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LIVING YOUR DHARMA

There are things that only you can do and there's a place only you can fill. We are all unique – shouldn't our life also be unique? If you agree, you might ask, "Yes, but what is that place only I can fill? How can I find it?"

The way to find your place, your task, is to follow an ancient principle – that of *dharma*. The word *dharma* comes from the root *dhṛ* which means "to hold" or "maintain" and if you are connected with your *dharma*, that *dharma* "holds" or maintains you. You are then maintained by a universal power that works in the entire creation. Following one's *dharma* means allowing oneself to unfold positively, based on the particular person that one is, and thereby serving others with one's potential.

Generally speaking, there are three types of *dharma*:

- 1) *Dharma* in relation to others – how to think, talk and act towards others and the inanimate world
- 2) *Svadharmā* – which relates to finding one's own place and meaning in life
- 3) *Sanatana dharma* in relation to the spiritual reality that speaks about our spiritual essence as a soul and our relationship to the supreme

THE FRUITS OF DHARMA

The more you act according to these different aspects of *dharma*, the more the principle of *dharma* can and will support you. You will start moving forward not only with your own strength, but also supported by the strong force of *dharma*. Therefore, the Vedas proclaim *sthānam pradhānam*, "One who has found his *dharma* moves forward with strength." Also, King Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of *dharma*, said "Where there is *dharma*, there is victory." In the *Manu-saṁhitā* it is said, "One who protects his *dharma* is protected by *dharma*. One

who hurts his *dharma* is hurt by *dharma*." In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vālmīki says, "From *dharma* comes prosperity. Only from *dharma* flows happiness. From *dharma* comes self-realization. By *dharma* everything is attained. *Dharma* is the essence of this world."

Here is a list of the effects of following *dharma*. While you read it, you can check how many of them are present in your life.

When you are in tune with <i>dharma</i> ...	When you are not in tune with <i>dharma</i> ...
...you feel you lead a meaningful life that totally satisfies you.	...you wonder if what you do has any meaning and you are hardly ever satisfied with the results.
...you do not just do well in an activity but you can't imagine not doing it.	...you're not sure if you should be doing what you're doing at all.
...mostly people and circumstances come into your life effortlessly and help you move forward.	...most of what you do is a struggle.
...your gifts and talents come to your aid so that you have the strength to easily accomplish your work.	...you seem to accomplish everything only with great effort and it never seems good enough.
...you take wise risks and remain confident because you know you will be protected by <i>dharma</i>most of the time you are afraid that disaster will strike.
...you're generally in good health and if illness does come, you can deal with it.	...you constantly get ill—you don't know what's wrong or how to get well.

Wouldn't it be great to always be in tune with *dharma*? Often, we don't give ourselves the permission to act according to our *dharma* because we have become "servants" of circumstances or the expectations of others or we are just following a misguided value-system.



THE DHARMA HOUSE

The *dharma* house is a metaphor that summarizes the main aspects of what it means to live according to *dharma*, following which will also help you to find your specific *dharma* or place in life. Like any good house the *dharma* house has a fundament, walls and a roof.

The Fundament:

The Four Pillars of *Dharma* – the *Dharma* Codex

The *dharma* codex describes the universal principles of *dharma*. These principles are a very different approach to the question "What is my calling in life?" than the one of modern self-help techniques. There are many questionnaires you can fill out on the internet to find out more about your talents. But they will only bring you to a slight improvement of your present way of life. You need a force that is beyond you to bring you to your true *dharma* – and that is the universal force of *dharma*. Banyan tree seeds don't know what they will look like when the tree is fully grown, in the same way one cannot speculate oneself into one's unique place in life.

Goethe wrote, "How can we learn self-knowledge? Never by taking thought but rather by action. Try to do your duty and you'll soon discover what you're like." In other words, you cannot discover your purpose by sitting around speculating, but by acting *dharma*ically, that will allow you to grow. The most reliable method of coming in contact with one's *dharma* is to follow the *dharma* codex and then observing how things change in one's life. The force of *dharma* will support you and show you the way.

The four pillars of *dharma* and the corresponding initiation vows in our tradition are:

1) Truthfulness (refraining from gambling and lying)

Be honest – first and foremost to yourself, but also to others. Spiritual progress requires knowing where one is, so one can then choose the proper next step. Knowing this is only possible by being completely honest about the condition of one's heart and mind. (Most gambling games require the gambler to put on a "poker face" which encourages dishonesty about one's real thoughts and feelings, which, over time, will become a habitual mindset – that is why truthfulness corresponds to refraining from gambling and lying.)

2) Discipline (refraining from intoxication)

Don't be lazy – that will only bring you down. Discipline is what moves you forward in life. (Discipline is only possible with a sober and steady mind, which is why it corresponds to refraining from intoxication.)

3) Outer and inner purity (refraining from illicit sex)

Be clean externally and do your best at keeping the mind free from the pollution of the six enemies in spiritual life: lust, greed, illusion, anger, envy and madness. (The greatest inner impurity comes from thinking that others are meant for one's sexual gratification.) Remember the arm-strength-test we did that showed how powerful thoughts are. The way to rid the mind of negativity is by cultivating counteractive, positive thoughts. Specifically, Vaiṣṇavas practice inner purity by chanting the Lord's holy names and hearing the message of the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*.

4) Compassion (not eating meat, fish or eggs)

Be compassionate – share what you have received with others.

EXERCISE

Evaluate your practice of these four principles. Has it changed sufficiently after the seminar? If not, what do you find lacking? What could be your next step to overcoming this gap? Once you've found it – make sure you don't forget it by placing a reminder in a place you look daily (maybe a post-it sticker on your refrigerator or picture on your desk). Remember: you can't think yourself into *dharma*, you have to act yourself into *dharma*. You will never know what true *dharma* is if you don't act accordingly.