

# Duty in the Face of Addiction

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**Patty:** Hi, Ted.

How does one develop the qualification of *svadharma* while living with an alcoholic who lies?

**Ted:** Technically speaking, *svadharma* is not a qualification. By fulfilling one's personal duty, which is one's *svadharma*, and thereby putting *dharma* (i.e. acting in accord with universal ethical norms) ahead of one's personal preferences, one both neutralizes the binding *vasanas* that extrovert the mind and cultivates the various qualifications that constitute a mind that is capable of engaging in effective self-inquiry and ultimately assimilating self-knowledge.

**Patty:** This person stopped drinking for a few years after his brothers staged an intervention, but is drinking again (alone and occasionally heavily) and he lies when asked about it. There is no evidence or proof. He does not admit to having a problem and is certainly not asking for help.

No matter what you think/do, you have no control over the outcome, but what approach is most in line with the teachings?

A few possibilities:

Calmly and dispassionately, as an offering to *Isvara*, call him out, and if/when he lies tell him you know he is drinking and that you are worried, while remaining non-attached to the outcome?

Not say anything unless there is some danger to yourself or others (drunk driving) and enjoy your freedom/solitude as they indulge in and hide their secret? Reflect on lessons to be learned?

Leave? This can be complicated with children and may not be the best solution. You don't need to go anywhere or do anything to be happy anyway, so would leaving be worth it and would it be for the greater good?

**Ted:** There isn't a hard and fast answer to this question. All three approaches could be considered *dharmic*, and thus in alignment with the teachings of Vedanta. Strictly speaking, Vedanta isn't concerned with remedying circumstances within the context of the apparent reality, but rather with unveiling the limitless conscious existence that is the substrate underlying the apparent reality. That said, in order to cultivate the *sattvic* mind (i.e. a mind that is peaceful, introspective, insightful and subtle enough to apprehend the limitless conscious existence in which all objective phenomena are appearing) it is important that one act in a way that promotes peace of mind. Therefore the best approach is that which affords the mind the greatest degree of peace. If you can remain detached enough from the circumstances in which you live so those circumstances do not interfere with self-inquiry, then stay and offer the person whatever help you feel will be most conducive to his overall well-being. If not, then you might have to change your circumstances. In either case, if you are concerned about acting *dharmically*, then be mindful to

not act in a way that enables his *adharmic* behavior. It really comes down to using common sense. If a person is choosing to act *adharmically*, then you are by no means under any obligation to fix or heal the person. You can offer help, but if the person refuses your help, then you've got to do what is best for you and the children for which you are responsible.

In regard to *svadharma*, you should consider the various roles you play within the context of the scenario you describe. Most notably, you are a student of Vedanta, a wife and a mother. Consider the responsibilities related to each of these roles and contemplate whether enabling an addiction and exposing yourself and your children to the potentially disturbing and detrimental consequences of living with an alcoholic equates with fulfilling the duty associated with any of the three roles.

It is not my place to tell you to stay with or leave your husband, but I will say that I have learned from personal experience that enabling addictive behavior in the name of love, obligation, compassion or as a means of fostering or demonstrating spiritual growth is not *dharmic*. Years ago, I was under the impression that it was my duty to play the role of the knight in shining armor who would save the day and rescue others from their misguided behavior. I thought that compassion meant that I had to stay within the context of even the unhealthiest circumstance and strive to rectify the *adharmic* behavior of others. What I learned was that compassion does not amount to standing by someone's side at all costs. Compassion is rooted in the understanding that the essential nature of everyone is the same awareness, and thus there is no one who is not worthy of our affection. Nevertheless, there are behaviors whose effect on one's self and others, such as children, for whose well-being we have a responsibility to do our best to ensure, that is too deleterious to abide. In the face of such behavior, the most compassionate action is to remove one's self and those for whom one is responsible from the situation. This will not only foster your own well-being as well as that of the others for whom you are responsible, but will also contribute to the growth of the addict. Despite the pain the addict will likely feel, the loss of loved one's will demonstrate the cost of the addiction and serve as a "wake-up call" that along with what will likely be a host of other painful consequences will eventually impel the addict to reassess his or her choices and possibly seek help. Thus compassion is a matter of unconditionally loving someone, a sentiment that is rooted in an understanding of the ignorance that is underlying the person's problematic behavior and not dismissing the person's essential worth because of it. It is not a matter of unconditionally putting up with the abusive or at least *adharmic* behavior that is the consequence of this ignorance. Simply put, compassion and *dharma* in general and compassion more specifically does not equate with feeling it is your duty to save anyone else. If your husband were to honestly ask for your help, it might well be that it is your duty as a wife to do your best to support his recovery. In the absence of any sincere cry for help, it might be best to seek other living arrangements.

Whether you choose to stay or leave, I highly recommend that you seek some support from a group like Alcoholics Anonymous. Though 12-step programs are not the same as Vedanta, they can be an invaluable support to self-inquiry, as they are highly effective means of helping one cultivate a *dharmic* lifestyle and cope with challenges that one faces within the context of the apparent reality, which is important since that is where we spend all of our time, and also cultivating the peace of mind that is conducive to engaging in effective self-inquiry and ultimately assimilating the truth.

My prayers are with you.

~ Ted