



Personal Dharma

By Mike Cook

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The pursuit of a livelihood can often devolve into a pursuit of income. Here’s something to keep in mind: How we choose to earn our living has, almost inevitably, ethical implications. These ethical implications do not necessarily involve legal issues; in fact they likely won’t. Rather they can involve violations of our most basic commitments to ourselves and others. The remedy for this dilemma is the pursuit of our “personal dharma.”

In this article I propose to explore with you our apparent resistance to discovering a personal dharma and offer a simple path to another way of living. But first, what exactly does the term “dharma” mean in an everyday sense? One way of phrasing it is “right livelihood,” a term that might best be defined as *that livelihood which brings true benefit to oneself and/or others*. Another way to think about it: whatever might be the “right livelihood” for each of us does not merely satisfy a financial or material need, it also enriches the experience of our lives and the lives of other around us.

“What is my dharma?” is shorthand for ‘What is my responsibility as a mature, ethical individual—my responsibility to others, my responsibility to myself, my responsibility to life?’ Not only ‘What is the morally and ethically correct choice?’ But also, ‘Given my nature, my skills and talents, and my personal preferences, what is the best way for me to support the greater good now?’”

—Sally Kempton, author of Awakened Heart Meditation

Before you begin to suspect that I am about to head off on an Eastern religion tangent, consider these words from another great teacher...

“For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?”

—Jesus Christ, from Mark 8:36, as quoted in the New American Standard Bible (©1995)



Leaving aside who you believe him to have been, there was a time when Jesus was an apprentice carpenter before he discovered his gift for teaching. His pursuit of a personal dharma was one of the most significant choices ever made. The words quoted above seem to make the point for the way he chose to live his life and for the path he was suggesting we each follow. Note that he *did not* say *not* to pursue material satisfaction. But he *did* say not to pursue it at the expense of your soul.

How many of us could take a step back right now, from whatever we are doing to create income for ourselves, and say that we are seeking the fullest accomplishment of our lives?

“Man only progresses by slowly elaborating from age to age the essence and the totality of a universe deposited within him.”

- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, French Jesuit Priest and Philosopher

How many of us are doing work that fully engages us each and every day? The Gallup polling organization tells us that out of those who are employed in some fashion, working for others, only 27 percent (roughly one in four) report being fully engaged in what they do every day. This is neither a very inspiring statistic nor a strong recommendation for seeking employment.

Many of us begin our adult lives in an almost desperate search of a “good job,” one that’s fulfilling and makes the best use of our innate talents. The securing of this “good job” is one of the first items we hope to check off in the process of reducing uncertainty and having our lives look as if we know what we’re doing.

Others of us might not be desperate, but only because we are clueless as to what our “right livelihood” might be. We become resigned to the need to find “something to do” that pays the bills. Those words often seem to come from an almost hypnotic state, as if “the bills” are some sort of inevitability, like the sun coming up each day. “Must get money, must pay bills!” We seldom question how many of those bills were incurred out of “want” rather than necessity.

How did we come to this mindset? Why do so many parents discourage their children from educational paths that do not predictably result in obtaining a “good job?” I spoke with a friend in her fifties just the other day. She has been involved in accounting for as long as I’ve known her. In the course of catching up she excitedly revealed to me that she had submitted some of her photographs to a local show. I asked if she had recently taken up photography as a hobby. “No,” she said. “I majored in photography in college with a minor in accounting. After college my parents, who had paid for my education, insisted that I take a job in accounting since it seemed to offer a much more stable income.”



I do not think my friend's life experience is an exception. What has happened to our national commitment to "the pursuit of happiness?"

If I were to offer my own view, it would be that as a culture Americans have either denigrated "the pursuit of happiness" we so proudly refer to in the Declaration of Independence, insisting instead on security as a primary aim, or that we have collectively interpreted the pursuit of happiness to mean the pursuit of **having**, and have come to believe that **having** leads to **happiness**. The ironic background fact is that Thomas Jefferson, in crafting the Declaration of Independence, derived much of his thinking from John Locke, the 17th century English philosopher. Locke, in referring to rights that a government should guarantee its people, had written about "life, liberty and the pursuit of **property**."

Perhaps John Locke was already more in tune with the America that had yet to be founded than was Jefferson. The shopping malls of America are, on any weeknight, filled with millions of Americans in search of property, and the Internet thrums with e-commerce. But I'm going to come right out and say it: There must be more to an accomplished life than shopping.

"The higher nature in man always seeks for something which transcends itself and yet is its deepest truth; which claims all its sacrifice, yet makes this sacrifice its own recompense. This is man's dharma, man's religion, and man's self is the vessel."

—Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Poet, Playwright and Essayist

If we think of the Gallup poll results mentioned above as the devastating outcome of a mass "sell-out" to security, we can likely all agree that a continuation of the process will lead to more of the same. A global marketplace that promises to continuously move "jobs" to places on the planet where they can be done for less money might be seen as not only threatening economically, but also possibly precipitating a cultural crisis of the spirit. Perhaps we have been in the midst of such a crisis for some time. The abundant availability of material comforts has served as an anesthetic, masking the pain we're experiencing in our collective soul.

It's now time to pay the piper and re-equip ourselves in preparation for a very different future. Not necessarily a bad future, but almost certainly one that presses us hard against the real uncertainty and ambiguity of a life lived fully. Perhaps we will finally embrace the opportunity to live in response to the calling of our truest selves and realize that this is the authentic path of a spiritual practice. Do I have some recommendations? Yes.

In the course of our lives, we've all encountered activities that came easily to us, so easily in fact that they felt more like play than work. These moments—when we find ourselves fully



engaged and absorbed, without any concern for the passage of time—are clues about where “right livelihood” can be found. Please, start listening to and acting on those clues. Below is a simple path to discovering your “right livelihood”:

- Resolve for yourself that you will make the pursuit of “right livelihood” your primary life objective.
- Responsibly unburden yourself from any financial obligations or practices that involve only momentary or ego gratification. I’ve seen more poor choices made because someone had to “pay the bills” than for any other reason.
- Spend time coming to understand the nature of work that both turns you on and has value to others. Begin a search, right where you are, for opportunities to move yourself into spending more time involved in those activities.
- Do not worry or fret if the process takes some time. Enjoy the experience of the search rather than being focused on the outcome. Where were you going before this, anyway?
- Involve those around you—family, friends, employers, co-workers—in what you are seeking. Never present your search as a problem; you’ll just scare the people who love and depend on you.

Always stay present to the reality that this moment, this day, this *now* is all that is real and all that is yours. Do your best to make sure that every moment is spent consciously to your satisfaction and to the benefit of those around you.

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