

The *Svadharm*a Dilemma

Ted Schmidt

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Jack: Hi, Ted.

In *Tattva Bodha*, video 7, James says: "Until you do your duty/*dharm*a in the world *Isvara* will not let you have *moksa*." If this is true, how do I know if I'm doing my *svadharm*a here?

Is it just taking care of my duties and responsibilities with what I am doing with a *karm*a *yog*a attitude? Or is there a specific *svadharm*a in this world I need to do first?

Ted: The topic of *svadharm*a is problematic for Westerners because our lifestyle is based on fulfilling our desires rather than doing our duty. You can assume that your *svadharm*a is the role you are currently playing, unless you know deep down that what you are doing really does not jive with who you are, which in this case means the personality of the apparent individual you seem to be.

James makes this statement because so many people are driven by a sense of being something different from what they are. For instance, an artist foregoes his love for painting and takes a job in the business world because he fears he will not make enough money to be comfortable. Or a gay person denies his sexuality because he fears the disapproval of his family, friends and colleagues or has bought into the brainwashing that it is somehow immoral or "against God."

In extreme cases like this, one needs to take a look at the desires and fears that are preying upon one's soul, accept the fact that one has a unique role to play in the drama of life and get on with it.

The point isn't that we should abandon our current line of work if we don't feel totally satisfied with it. That is an option of course, but if one is going to do that, one needs to first look at the cause of the dissatisfaction. Is it really the job? Or is it the sense of incompleteness and inadequacy that are the consequence of self-ignorance? Then, if one still decides that making a career or lifestyle change would be in one's best interest, one should use common sense and make the shift in a responsible manner.

In this regard, the purpose of observing *svadharm*a is to cultivate a quiet mind. If the mind is continuously agitated because one feels one is doing the wrong thing, then it will never be calm and focused enough to engage in effective self-inquiry.

The concept of *svadharm*a is rooted in the Vedic culture, where there existed clearly defined responsibilities to uphold with regard to *ashram*a *dharm*a, one's stage in life (i.e. *brahmacharya*, student; *grihastha*, householder; *vanaprastha*, retiree; *sannyasa*, renunciant) and *varn*a *dharm*a, one's place in society (i.e. Brahmin, priest; Kshatriya, ruler-administrator-warrior; Vaishya, artisan-merchant-tradesman-farmer; Shudra, laborer). One naturally evolved through the stages of life, and one was naturally inclined due to one's disposition to a particular duty or role in society. Though the caste system became corrupted over the centuries, one's role in Vedic society was not originally a matter solely determined by the family into which one was born. Rather it was determined by one's *gun*a make-up, which manifested as one's personality,

proclivities and aptitudes. At any rate, there was a much clearer picture of what one's role in society was given these parameters. So it was much easier to know what one was to do.

The purpose of upholding *svadharma* in terms of self-inquiry is that provides a litmus test for the *dharmic* nature or integrity of one's actions. Rather than allowing one's *vasanas* to determine what one should do, one gives precedence to one's duty. This can get a little complex because we play many different roles depending on our life circumstances (e.g. child, parent, spouse, friend, lover, employee, boss), and sometimes the duties required by each seem to conflict with one another. But generally it is pretty easy to identify what we should do in any given circumstance. We are all hardwired with a sense of universal ethical norms that clearly indicate what is right and wrong (e.g. we know we shouldn't kill or rob or betray others). If we let our conscience be our guide and use common sense, we usually pretty safe. The only thing that muddies the waters is our binding *vasanas*, those compelling desires that are difficult – seemingly impossible in some cases – to resist. If we stick to our duty rather than succumbing to the influence of these desires, however, then over time we are able to weaken their hold over us and eventually get free of them. And it is only when we are free of binding *vasanas* that we will gain *moksa*.

Jack: I enjoy what I do right now but only do it for the money, and that it gives me time to pursue *moksa* and inquire because I work from home. I'm a marketing writer, but a part of me has always yearned to write stories/screenplays, but money was more important and had a talent for marketing writing.

Jack has always doubted what his purpose here is. Yet now that he's hearing Vedanta, *moksa* is what is most wanted. Yet when I hear comments likes James', along with the practical parts of paying bills, etc. Jack wonders if he's doing the right work. After inquiring it seems so, but I'd love your thoughts if I'm missing something.

Any help would be greatly appreciated.

Ted: It sounds like you are doing exactly the right thing. Your career may not be the work you yearned to do, but it affords you the time to engage in self-inquiry. If you truly want to write and feel you cannot be happy without quitting your current job and pursuing a career as a writer, then go for it. But if your top priority is *moksa*, then it might be better to stick with what you are doing rather than putting so much effort into creating a different life circumstance. For one thing, all the issues related to making the change could potentially disturb the mind and thus circumvent self-inquiry. For another, as the objective phenomenon that it is, any new life circumstance will only provide limited fulfillment. I can't tell you what career is best for you or what your *svadharma* is. But if *moksa* is your top priority, my advice is that you do whatever will best support the process of self-inquiry.