Dear Saurabh,

For every serious seeker it is vital to have a clear understanding of Dharma and its various facets. But as it is not a straight forward topic, I will discuss it in length, placing it in context with the four purusharthas (that for which a person strives for) as expounded in the Vedic tradition.

Human endeavors can be broadly categorized into four major categories:

1. artha
2. kama
3. dharma
4. moksha

Artha & Kama are pursuits of securities and pleasure, respectively. To put is simply, artha is making money or its equivalent, with this hope this will mitigate my insecurity. And Kama implies pleasure seeking; this could be gratification of the senses or intellectual stimulation or could be sheer laziness. For majority of us these two are main goals of life, most of our activities are directed towards fulfilling these ends. The reasons why they gain such precedence are:

- We are, as though, programmed to think in this pattern
- The results are visible & quantifiable and
- Gratification is instant
- We know nothing else better to do as this is what is seems obvious.
- Every one around us is in the same boat. Our loved ones and role models have lead their life following this pattern and would not allow us to move away. So we feel secured and don’t question even if we have doubts.
- There is a genuine need for securities. We need food, medicine, shelter etc in day to living. The system is designed in such a way, if not anything else, at least you need food to go on. Similarly with pleasure, these are not so much of body but more of minds’ need and should be dealt with.

There is nothing wrong with these two pursuits *per se*, but it is seen that most of us want artha to be come as much and as fast as possible and with pleasure the tendency is for instant gratification, thus we are ready to cut corners and flout the laws both written and unwritten and move away from dharma. Also these pursuits will take there share of time and energy and we would not able to give the same for contemplation, necessary for moksha.
During this course, going through the same experience, accumulating artha and indulging in kama, umpteen number of times, birth after birth, some rare and blessed jiva start finding this pattern as being repetitive and these two pursuits become a drudgery. He starts realizing they really don’t offer what they promise i.e. securities don’t me really secure and these pleasures are ephemeral and go after them is not worth the effort. He senses some kind of disorder in all this. Not only this he finds there are certain realities of life, namely death, disease & old age, which one cannot escape, these two pursuits do not offer any solution, in this regard*. This is when he/she starts wondering whether is there something more substantial that life can offer, he sees need for a deeper order and freedom from this relentless quest to end this seemingly quenchable thirst of securities and pleasure. A jiva then turns towards finding permanent solution as an inexhaustible spring of water (moksha) and realizes that he earn this through conscientious living (dharma)

*Symbolic representation of this was when Siddharta (Buddha) sees these realities and they became a turning point in his life.

Every soul is born with deep sorrow embedded in the psyche, like an inoperable congenital defect, producing constant dull ache and being incompatible with life. In the effort to put an end to it, he finds himself engaged in incessant struggle like someone lost in a maze, located in a madhouse, where every lunatic promises an exit after the next turn. It is after a series of disappointments he finds a sane source that ushers him to take the straight and difficult path (of dharma) for that will take him to a point after which he will find enough signposts that help him get out of the labyrinth.

Dharma centers around Ishwara which in turn depends on shraddha. Between our actions and the results there is law that operates which decides nature of results. Action is by itself inert and therefore cannot determine what would be the result. This thought is echoed in the first verse of updesh saram* by Raman Maharishi.

*Karturajnaya parapyate pahlam I
Karam kim param karma tajjadam II

The result of action is obtained by laws of the lord;
How can action, which is inert, be ultimate?

Human mind is endowed by intelligence which can figure out to a certain extent what is the possible outcome of an action, but more often than not he finds that results are not in keeping with his expectations he either suffers unexpected losses
or sometime gets windfall gains. This leads him to think that results are arbitrarily
decided but if he has shraddha he will realize that nothing can be arbitrary there has
to be a basis and that basis is Ishwara.

Shraddha it is not a blind belief; like when I can figure out what's wrong with my
body I place my trust in a doctor only then there is a possibility of cure similarly as I
cannot figure if out with his limited intellect what are the possible outcomes of a
given action (performed to solve my problems) I have to have shraddha in Ishwara.
The difference is that a doctor’s reasoning can be fallible but Ishwara is infallible.

Most of our problems, in the sphere of Artha and Kama, have been solved by us
and this has lead to reliance on our abilities. We are generally confident of ourselves
and we think we can figure out, so shraddha is not easy. But when one questions
more complex issues of life like why does sorrow not end, once and for all, he will
see his own inability and shraddha will naturally be a part of his disposition.

Actions produce two kinds of results seen and unseen and both can be favorable
and unfavorable. Seen is, what manifests at the time expected by the doer but
unseen will also manifest based on laws , the basis of the law is Ishwara .Since we all
want favorable results, attempt to align our actions with the underlying
incomprehensible laws of Ishwara, based on shraddha , is dharma. To put it differently:
To be able to relate to Ishwara in our daily living especially in our actions is dharma.

Thus dharma is not just right and wrong but an appreciation it has a basis for
both why it is so and its outcome; There are agnostics, who are ethical in there work,
who adhere to their principles but meet unfavorable situations. As they fail to
appreciate more complex nature things, quiet understandably, get disillusioned,
over a period of time.

The prescription for the actions so that they can be directly related to Ishwara
forms a considerable bulk of the Vedas and is referred to as karmakanda bhaga or the
purva mimamsa where rituals & injunctions are prescribed in minute detail; the rest
of the portion, which is less voluminous, is gyan kanda(Vedanta) or uttar mimamsa or
to be precise the Upanishads.

In the present times the karam kanda seems to have lost its significance, it is
practiced be priests whose intention is use it as business to make there living and
not as means to grow, as a person. Also most of them are not trained properly as
these rituals have a precise format  that has to adhered during its  execution for e.g.
we have use proper intonation while chanting of mantra, but I find barring few most
don’t give attention to these details.

Another relevant issue is that the injunctions (do’s and don’ts) are in keeping
with the times. This is valid not only to Hinduism# which has its roots in the Vedic
tradition but also to other practicing religions across the board, most of the
injunctions need to revised with changing times. What is therefore necessary is to
understand, why these injunctions are prescribe in the first place to get to the bottom
of it, therefore one should try to inculcate right understanding rather than prescribe
or follow injunctions. Therefore it’s the spirit behind dharma that one has to grasp.

# If one is fairly unbiased one can observe that when any religion or sect tends
undermine @the importance of understanding over injunctions the result is
dogmatism leading to irrational & heinous acts which are at times more
gruesome than usual crimes with malicious intent acts. Thus you find terrorism
espoused in the name religion; there cannot be greater adharma going on in the
name of dharma.

The problem that arises is that I cannot figure out dharma on my own, people
around me are in the same (defective) boat, what is prescribed has to a certain extent
has lost its significance at present times, and I am desirous of freedom (moksha) and
this will come about if there is order (dharma) in my life, so how do I figure out &
follow dharma?

If one is blessed, then one can find a person or a teacher who leads a life of
dharma and communicates the same, more as living example and less by preaching.
Ideally he should know the relevance of dharma in context to moksha, should lead
a transparent life that is accessible to other, should interact with people around and
preferably know the scriptures/shastras, which he may consult if need be.
Paradoxically this meeting itself requires punya, unseen favorable result, so one has
to make humble beginnings with dharma.

Bhagwat Gita is a helpful compendium of the Vedas; complete in itself and
structured in such a way that it brings out the timeless wisdom of Vedas more
relevant to all ages, on both dharma and moksha, without making compromises.
Having said that I must add a word of caution; most of the interpretations of
Bhagwat Gita available in the market are unable to do justice to the depth and
profundity of this glorious text. They tend to get lopsided and misinterpret it, at
times, to endorse their (interpreters’) biases. So correct choice of interpretations## is necessary and then bringing the teachings down in our daily living.

## Dayandji’s “Home Study” on Bhagwat Gita is one.

Broadly we can live a life in dharma if we can inculcate in our understanding these three general principles:

1. **Yagna:**

   Either: look at the cosmos as large machinery, well designed marvel of engineering, constantly in motion, in which ever part is serving a specific purpose keeping with the intention of the engineer. We look at ourselves as one of the parts, a cog in the wheel, and diligently perform our duties.

   Or: we stimulate a miniature model and perform rituals keeping our minds on Ishwara.

   The former become karma yoga where our actions become offering to the lord (Ishwara arpan buddhi) and results are cheerfully accepted with prasadh buddhi. These results can be bitter* but as we know it is from the lord and therefore based on what we deserve. The emphasis, while we are engaged in action, shifts from results to doing our assigned duties. This neutralizes our strong hankering for material things and brings acceptance to all the unfavorable situations, we find ourselves in, now and then.

   *in some Indian temples we get bitter prasada

   Later, in contemporary context, can be translated as time exclusively taking out, for Ishwara; performing puja or chanting/japa or any form of meditation. The love for Ishwara (bhakti) reduces love for the world (Ishwar vasana replaces vishaya vasana)

2. **Dana:**

   To share our resources with others. These resources need not be only material like money, food etc but can include time and energy sharing your knowledge, having a disposition to help others without expecting anything in return. The underlying principle is that life is a two way affair, we get so much from nature
and we need to pay back. We should acknowledge our indebtedness from obvious and not-so-obvious sources.

This neutralizes our tendency of being possessive about our assets and brings in a disposition and ability to help and share. In any case what is not due to us will go, in time, this prepares us for accepting losses with a poised mind.

3. Tapas:

Leading an austere life. What’s desirable is that mind does not naturally go towards indulgences. This happens when mind outgrows desires, like a child outgrows his liking for toys as he grows older, he does not make an effort. But we find this does not happen naturally and therefore we have resort to discrimination that is being able to understand that what brings instant pleasure will, in time, become a source for pain. (viveka vairagya or discrimination-dissipation). But, more often then not, neither vairagya does come in naturally nor even by doing discrimination then the conscious effort to cut down the indulgences is called tapas.

This directly neutralizes our strong likes and dislike, thus all the aforementioned principles purifies the mind (antar karan shuddhi) that is necessary for pursuing self inquiry which culminates in moksha.

Among the various qualities necessary for a mumukshu that which is most significant is vairagya. Therefore need to have moderation in every sphere of activities including our eating habits and other mundane activities. But, as it takes time to bring vairagya in our live, this should not lead to self judgment & self prosecution, and as discussed vairagya should preferably be preceded by viveka.

Another important aspect of dharma is the ‘Ethic of reciprocity’ or as stated: “One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self. This, in brief, is the rule of dharma. Other behavior is due to selfish desires.” in Mahabharata, Brihaspati (Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, Verse 8) this is a good guide to find out what’s is right and wrong in a various situation, especially day to day mundane interactions; but one can find oneself at more complex crossroads* of life when discerning between the two (right and wrong) is not so straight forward. This has been emphasized in most of the religions and tends to remain the main focus; one should appreciate that dharma is not merely ethics but is more complex subject and encompasses many other aspects and has its bearing on event in our day to day living.
*clash of two dharmas like Arjuna found himself was in the battle field between ksahtriya dharma, to fight/kill and manav dharma/to refrain.

Moksha: is clear perception of our nature which is free from sorrow. Dharma does bring in order in our daily living as it promotes sattva and we gain punya this will make our lives pleasant and bring in contentment. But as it does not take care of self-ignorance we will, after a period of time, revisit sorrow. Therefore though it is mandatory for a seeker that he understands the importance of dharma and brings it into his life, but he should not make it his final goal (parampurushartha).

Rather he capitalizes on this relative freedom to gain absolute freedom by pursuing self inquiry, which is to find out the “one” for whom, has he gained dharma.

Every duty presupposes a context and its respective role like a doctor or a father has to perform his duties in taking care of his patient or son, respectively. In doing this we never question our real identities, for we don’t look at these “roles” as roles, we are doctor or father and easily get caught up with its dharma but it’s only from an extraneous source that can remind us that there is larger responsibility of finding out our true identity or svadharma.

On this account Vedanta is often criticized that it tends ignore the problems of world/society/family and just concentrates on the individual salvation. Let’s examine this:

- Ishwara is the creator of the world, he knows and can solve its problems, better than any individual**(unfortunately Marxist who eagerly take the role of world savior more than any one else don’t accept Ishwara and will not buy this argument )
- Society is composed of individuals as its building blocks; therefore solution to any individuals ‘problems is in turn helping the society.
- It’s logical that I first get my house in order than make correction elsewhere.
- Society/world rarely changes, like the proverbial dog’s tail which refuses to straighten out; there have been exceptional souls that have made significant change but were few & and far between, and the impact does not last beyond a certain time frame. In contrast sincere efforts to change ourselves are more fruitful.
In the earlier part of the discussion we have highlighted role of diligently performing our duties and contributing to world, but one should know his place in the scheme of things and should confine to it. Otherwise there is no end to world’s problem and one can be perennially engaged in solving them, ignoring what is more close and needs urgent attention. Also, majority of those who set out with a clean intention to help others through social service, NGOs, etc, during there course they falter and move towards making it an easy way to make money or getting fame. This also can be seen happens invariably with most spiritual organizations or ashram. This holds true not just for society but even for our closed ones who can have numerous irrational demands and expect too much from us. One has to judicious and sensitive when it comes to dealing with them & should know, when & where, to draw a line. What I have said may not sound pleasant but as it has bearing on a spiritual seeker I will not refrain from stating them.

** This thought is reflected in Milton’s poem “on his blindness”

“God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait”

Some more notes on these four purushartha\(_s\) vis-à-vis dharma:

These distinctions neither are water tight compartments nor does one follow a singe purushartha\(_{s}\) exclusively. But there is a predominant goal for an individual jiva

Dharma has many other connotations attached to it, for e.g. it’s the nature of a thing like heat is dharma of fire another common way dharma is used is: that which protects. I have restricted its meaning to its relationship with moksha as that what concerns us.

There is no good equivalent in English language or may be any other language to the word dharma.

In Buddhism dharma has a larger canvass and is a significant word in there philosophical text

The end result of these four purushartha\(_s\) gets progressively subtler and closer to the seeker. Artha is easily seen is gross and is outside are while pleasures appease the
mind, *dharma* is more to do with the intellect and its gains are not easily quantifiable, and what could be more close to us, than ourselves, which is essence of *moksha*

*Artha & kama* is natural to us but *dharma & moksha*, as discussed, cant be figured out by ourselves therefore a dire need for an extraneous source, which in its pristine form is the *Vedas*. We do not consider the *Vedas* to have come out of a human mind, *(apurushiya)* no matter how intelligent or how refined that mind may have been. For us *Vedas are words of Ishwara* (*Ishwara vachana*). This is not a subject of scrutiny and thus requires *shraddha*.

*Artha* is more to do with doing we are active and in *kama* we are passive and *artha* as though supplies for *kama*, only a secured mind hunts pleasures, similarly *dharma* is more to with actions and *moksha* is do with knowing and your gains in *dharma* fructify in *moksha* this is what I meant when I had said *dharma* paves the path for *moksha* in one of the earlier discussions.

But one should be able to distinguish them as two distinct entities. Many schools mix the two you, both old *(mimamsikas)* and new ones as you find many spiritual organizations prescribe a *sadhana* and swear by its efficacy by promising it’s the most effective method for salvation.

The one who has figured out the essence of *moksha* *(jyani)* what ever he does is always in keeping with *dharma* as no axe to grind with the world. He personifies *dharma*.

As we see more meaning in pursuing *dharma & moksha* we will wonder why the world can’t see what we see. Why this mad rush to make money; why such long q outside the ticket counter of such banal and boring film; so one needs to understand there cannot be consensuses with respect to each ones *purusharthas*; as they say ‘to each his own’. This helps to deal with world better and see the creation as *Ishwara’s* play. So there is a place of a bank, a bar, a temple and *Satsang* in the creation, for they are all meant to serve the diverse aspirations each unique *jiva*.

With Warm Regards,

Vishal