

How Do I Know I Am Doing My Duty?

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Henry: Hi, Ted. I hope all is well with you.

I had a question. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, VI.45, Krishna says, “*Aneka-janma-samsiddhis-tato yati param gatim*,” meaning, slowly graduates to perfection only by several births. “Even this attainment of Realisation after several births happens only by His Graceful Hand that lifts us up. Otherwise the ‘*bahu*’ of [VII.19] and the ‘*aneka*’ of [V.45] will be several times larger! The reason is: the goal is great and grand. ‘To become *Brahman*’ is something really great. But the one who wants to win that high prize is so small! Naturally, it has to take several several lifetimes. Just to conquer another kingdom like his own a king has to make elaborate preparations for war. When that is so, for a small man to win over the kingdom of *Brahman*-realization, he has to take enormous efforts. It is the kingdom of the *Atman* that the *Jiva* is set out to conquer!”

From one point of view the whole matter appears simple. We are not aiming for the kingdom of heaven in *Vaikuntha* or *Kailasa* which are far away from us. What we are aiming at is to know ourself, to know what is within us. Just to be what we are is the goal. There should not be any difficulty here because we are being asked to be what we are and nothing more. When it is said that way it looks simple. But when we attempt it we come to know there is nothing more difficult than this *Sadhana*. It is like walking on razor’s edge, says the *Katha Upanishad*. But don’t lose heart, adds the *Upanishad*. Wake up, there are excellent teachers to guide you. Even if it be razor’s edge you can walk on it and come out successful! Thus the *Upanishads* speak of the difficulties of the path but also give you the path. The *guru’s guru* of our *acharya* has also talked of these in very formidable terms. “*Advaita* is the only fearless state. Even great *yogis* fear to tread that path. It requires that fantastic effort of emptying the waters of the ocean by using blades of grass, soaking them in the water and shaking the water off from the ocean. Only by such unceasing effort can the mind empty itself of all its thoughts and be in the *Atman*.” Note: This is from *Mandukya Karika*, III.39, 41.

So my question through this long opening is: Does this have to do with our *svadharma* (self-duty)? And if so, how do I know that I’m doing “my” *svadharma* and not someone else’s... How do I know it’s “mine”?

~ Best wishes, Henry

Ted: Hi, Henry.

The passage you quote deals with *svadharma* in the sense that it articulates the idea that *sadhana*, spiritual practice that prepares the mind for the assimilation of self-knowledge, is one’s most essential duty.

The quest for gaining *moksa*, ultimate inner freedom, or freedom from dependence on objects for one’s sense of well-being and happiness, is the essential end underlying all human pursuits, which can be broadly categorized as the pursuits of security, pleasure and virtue. One who realizes that *moksa* is the ultimate and essential end of all other pursuits and moreover that the quest for it is a choiceless choice (i.e. that we are “wired” in such a way that we cannot not seek

freedom from discomfort, irritation, pain or any other sense of limitation, which is clearly evidenced by the fact that our every action, be it as small and immediate as scratching an itch or big and long-term as earning a master's degree, is executed with the intention of alleviating some degree of discomfort and limitation and thereby establishing a greater sense of comfort and freedom) has what is called *purushartha nishchaya*, clarity with regard to his or her purpose in life. This clarity is the key factor that enables one to consciously embrace and act in accordance with his or her *svadharma* and, more specifically, to undertake self-inquiry.

In more general terms, *svadharma* refers to one's personal duty, responsibility or obligation toward one's nature, class, social position, latent tendencies (i.e. *vasanas* and consequent proclivities or inclinations/interests, proficiencies or talents/skills, and preferences or likes/dislikes), place and time. Given this litany of influences, *svadharma* is more complex than simply "doing one's own thing."

Within the context of ancient Vedic culture and the *varna dharmas* (i.e. the caste system), which along with *ashrama dharmas* (i.e. the duties pertaining to the stages of life) served as the basis for social organization and personal duty, it was easy to identify one's role and its associated responsibilities. Because we don't live within the context of such a prescriptive system, however, many in the modern world are uncertain about what their *dharma* is. Westerners, who enjoy so much freedom of choice concerning what career path we wish to follow and at least the theoretical possibility of social mobility, are especially prone to this quandary.

It is important to act in accord with your personal nature in order to give expression to the *vasanas* obtaining in and lending character to your subtle body, both in order to be happy and to allow for the expression of those *vasanas* as a means of fostering your spiritual growth, for if you don't express the *vasanas* associated with your subtle body, you will prohibit the experience and eventual recognition of the limitations of object-oriented pursuits and thereby prevent yourself from ultimately neutralizing the binding nature of the desires that compel such pursuits. But we tend to over-think this aspect of life.

Your *svadharma* is essentially to do what is to be done within the context of any given circumstance or in the face of any given challenge. That is, your duty is to deal with whatever life presents you in a manner that is in keeping with *samanyas dharma*, or universal ethical law.

Because universal ethical laws are ideals that are impossible to adhere to without exception, you will most certainly have to interpret such laws according to the unique character of any given situation. For instance, observing the universal ethical norm of non-injury precludes one from physically harming another living being, which is inarguably a good practice in general. If a robber were to break into one's home and threaten one's own life and/or those of one's family members, however, would it not be permissible to wound or even kill the robber? Or while observing the principle of non-injury also pertains to refraining from inflicting harm with one's words and thus precludes us from slandering another person, would it not be permissible to hurt someone's feelings if a strong verbal rebuke was the only means to call their attention to some behavior they were exhibiting that was inappropriate, self-destructive or might even be hurtful to others? This subjective interpretation of universal ethical norms is called *visheshana dharmas*.

Your interpretation of universal ethical norms as well as the action the interpretation prompts you to take will be colored by your unique personality and values, but generally speaking, there is an innate sense of right and wrong with which we are all endowed that lets us know what we should do or what is the right thing to do in any given situation. Thus your *svadharma* involves both

following that inner prompting and doing so in a manner that accords with your personal demeanor and to the extent that it is appropriate (i.e. the extent to which it serves our own best interests as well as those of the total) accommodates your preferences and proclivities.

With regard to the question of how to be sure that you are doing your own *dharma* and not that of someone else, the fact of the matter is that you cannot do someone else's *dharma*. Your life is your life. The circumstances of your life and the situations you encounter within the context of those circumstances are unique to you. Moreover, your *vasana* load is unique as well, and so you will respond to those situations in a way that accords with your personality and set of values.

The bottom line is that your heart will tell you what to do, so to speak. Most often, we are drawn to activities and professions related to our particular skill set. While we may dream of being a professional athlete or a famous movie star, we usually find that we are – or at least can be if we are honest with ourselves about what we want and what we are willing to do to get what we want – happy with the circumstances of our life as they are.

Granted, if you have an artistic temperament, you will probably not be happy working in the pragmatic-minded corporate world, and vice versa. So it is advisable that you seek employment in an arena that befits your proclivities. But, as self-inquiry reveals, joy is not in the object. Or in the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, wherever you go, there you are. Whatever you are doing, you are still going to have to deal with yourself. And for this reason no set of circumstances is ever going to be free of its challenges. Moreover, because of its dualistic nature, life is a perpetual play of opposites, and so there are bound to be things you don't like within the context of any situation.

In any case, any role we assume – or as the case may be, that is thrust upon us – in life has certain responsibilities that go along with it. *Svadharmā* is most essentially about taking care of whatever responsibilities you happen to bear in a manner that your conscience tells you most accords with universal ethical norms. Making this determination and, more importantly, enacting it through your words and deeds, requires courage and honesty. You have to be willing to set aside your personal agenda in service of what you know is both morally right and appropriate to the role you are playing within the context of the particular situation you find yourself. In this way, *svadharmā* is quite similar to *karma yoga*, and thus is the essential means by which you can neutralize the binding *vasanas* that agitate the mind and prevent you from recognizing and abiding in your true nature.

In short, *svadharmā* is not so much what you do, but how (i.e. the understanding and attitude with which) you do it.