



January 2015 Contemplation:
Understanding Yoga: Understanding Life #1

Dharma: Life Purpose

by Vidyadevi Stillman & Rukmini Abbruzzi

“What is the purpose of life?” My internet search gave me 1 billion results. Amazing! There are a lot of people asking this question. Many of them come to yoga classes. When you look around the room, there are many there who share your yearning to know and to fulfill the purpose of life.

Yoga’s ancient teachings clearly describe the purpose of life, acknowledging its complexity by describing four goals of life. Swami Nirmalananda says, “You don’t have to pick just one of the four goals of life. You get to have all of them! In fact, your life will feel incomplete unless you have all four.”

In the Ashram, every morning during sunrise we chant the Guru Gita in Sanskrit. One line of the text says, “My purpose for chanting the Guru Gita is to attain the four goals of life: dharma, artha, kama and moksha.” Isn’t it wonderful that you can chant a text in Sanskrit for the purpose of realizing all four of the goals of life!

Dharma (dar-ma) = fulfilling your responsibilities

Artha (art-ha) = creating and utilizing wealth

Kama (kaa-maa) = enjoying pleasures

Moksha (mok-sha) = freedom, enlightenment

These Sanskrit terms have richly layered meanings, so we will cover each of them in our next four months, as we begin a year of exploring yoga’s teachings on life itself. Our theme for the year is:

Understanding Yoga: Understanding Life.

While yoga’s physical practices are well known, and *Svaroopa*[®] yoga is a way of working deeply in both your body and your psyche at the same time, yoga’s underlying principles have yet to be discovered by the mainstream. You’ll find many that resonate with things you already knew, while others free you from misunderstandings that sabotage your life. Understanding yoga’s ancient philosophy makes you a master of life, not just of your body.

The first of the four goals of life is dharma, which means you take care of things. It includes the responsibilities you were born into as well as those you have chosen or created. To begin with, you have a responsibility to take care of yourself, which includes your body and your mind. If you don’t take care of yourself, you become a burden to others and you’re not happy either. You also have a responsibility to the family you were born into and to the family you have created, as well as to society, to your profession, to your neighbors, etc. These can sometimes be hard things, but that is true of anything you are responsible for. If you don’t fulfill your responsibilities, it will bother you for the rest of your life. You must!

Rukmini shares, “One way I can tell that something is my dharma is when not doing it doesn’t feel right. Like so many of us, my life is very busy. My extended family lives several states away, so I don’t see them very often. If too much time goes by, I begin to miss them and want to see them because I love them. But something more happens. I begin to feel a compulsion on another level inside, and I know if I don’t go visit them soon, all will not be right in my world until I do. Because my family is one of my dharmas, spending time with them is part of that.”

Beyond merely doing all the things you are supposed to be doing, dharma demands that you do it willingly. Resistant and resentful doesn’t work out for you or for anyone else. Plus, if you don’t do the hard stuff that is your dharma, life is going to force it on you anyway.

Karma, a related principle, explains that you have a certain amount of pain and a certain amount of pleasure to undergo in your life. If you try only to fill your life with pleasure and don’t willingly embrace

your responsibilities, the pain will come chasing you. You will have no control over where it shows up. But if you choose to fulfill your responsibilities, the rest of life gets easier.

This is a good time of year to really look at your responsibilities and even make a New Year's resolution. When you follow dharma you get good karma. When you don't follow dharma you get bad karma.

Dharma also includes things that blossom forth from within, those ways of expressing your own innate nature. You have so many capacities, skills and talents. So many potentials could blossom forth from your own being. You get to choose which of them to express into the world. Any of them is a natural direction for you to flow. You maybe already done have or presently are doing many of them.

If you don't know what your dharma is, but you want to know what you should blossom forth from within, begin by acknowledging that what you are already doing is your dharma. If you've landed in this spot in life, doing this stuff, dharma has brought you here. Even if it isn't your ultimate dharma, embracing it as if it is your dharma will shift things.

Vidyadevi says, "I never really felt like I chose my first profession. I graduated from college with a science degree but had no idea what to do with it. My family suggested I do what my brother was doing, as a research technician at the university. Though I was definitely more of the person who liked dealing with the body, I poured myself into being a scientist. Then the shift happened. It was so easy. Grant money was running out where I was working, Nirmala offered me a teaching position at Master Yoga and it just flowed into teaching yoga full time." Shifts happen! Simply pour yourself into what you are doing as though it were your dharma. If it isn't your dharma, things will shift you into your dharma.

Rukmini says, "I think this is amazing, and a mysterious gift. You don't have to know what your dharma is. You can do what you're doing as though it were your dharma, giving yourself to it fully, embracing it and doing to your highest capacity. Your actions will align you with your ultimate dharma and draw it to you. There's a deep satisfaction in doing your dharma, even when it's challenging, even when you have doubts that you can do it. If you're not experiencing that deep satisfaction now, getting better at how you handle your current responsibilities will get you there."

You may feel that you are not the right person to be doing what you are doing. There is maybe someone else who is more knowledgeable, more skilled or more talented. The Bhagavadgita addresses this clearly, "Better to do your own duty, though imperfectly, than the duty of another person, even perfectly."¹ Find a way to do what you are doing even if you don't do it perfectly. You are only responsible for doing the best you can.

For example, if your dharma is to take care of an ailing or aging person, but you aren't very good at it, you cannot effectively hire someone else to do a better job. All three of you will feel something is missing, because it is. You must do your dharma. You can get help with it, but if you back down or do something else you like better, then you don't fulfill your life purpose. You will feel that there is no life in your life.

This teaching is so beautiful because it says you have to be who you are. It is your dharma. Find dharma and be a responsible, actively involved, willing participant in life, whether at work, home or play.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "UNDERSTANDING YOGA: UNDERSTANDING LIFE" — OUR CONTEMPLATION THEME FOR 2015, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI AND VIDYADEVI STILLMAN OR RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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¹ Rendered by Swami Nirmalananda