ever towards mastery, resulting in excellence of action and grace.

Truth (*Satya*)

Dharma demands that the pursuer stick to the truth. Dharma is concerned about the cluttering of the mind with tension due to straying from truthfulness. Untruths cause stress, which blocks a person’s realization of true potential and energy that he is capable of. This affects vitality, intellect and consciousness. Veracity (pursuance of whole truth) is counted as one of the means to balance the ego by David Marcum and Steven Smith (2008) in their book *Egonomics*. Writings on dharma stress upon ‘egolessness’, though it may be interpreted as having a balanced and appropriate ego (sense of self), as false grandness falls away when an individual accepts a true knowledge of the self within the framework of the universe.

Non-Cheating (*Asteya*)

There are many accepted definitions of Emotional Intelligence and, being a young subject, some definitions are still undergoing refinement. Most definitions include the word ‘relationships’ in a positive sense; hence exclude the

manipulative and exploitative person from the umbrella of emotional intelligence without actually saying so. It seems to be understood that a person who has empathy for others will refrain from cheating them. This wonderful attribute of empathy coupled with intelligence (Goleman, 2006) enables us to fathom the needs and wants of others and to be able to differentiate between needs and wants. This knowledge could be put to misuse to manipulate and exploit people, hence dharma spells out that one must inculcate *asteya* (non-cheating; non-stealing). It advocates purity of motive, transparency and faith in moral values. The word ‘transparency’ is found on the Emotional Intelligence framework constructed by Daniel Goleman (1998) within the quadrant of Self Management.

Anger Management (*Akrodha*)

The three main enemies of dharma are attachment (*aasakti*), desire (*kama*) and anger (*krodha*). Spiritual connectedness could be the cure for attachment, and *indriya nigrāh* (control over sensual pleasure) has already been detailed for dealing with desire. But anger can still boil over, especially when one cares deeply. Although *dama* (control over the mind) includes emotional regulation, anger receives a special mention perhaps because managing anger is really hard. Dharma advocates inculcating the ability to keep calm and poised in difficult situations, refraining from harsh words and retaliatory behaviour. This prevents escalation of the situation and a chain of unhealthy reactions and can be regarded to be for one’s own good as well. Anger management must include unapparent anger too because even if anger is held within, it still leads to the confounding of the intellect, poor access to memory, loss of discretion and steers the person towards destructive behaviour. In case of persons who hide their anger, the destruction could be self-directed.

Forgiveness (*Kshama*)

Management of anger paves the way for forgiveness. Forgiveness is not merely a word or a concept, not even a declaration or a ritual. Forgiveness has to come from within like setting something that was shackled and bound permanently free. Once negative feelings are removed, the person feels liberated and energized. The person forgiven no longer holds a special status and becomes like just another person.

Conclusion

The nine dharma interventions detailed above can be inculcated from a very young age. That is why parenting with

awareness provides a huge benefit to growing children (Casey et al., 2011). No ability develops through a short cut. Each attribute helps prevent stress of everyday living and contributes to grace and equipoise. 'Let one attain quietude step by step' (*Bhagavad Gita*, 6.25, Easwaran, 2007).

A person, who sees the self in others and others in the self does not take things personally and does not get stressed. The individual is able to protect himself from stress due to habits prescribed by dharma and develop compassion for others. Adherence to the characteristics of dharma ensures ethical behaviour, thus protecting everybody else. Dharma and spirituality are concerned with both the individual and the world. The same is true about Emotional Intelligence, which advocates an inside-out approach.

The Emotional Competencies Framework and the interventions prescribed by *Manusmriti*, as characteristics of dharma, overlap so much that sometimes it is hard to say where neuroscience-based emotional intelligence stops and dharma comes in. These concepts are applicable in self-development, parenting, leadership, management, mentoring and in teamwork.

Transcending the self is natural progression, as the individual evolves by becoming aware of other people's thoughts and intentions, generating a sense of self and sense of separateness (*dvaitabhava*), passing through phases of pride (*abhimana*) for the self (which may degenerate into arrogance or *ahankara*), simultaneously reconnecting with others through intrinsic compassion (*karuna*) raised step by step till one experiences the higher consciousness of oneness with all. Transcendence leads to a stage when a person endows himself with real wealth, which consists of acceptance, respect and true satisfaction.

Since the guidelines provided by the ancient thinkers and modern philosophers who are grounded in the findings of neuroscience overlap so completely, management teachers must examine both and dovetail each into the other to derive maximum benefit from both concepts. Hitherto, scientists and philosophers have been hesitant to join hands but if they can overcome the mistrust and collaborate, a new generation of neurally optimized leaders can emerge and be protected from burnout and health hazards, which are known to afflict executives and decision makers.

Note

1. *Ekatmanubhuti* is discussed in Chakraborty (1995).

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