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Live well
– live your dharma

Early in your yoga career you're sure to hear talk about 'dharma'. But what exactly is it? And how is it relevant to the contemporary western yoga student?

Nancy Jackson explains how this foundational philosophy of yoga encourages us to live in mindfulness and do the right thing.

You don't need to be a long-time yoga practitioner to notice that the word 'dharma' has slipped into the mainstream. You can preserve the dharma, be in the dharma, do something dharmic or follow the dharma. But what actually is the dharma, and how do you follow it?

Drawn from moral traditions in ancient India, 'dharma' has many broad meanings in the practice of yoga. It is from the Sanskrit root *dhri* and means, 'that which holds together, supports or upholds'. By 'holding together', it is the basis of all order, from social values to the fabric of the cosmos. As a practice, following the principles of dharma leads the yogi deeper into the nature of being human and exploring pathways that connect to spiritual understanding.

Dharma as virtue

At its most basic, dharma is to live a decent life. All social traditions have a moral code, or the do's and don'ts of proper behaviour. Moral guidelines appear in many yogic paths throughout history. One of the most famous is from the great yoga master Patanjali, who provided qualities of virtue in his *Yoga Sutras* over 1500 years ago.

In the *yamas*, or restrictions, Patanjali recommends that we: do not harm others but practise non-violence (*ahimsa*); do not be deceitful, but practise truthfulness (*satya*); do not steal (*asteya*); do not be promiscuous, but practise chastity (*brahmacharya*); and do not cultivate greed (*aparigraha*).

In the *niyamas*, or observances, he recommends that we: be clean, or cultivate purity (*shauca*); be content (*santosha*); be disciplined (*tapas*); study the ancient wisdom (*svadhyaya*); and be devoted to the path of higher consciousness (*ishvarapranidhana*).

The *yamas* and *niyamas* are standard moral principles to be

considered in each situation. A yogi may choose to follow them to the letter; but a married householder does not need to practise chastity, for example, and a police officer may need to resort to violence. In general, these principles are designed to help clear emotional energy. By following these guidelines the mind and the heart are not agitated with negative emotions such as justification, guilt, regret, denial or retribution. Their intention is for us to enjoy living in the states of cleanliness and contentment. We reap the rewards of discipline in regular hatha yoga practice, meditation

attained by cultivating friendliness towards the happy, compassion for the unhappy, delight in the virtuous, and indifference towards the wicked".

Dharma as virtue is a combination of life experience and conscience. It is a fluid and intuitive process applied in each circumstance. Sometimes we can draw inwards to our sense of right and wrong to make decisions. Other times we follow the examples or advice of people we respect. Most important is our effort to make good choices through mindfulness, or consideration.

Mindfulness is to pay attention and

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and study of spiritual teachings; and by being devoted to the path of higher consciousness, we can expand the focus of the mind from pettiness to more expansive contemplations.

Yoga takes it a step further by asking us not only to make moral choices but also to discover and dissolve our own negative tendencies. Patanjali tells us to turn away from "sickness, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, sloth, craving for sense-pleasure, false perception or despair caused by failure to concentrate". Why? Because, he says, "these distractions are accompanied by grief, despondency, trembling of the body and irregular breathing".

On the up side, he says, "undisturbed calmness of mind is

be aware, a presence of mind rather than absentmindedness. It is the state of focusing on inner thoughts and feelings while being highly sensitive to our surroundings and the people around us. Deliberate mindfulness allows us to do things that are 'dharmic'. On a mundane level, these actions might be picking up litter, giving someone a ride or using water with great care. Yet each person adding a contribution can make a considerable difference. Dharma is about being appropriate while living in vibrant awareness.

Dharma as life's plan for us

One of the most spectacular dramas about dharma comes from the sacred text on yoga, the *Bhagavad Gita*. In this epic, the great warrior Arjuna rides onto

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the battlefield to signal the beginning of an inevitable war. He surveys the warriors of both sides poised for possible death and recognises friends, family and acquaintances. He freezes in inaction, a moment of tension that unfolds as complete awareness, when time stops and he questions his very existence. Arjuna asks for guidance from his charioteer, the immortal Krishna, who represents all knowledge.

Krishna tells him, “Know what your duty is and do it without hesitation”. It is Arjuna’s dharma, or duty, to be a warrior. His dharma, or his place in the world, is to play the role he has been given in life. The *Bhagavad Gita* recommends performing as an actor on the grand stage of life. The role we have been given belongs to the play, not to our spiritual being, our essential life force. And, like an actor, there are many plays. Some of our roles are played throughout our lives – for example, our role as friend, daughter, or partner. Other roles we take on or leave off as our dharma changes. For example, a woman who has raised children to a certain age may go into the workforce. A dancer may become a dance teacher. Or someone who has done well in a particular career path may enter a different arena.

Krishna advises, “It is better to do your own duty badly, than to do another’s perfectly”. Each person’s dharma is different. The right dharma for one is not necessarily the right dharma for another. Some can claim a life path of lofty ideals such as serving humankind as a champion of the environment, inspiring children to learn, negotiating peace, or saving lives as a medical emergency worker. But from the broadest perspective, every task and every role is noble dharma, no matter how humble.

Dharma goes beyond career paths to interests or tendencies, such as sports, art, building, or a function in life, such as parent, student, leader or supporter. Consider the people you encounter in the world around you. One person might just cook to eat while another

enjoys the entire process of shopping for produce, preparing ingredients, cooking and serving food. Someone might take a job in retail just for some extra money while another takes pride in selling certain products or services. While one person dislikes being in an office, another loves working with computers, organising systems or attending to details. When we are immersed in an activity with a focused mind, flowing with the actions or process of the activity itself, we are ‘in the dharma’.

Sometimes a job becomes a career, or an activity becomes an expertise, but we can still be in the dharma if we fit perfectly with what we are doing, even with mediocre or poor outcomes. Passion does not necessarily mean we are in the dharma. Sometimes over-enthusiasm can bring us out of the flow of connection with the spiritual self because it may be ego-based or too attached. Being in the dharma is about free interchange between us and the people around us, our activities and our environment. It is being in harmony with the universe.

Do your best without attachment to the outcome

In his spiritual teaching, Krishna also tells Arjuna not to be attached to the outcome of his actions. This can be a challenging concept to the Western mind. We are taught that effort produces results. Why even do something if we don’t expect an outcome? The difference here is to not be attached. Certainly we can expect outcomes. We can be delighted when good things happen and disappointed when they don’t.

Dharma asks us to consider a different relationship. What if there isn’t necessarily a direct cause and effect? What if we do our work and offer it to the universe? What if everything we receive is a gift from the universe?

This may seem simplistic or at odds with a number of daily activities. For example, a workout at the gym should bring certain results. Or we have to be

accountable for responsibilities at work. How can we balance expectations with the idea of dharma? According to the yoga tradition, to follow the dharma is to do our very best under every circumstance, then let go of any vested interest, or allow events to unfold without anger, fear or resentment at the outcome. Sometimes things don’t work out the way we want them to, no matter how much we put into them. The balance is between appropriate effort and grace in receiving the results. As selfless service, dharma supports the integrity and dignity of family, friends and co-workers, the community, the world and the universe.

“Do your duty,” says Krishna, “and dedicate it to me, or openly surrender attachment”. Regardless of a person’s job or position, anyone can offer service in honouring the spirituality of nature. Imagine dedicating everything we do to the good of universal harmony.

Dharma as the spiritual path

Krishna tells Arjuna that he is not who he thinks he is, such as a man, a brother, a leader or an expert archer. Within him is the immortal self, comprised of the same divine consciousness as all life in the universe.

A deeper meaning of dharma is the inner purpose of each person’s life, or *svadharma*. The practices of yoga are active efforts to discover our own pathway and actualise the highest level of our capabilities and possibilities. Everyone has a unique pathway and has to meet obstacles as they appear. But rather than going through life tossed by a series of ups and downs, yoga asks us to take the next step to embrace our challenges as fully as possible.

Dharma is a central concern of Hinduism, which is also known as *Sanatana Dharma*, eternal law or universal righteousness. It also is a central concern of Buddhism, which is also called ‘the Dharma’, or ‘the Way’. Dharma here is a synonym for the spiritual path itself. It can mean teachings, truth, spirituality or ultimate reality. To ‘seek refuge’ in the dharma is to be dedicated to a way of life that recognises the truth within as connection to the harmonies of the universe. To ‘preserve the dharma’ is to uphold spiritual pathways and conscious living. The current residence in India of the Dalai Lama, where he preserves

the dharma of Tibetan Buddhism, is Dharmasala which means 'a place of the Dharma'.

The eightfold path of Buddhism is a practical guide of dharma: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Allowing for individual interpretation in each circumstance, it outlines a pathway of will, knowledge and action. It addresses the subtlety of the mind, open-mindedness and right thinking as overcoming negative tendencies. It supports appropriate actions and it encourages meditation and thoughtfulness.

Dharma as the foundation of the world

In its broadest meaning dharma is the underlying spirituality of the universe. Scientists point out the laws or principles of the physical universe, such as magnetism, gravity, electricity, or the effects of a supernova. These complex physical laws reflect the innumerable and timeless qualities and structure of the world around us. Like physical laws, dharma endures as an inseparable aspect of the universe. It is the primordial law of all creation, from which emanates all physical, moral and metaphysical order. When we take the time to consider our relationship with this remarkable, interrelational universe, we 'live in the dharma' amidst the harmonies of higher reality.

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[Living in the Dharma]

Dharma is an essential component of the yogic lifestyle of harmony with the spiritual energy of the universe. The many paths of yoga use the word differently, as do the many ashrams, centres and yoga studios. Even though the word 'dharma' is used in various ways, it's always about making informed choices and acting with intention and awareness. Following the dharma or living in the dharma is a dynamic process. Mistakes happen, life evolves, pathways change, but connection to the heart and the spiritual self can always stay constant when we want to make that connection.

Here are a few guidelines for living in the dharma.

- **Investigate your inner world.** Spend time in contemplation and meditation to explore what you think and how you feel. Through introspection you can become familiar with your inner world and identify your own tendencies and characteristics. As a practice, you can try to connect to your inner world several times a day, or for as often as you can remember to do it.
- **Balance inner and outer lives.** If you have a busy outer life, consider spending more time looking inward. When you have a peaceful mind, you can deal with outer events or make decisions more easily. Likewise, if you tend to spend a lot of time looking inward, consider becoming more active. Activity and a sense of accomplishment help relax the body and quieten the mind.
- **Check your intention.** Intention is the foundation of action. It never hurts to take a look at your intention in order to identify your true motivation in what you do and what you say.
- **Offer others good will and respect.** Wishing others well acknowledges your connection to your own higher self and respect for that same connection in each other person.
- **Read books of wisdom traditions.** Studying the great teachings and the great teachers is a practice that can bring you into direct contact with your spiritual self. Rather than allowing your mind to focus on daily events, consider reflecting on contemplations about the nature of spirituality.
- **Stay true to yourself.** What's right for you? What does your intuition say? In making decisions, choosing career paths, partners, or even everyday activities, we are sometimes inundated with advice or pressure. Today's complicated world offers countless options for deciding how to act. Ask yourself: how does it feel? Deep personal reflection helps you align yourself to the truth within. To help uncover your own wisdom, consider doing the opposite of what you usually do. If you usually follow your heart, ask your mind. If you usually follow your mind, ask your heart. If you usually hesitate, take action. If you usually are quick to take action, wait and reflect.
- **Be here and now.** An ancient wisdom from all yoga traditions, the act of being present carries great power. All of life's experience happens in the here and now. The more present you are, the more your life resonates with spiritual energy. Being present also offers opportunities to absorb information, weigh the possibilities and make good choices.
- **Stay real.** It's the nature of the mind to create 'what-if' scenarios as fantasies or worry. The mind also can habitually look at the past, sometimes getting stuck on unresolved issues or relationships. Watch the mind as it chatters. Rather than how it could be or should have been, look at how life actually is.
- **Deepen your wisdom.** A great technique of all yoga practices is to drop preconceived notions or expectations. To forge strong spiritual pathways, raise the bar in your own practices. Can you take the next step? What is it? In what ways can you cultivate mindfulness, deepen compassion, improve communication and tap into your inner wisdom? Yoga asks us to observe ourselves, reflect on our true natures, use our strengths and strengthen our weaknesses.