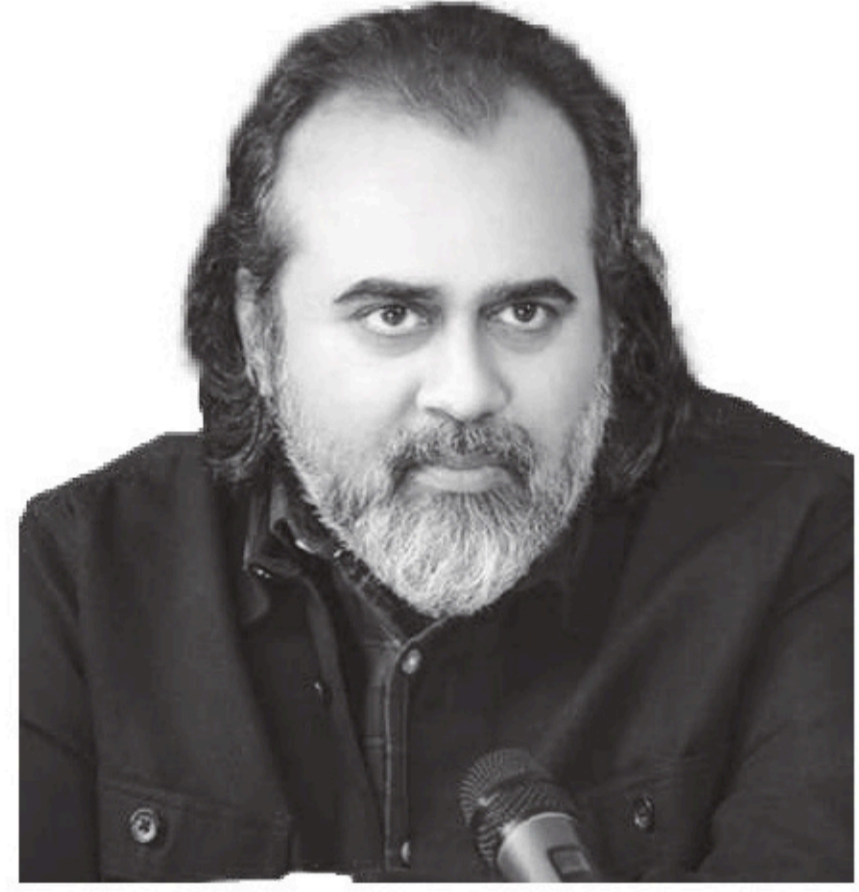


Desire and duty: A false divide

Desire and duty are not opposing forces; true integrity arises when both flow together harmoniously.



ACHARYA PRASHANT

When we run after a better job, more money, or a little more comfort, a lingering doubt often arises: “Am I neglecting my duties to the world by seeking more for myself?” We feel torn between our own goals and what we think we owe to others.

Choices made for personal comfort or family may appear selfish. One part of us moves toward desire, another whispers of responsibility. How does one choose a path that doesn't leave behind guilt or incompleteness?

This conflict comes from assuming duty and desire are mutually exclusive. Chasing goals feels like neglecting obligations, while fulfilling obligations feels like denying aspirations. Whichever we choose, guilt lingers.

But must we accept this

divide as real? The conflict doesn't arise because desire and duty are naturally opposed, but because of the lens through which we see them. We assume ambition must cost responsibility, and responsibility must sacrifice aspiration. The issue isn't what to choose, but why we believe we must choose at all.

THE BELIEF WE NEVER QUESTION

We call “selfishness” the instinct to secure our own goals, and “responsibility” the urge to serve others: community, nation, or ecosystem. We treat these like two ends of a seesaw: one rises only when the other falls. If every gain for the self is a loss for someone else, then self-care becomes injustice. But is that always true?

Those who have looked deeply insist: your first responsibility is to yourself. If that is rightly fulfilled, everything else aligns. Even our perception of others exists only in relation to the self. In Vedantic thought, the Self, *Atma*, is the highest truth. How then can one neglect the Self?

If we try, it turns into sub-



tle hypocrisy: pretending to serve others while secretly feeding our own needs. The self is not to be denied but understood and cared for with honesty. Without this, selfishness becomes destructive. With it, selfishness becomes integrity.

If selfishness necessarily means harming others, and we are naturally selfish, then conflict is unavoidable. In such a worldview, desire and duty truly cannot coexist. But the wise urge us to pause. Perhaps the conflict

is not between self and society, or desire and duty, but between two ways the self operates: one ignorant, one clear.

THE TWO SELVES: ONE THAT KNOWS, ONE THAT WANTS

This divide sharpens when we act from the “lower self”—not lower in judgment, but in ignorance of who we are. Think of the newest phone, a bigger car, an exotic holiday. Each excites briefly, then fuels more

wanting.

We are born with a hollow we cannot ignore, and instinctively try to fill it by consuming the world. The lower self is that hollow, mistaking consumption for cure. Others become mere means: “I must take to feel whole, even if it wounds another.” The conflict feels real because it is lived in confusion.

Take something as ordinary as taste. From the lower self, it demands blindly: “I want to feel good.” For a

few minutes' pleasure, billions of lives end each day. Fleeting relief bought at enormous cost. This is how the lower self consumes blindly, turning desire into harm and distancing us from responsibility.

In contrast, the higher self begins with self-understanding. Then a quiet realization arises: pleasure, status, possessions never healed what we hoped they would. They harmed others, and left us restless. Seeing this clearly opens a new way of living.

THE HIGHER SELF: WHEN DESIRE MEETS DUTY

We try to balance ambition and virtue—weekdays for profit, weekends for peace. But this only deepens the divide. From the higher self, compartments dissolve, and integrity appears.

Integrity does not mean balancing desire and duty; it means seeing they were never separate. True integrity means no division between oneself and the world. To realize the Self is the highest form of selfishness. One who lives from clarity does not need to “add on” responsibility; their very

living becomes responsible.

What helps others cannot harm you, and what harms the world cannot truly help you. This is not morality but a law of life. Joy cannot sprout from another's ruin. When this is seen clearly, desire and duty cease to conflict. Desire expresses responsibility; responsibility fulfills desire.

Now there is no need to juggle roles or compensate with small acts of virtue. The divide between weekday and weekend, personal and professional, spiritual and material vanishes. Life becomes one movement.

BEYOND RESPONSIBILITY: FROM FEAR TO LOVE

With this alignment, even responsibility changes. For most, duties are inherited—family, culture, tradition. A bride, for instance, steps into a household already knowing her “duties”: duties identical had she entered the house next door. Such responsibilities are photocopied scripts, sustained by fear of judgment, not love.

The higher self acts not from obligation but love. And love has no boundar-

ies. Duty draws a boundary; love overflows it. When action arises from love, the old distinction between desire and duty dissolves; they flow as one.

THE END OF CONFLICT, THE BEGINNING OF UNDERSTANDING

The real question was never duty versus desire. That conflict belongs to confusion. When clarity arises, harmony follows: desire is no longer restless, duty no longer heavy. What you do for yourself naturally serves the world.

In that understanding, life becomes one movement: peaceful, clear, and undivided.

Acharya Prashant, a philosopher and teacher of global wisdom literature, is the founder of the Prashant Advait Foundation. A bestselling author who brings timeless wisdom to urgent modern questions, he has been recognised for his contributions to thought and ethics—with honours from PETA ('Most Influential Vegan'), the Green Society of India ('Environmental Leadership'), and the IIT Delhi Alumni Association ('National Development').