Do the Right Thing: Finding Your Dharma by Sally Kempton

Dek: When life hands you a difficult choice, try this time-tested process for discovering your dharma—the right action for this situation.

One June morning in 2003, I took my seat on an airplane next to a man with chiseled face and beautifully pressed clothes. As we talked, he told me about a dilemma he faced: Some people in the Democratic Party wanted him to run for president, and he didn't know whether it was the right thing to do. He'd been a career soldier and felt pretty done with being a commander. He liked private life. But some part of him felt that, given the way things were going in the country, maybe it was his duty to try and lead. The problem, he told me, is that when you put yourself into a fight like that, your opponents do whatever they can to destroy you. He wasn't sure he wanted to subject himself to that kind of personal attack.

When the flight was over, and he gave me his card, I discovered that I'd been sitting next to General Wesley Clark. I was struck by how much his life-path crisis mirrored the one immortalized in the *Bhagavad Gita* when Arjuna is faced with having to fight against his kinsmen in a world war. It was in response to a dilemma much like Clark's that Lord Krishna gave Arjuna a teaching that has literally rung down through the centuries: "Better your own dharma—your personal duty—even if unsuccessful, than the dharma of another done perfectly." (BG III-35)

As it turned out, Clark did follow his warrior's dharma. He got into the fight, and as we all now know, it played out unsuccessfully. Perhaps Clark wished afterward that he had listened to his doubts. My hope is that he felt good about what was, in fact, a courageous act of personal dharma, regardless of the outcome.

Before we go any further, let me clarify what I mean by personal dharma. Your personal dharma is the path you follow towards your nature's highest expression and the fulfillment of your responsibilities to yourself, others, and your society, and the planet. In the Bhagavad Gita, one of the great texts on personal dharma in any tradition, Krishna often speaks of dharma as something inborn—a life-calling that each of us has been given which we depart from at our peril. But he also uses the word to mean "right action," and for most of us, personal dharma comes down to that most basic question: "What is the right thing for me to do now?" or, "Given my nature, my skills, and my personal preferences, what actions should I take to support the greater good?"

Often, we associate dilemmas of dharma with situations in which our desires conflict with our sense of personal or professional responsibility. (As in, "Is it okay for me to date my yoga instructor, or insist that clients pay me in cash, so I don't have to declare that part of my income or skip my kid's school play to finish my project?") But just as often, our conflicts of dharma are not about desires at all but about competing responsibilities. Sometimes you're faced with life choices in which no matter what you do, someone will get hurt. Even when the right thing to do is obvious, you may not always be the right person to do it. (If you can't swim, it may be in everyone's best

interest for you not to jump into the river to try to save a drowning child. So, the right action for you at a given moment may not be the right action for me.) That's what makes the contemplation of personal dharma so tricky and so vital.

As examples, let's look at two people in classic dilemmas of dharma. Judy is a social activist married to a fellow aid worker and living in Zambia. She's deeply committed to her work and can't imagine doing anything else with her life. Last year Judy got pregnant. She didn't want to raise a child in a war zone. She didn't want to leave the people she's working with—and helping in Africa. She didn't want to have an abortion.

Then there is Darren, who was recently offered a grant that will allow him the time he needs to finish his novel, but then found out that the grant's corporate sponsor is a pharmaceutical company known for price-gouging.

Both these people faced situations in which it's hard to calibrate the "right" thing to do. Both of them needed to think through their situations and longed for some guidance about how to do it.

A Guide to Decision Making

Fortunately, there is a set of guidelines in the *Yajnavalkya Samhita*, an Upanishadic text of India, that can help you answer questions of personal dharma. The text offers criteria for figuring out your dharma in a given situation and one overall "rule" that trumps the rest. "*The sources of dharma are known to be these: the sacred texts, the practices of the good, whatever is agreeable to one's own self, and the desire which has arisen out of wholesome resolve."* Then the passage goes on to give us a kind of dharmic bottom line:" Over *and above such acts [as] … self-control, non-violence, charity, and study of truth, this is the highest dharma: the realization of the self by means of yoga."*

What I love about this prescription is that it is free from absolutism. Instead of saying: "Do this or that," it gives us a method for weighing the different factors at stake in any important ethical or life-path decision.

I offer it to you with a few adaptations of my own and suggest that you experiment with it yourself:

1. Seek Guidance

Begin by checking in with the wisdom—"the sacred texts"—of your tradition. My personal guides to dharma include the yamas and niyamas of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (non-violence, non-stealing, contentment, truthfulness, and the rest); the Buddha's Eight-Fold Path (right speech, right livelihood, etcetera); some of the precepts of Taoism ("To create without owning, to give without expecting, to fulfill without claiming"); Christ's beatitudes; the *Bhagavad Gita*; and particular instructions of my teachers.

You can identify your wisdom sources. However, if the sacred texts, and even your teacher's instructions, are to be helpful in a crunch, you'll need to take time to reflect on them, understand what they mean for you, and try to apply them to real-life situations.

How would you do this? Suppose you've come across teaching about the importance of equanimity—or as the Bhagavad Gita puts it, "even mindedness towards desired and undesired events." You intuit that this is a quality that you'd like to develop. First, you'd spend some time thinking about what the word means. You might read about it in different sources and contemplate what other teachers have said about equanimity. You might ask yourself what the difference is between equanimity and indifference or whether practicing equanimity means that you never feel your emotions. Once you have a sense of what the teaching means for you, you'd try to put it into action. You might spend a week applying it strictly and notice how you feel. What thoughts or actions help you feel even minded? What challenges your equanimity? How do you treat your emotional ups and downs—do you tend to give in to feelings or suppress them? What practices can you do to regain your even-mindedness when you've lost it?

You can follow this process with any one of the great wisdom teachings, remembering that it can be as valuable to notice where you "fail" to practice the teaching to see where you succeed. And as you keep practicing, you'll begin to find that these pieces of wisdom actually surface when you need them and help you make wise decisions on your own. For Judy, who has studied with a Buddhist teacher for several years, the teaching that came to her rescue was "openness"—the idea that all situations are workable if we are simply open to them.

2. Rely on Good Examples

The second yardstick for right action—"the practices of the good"—invites us to channel the discernment we've received, often unconsciously, from observing people who consistently make elevated moral and ethical choices. This is the basic, "What would Martin Luther King do?" question. For MLK, you can substitute your Polish grandmother or the tenth-grade teacher who spent her after-school hours helping failing kids or the admirable people in your field.

In thinking through his situation, Darren looked at the examples of great artists of the past, artists whose work was supported by kings and even dictators and saw themselves as servants of art, whose first responsibility was always to the muse. He thought about the fact that the patrons of art have often been people with ethically questionable business practices, whose philanthropy at least put their money to good use. He decided that it was acceptable for him to take the money.

Judy thought of great political activists like Dorothy Day and saints like Sarada Devi, the great saint Ramakrishna's wife, who took care of a mentally unbalanced niece for years and managed to be a spiritual teacher to everyone who came to her. As she looked at their lives, she realized that wherever she chose to make her home, she could find work that would satisfy her desire to help society.

3. See If It Feels Right

The third criteria—"Whatever is agreeable to one's own self"—is crucial. You might know what the books say is the right thing to do. You might long to make the decision that Jesus or Buddha or one of your saintlier friends would have made. But if something

feels wrong *for you personally*, then it probably is not your dharma, which means that you probably shouldn't do it.

However, feeling "wrong" about a course of action can be hard to distinguish from the resistance that comes up when you're asked to try something new and challenging. In the same way, feeling "right" can be hard to distinguish from greed or ambition or laziness or from wanting something so badly that you'll overlook the warnings from your inner dharma meter.

One way to handle this is to get quiet and ask yourself, "If I did know the right thing to do, what would it be?" When the answer comes up (which it will, especially if you give it time), do it. *But give yourself permission to re-evaluate your choice in a few weeks or months.* The great blues singer Bessie Smith once sang, "Once ain't for always, two ain't but twice." It's a great point to remember about dharma. Sometimes, the choice we make based on our best instincts and information turns out to be wrong. Or perhaps the circumstances change. Dharmas change according to circumstances. In short, it's okay if you change your mind.

That's what Darren, the novelist with the dicey corporate sponsor, did. After contemplating his own artistic calling and deciding that he had to take this opportunity to write the book that was bursting to come forth, he took the grant. He reasoned that supporting artists was actually a worthy use of corporate money. But months later, after reading a series of articles about how "his" company declined to lower prices on AIDs medicines for poor countries, he stopped feeling okay about living off its money. He gave back what he hadn't spent and got a part-time job. The time the grant had given him had allowed him to get such a good start on the novel that he could get a small advance. Darren feels fine about both his decisions. As often happens with decisions of dharma, he had made the best choice possible at one moment and changed course when he received new information.

Judy decided to go home to London when her baby was born, even though a part of her felt that her help was needed in the Zambian bush. "But the truth is, having a newborn felt so stressful and such a responsibility," she says, "that I felt I needed some measure of physical comfort and security both for her and for me." Three years later, she still wonders whether she made the right choice, though she also realizes that there will be time for her to go back to Africa when her daughter is older. It was the fourth of the yardsticks for dharma that finally helped her accept her situation.

4. Do What's Best for All

The fourth criteria—"the desire which has arisen out of wholesome resolve" cuts to the heart of personal dharma. What is a wholesome resolve? It's essentially an unselfish motivation. The desire to help others, serve the situation, accept responsibility for creating positive change—these are perhaps the most powerful forms of wholesome resolve. So are the motivations that come from the vows we take (both formal and informally)—the vow to preserve a family, to maintain good health, to love unconditionally, to complete a difficult project.

Judy's "wholesome resolve" was to give her child the best possible chance to grow up healthy. In choosing between two different dharmas—her commitment to working with the people of Zambia and her commitment to her child—Judy based her choice on the realization that while other people could do her work in Zambia, no one else could bring up the child. Even when our motives are mixed, layered with ego or desire or competitiveness, when our resolve is essentially healthy or helpful, it's probably dharmic. This is especially true when, like Judy, we find that we are literally the only person available to do some important task.

5. Reach for the Highest

Yet, as the Yajnavalkya Samhita says, all of these methods for following the thread of dharma only really work when you're in touch with your spiritual core, the authentic, essential "self" that we experience when we enter deeply into our own being. Different traditions call that essential self by other names—the heart, the inner self, the tao, pure Awareness, Presence, or basic emptiness—but one thing all agree on: when we're in touch with it, we are in touch with our highest dharma. When people asked my teacher Swami Muktananda how to find their personal dharma, their life-calling, he'd always say, "Your real dharma is to know the truth of your inner Self." Sometimes his answer seemed to ignore the issues we were worried about, those burning life-questions like "Should I marry this person?" or "Should I go to graduate school or take a job?" Only later, after years of meditation and self-inquiry brought me into the kind of relationship with my authentic self that couldn't be overturned by a bad day or a difficult decision, did I come to understand what a good piece of advice he was giving us.

When it comes to knowing what's right, my mind will often hesitate between one course of action or another, wondering whether an impulse has come from my true self or from some hidden sub-set of the ego. But when I sit quietly for long enough to let my mind settle into stillness, I begin to become aware of an inner Presence, a sense of being that is wordless and calm. That quiet Presence is not only calming; it tends to put everything else into perspective, showing me the difference between what matters and what is only of temporary importance. The keys to your personal dharma, the secrets of what it means to live the life you're meant to live, begin to reveal themselves quite naturally when you have that sense of perspective. And it develops on its own, over time, when you get in the habit of sitting in meditation for some time every day, with the intention to touch your true self.

When you're faced with dharma decisions, whether they are big questions or small ones, try applying this final criterion. Sit down for a moment and focus on your breath, observing the flow of thoughts and emotions. When you feel a bit of space in your mind, breathe into that space, and ask yourself, "Which choice will take me closer to my true self? Which choice will give me more access to the clarity and wisdom of my true self?" Then wait, paying attention to the feeling that arises. When it comes, attend to it. The more you get to know it, the more it will be there to guide you, and the more you will be living your own dharma, the deep truth of your most personal and most universal being.

Take the Dharma Challenge

Are you facing a decision that tests your sense of dharma? Try applying the five principles above. You might do this by writing out the problem on a sheet of paper. Then ask yourself the following questions, based on the five principles we discussed above:

> What do the teachings of my spiritual tradition, or of a wisdom tradition I trust, suggest that a person should do to handle such a situation? How would someone I admire handle it? What is my personal preference—what feels good to me? What action of mine would best serve the situation and satisfy my desire to fulfill my responsibilities?

Then sit quietly, attending to the breath until your mind gets quiet, and see what answer comes forth from your inner self.

Or try applying these five questions to the following situations and see what answer you come up with. As you think them through, remember that sages and wise people have traditionally worked with problems like this and that there are several ways to come to a dharmic solution!

It's the morning of a workshop your company is putting on. You're in charge of logistics, and in an hour, 45 people will be showing up to register. As you step out of the shower, your daughter comes in with flushed cheeks and a 101-degree fever. Your husband is out of town, and you can't get the babysitter on the phone. Asking the questions, "Given that I want to fulfill both responsibilities, what will best serve the situation?" and "How would someone I admire handle this?" contemplate and decide what would be the best way to deal with this dilemma.

You're a popular and gifted professor and have just been offered the job of dean of your college. You don't see eye-to-eye with the university's administration and dread having to work closely with them, but your colleagues are begging you to take the job and improve things for them—and the job offers a major salary increase. Apply the dharmic yardstick of "What would be of most help in this situation?" and the yardstick of "What feels personally right, given my preferences and skills??" What choice do you make?

You're in a long-term relationship, but you run into an old lover and start an email correspondence. Suddenly you're spending hours on the computer exchanging emails, and you've begun having fantasies about starting up your relationship with your ex-lover. Use the following questions as your criteria: "What would the wisdom of the Golden Rule—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—suggest I do here? What would someone I admire do? What would serve the highest good in this situation? Then decide what you would do.