

THE BIG IDEAS



What Is Dharma?

In short: Your sacred duty.

The Path of Action

Four keys.

Decide

Cut off all other options.

The Right Conditions

Create them.

When Difficulties Arise

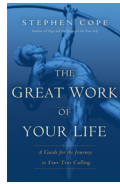
See them as dharma.

Training Elephants

Mantras and focus.

Reduce Yourself to Zero

Enter: Soul Force.



The Great Work of Your Life

A Guide for the Journey to Your True Calling

BY STEPHEN COPE · BANTAM © 2012 · 304 PAGES

“The yoga tradition is very, very interested in the idea of an inner possibility harbored within every human soul. Yogis insist that every single human being has a unique vocation. They call this *dharma*. Dharma is a potent Sanskrit word that is packed tight with meaning, like one of those little sponge animals that expands to six times its original size when you add water. Dharma means, variously, ‘path,’ ‘teaching,’ or ‘law.’ For our purposes in this book it will mean primarily, ‘vocation,’ or ‘sacred duty.’ It means, most of all—and in all cases—*truth*. Yogis believe that our greatest responsibility in life is to this inner possibility—this dharma—and they believe that every human being’s duty is to utterly, fully, and completely embody his own idiosyncratic dharma..”

Come with me, then, and with my fellow students of fulfillment as we tell the story of Krishna and Arjuna, and as we tell stories of great lives that vividly reflect the principles of living as they are laid out in the Bhagavad Gita. Bring your fears and neuroses and doubts; do not leave that excellent fodder behind. Bring your desperation and your most ardent wishes for a full life. Gather ’round the fire with the rest of us ordinary human beings, as we investigate the not-so-far-fetched possibility of becoming fully alive.”

~ Stephen Cope from *The Great Work of Your Life*

Stephen Cope is the director of the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living—the largest yoga research institute in the Western world. As the Senior Scholar in Residence at Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, he has been integrating Eastern contemplative traditions and Western philosophy and psychology for years.

In this great book, Stephen brings the Bhagavad Gita to life and helps us apply this ancient wisdom to our modern lives as he shares the key aspects of discovering and living our dharma.

The Bhagavad Gita (see Notes) is set on an ancient battlefield and features the great warrior Arjuna receiving wisdom from his divine mentor (and charioteer), Krishna. Arjuna is paralyzed with doubt. Krishna instructs him on how to live his dharma and honor his sacred duty.

Of course, the wisdom offered applies to ALL of us and Stephen shows us precisely how while sharing the dharmic journeys of extraordinary people including Jane Goodall, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, and Gandhi.

It’s a beautiful, super inspiring book. If you’re looking to discover the great work of YOUR life, I think you’ll really enjoy it—especially if you’re a practitioner of yoga! (Get the book [here](#).)

I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump straight in!

“ Every man has a vocation to be someone: but he must understand clearly that in order to fulfill this vocation he can only be one person: himself.”

~ Thomas Merton

WHAT IS DHARMA?

*"At the end of life, most of us will find that we have felt most filled up by the challenges and successful struggles for mastery, creativity, and full expression of our dharma in the world. Fulfillment happens not in *retreat* from the world, but in *advance*-and profound engagement."*

~ Stephen Cope

"The Sanskrit word 'dharma' as used in the Bhagavad Gita, is so full of meaning that it is impossible to grasp its full scope through any single English translation. 'Dharma' can be variously, but incompletely, translated as 'religious and moral law,' 'right conduct,' 'sacred duty,' 'path of righteousness,' 'true nature,' and 'divine order.'

René Guénon, in his classic *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, comes as close as any author to the meaning of dharma as we will use it here. 'Dharma,' he says, 'is the essential nature of a being, comprising the sum of its particular qualities or characteristics, and determining, by virtue of the tendencies or dispositions it implies, the manner in which this being will conduct itself, either in a general way or in relation to each particular circumstance.' The word dharma in this teaching, then, refers to the *peculiar and idiosyncratic qualities of each being*—those very essential and particular qualities that make it somehow *itself*."

Dharma.

I just LOVE that word.

And I love each of those nuanced definitions.

Our dharma is that constellation of "*peculiar and idiosyncratic qualities of each being*." It's the "*very essential and particular qualities that make it somehow itself*."

In short: It's what makes us us.

And, if we want to feel radiantly and joyfully and enthusiastically alive, it's *very* wise to live in integrity with that essence.

Challenging us and helping us do that is, of course, what this book is all about.

Now let's look at how we go about doing that.

There are four primary parts to the puzzle. Here they are:

THE CENTRAL PILLARS OF THE PATH OF ACTION

"Here are the central pillars of the path of action—the path of karma yoga—as expounded by Krishna. Here are the keys to Inaction-in-Action:

1. *Look to your dharma.*
2. *Do it full out.*
3. *Let go of the fruits.*
4. *Turn it over to God.*

First: Discern your dharma. 'Look to your own duty,' says Krishna in Chapter Two. 'Do not tremble before it.' Discern, name, and then embrace your own dharma.

Then: Do it full out. Knowing your dharma, do it with every fiber of your being. Bring everything you've got to it. Commit yourself utterly. In this way you can live an authentically passionate life, and you can transform desire into a bonfire of light.

Next: Let go of the outcome. 'Relinquish the fruits of your actions,' says Krishna. Success and failure in the eyes of the world are not your concern. 'It is better to fail at your own dharma than to succeed at the dharma of someone else,' he says.

Finally: Turn your actions over to God. 'Dedicate your actions to me,' says Krishna. All true vocation arises in the stream of love that flows between the individual soul and the divine soul. All true dharma is a movement of the soul back to its Ground."

"In fact, the Bhagavad Gita was written precisely to show us how to make the world of action (the marketplace, the workplace, the family) an arena for spiritual development. Indeed, it portrays the 'battlefield' of life—real life, everyday life—as the most potent venue for transformation."

~ Stephen Cope

Those are the four central tenets of fulfilling our sacred duty.

The book is organized around helping us master each key.

Four quick questions:

1. What is your dharma?
2. Are you living it full out?
3. Have you let go of the outcome and committed to simply showing up fully?
4. And, finally, have you turned it all over to God?

DECIDE

"Naturally, there is an obstacle to all this wonderment. Alas, it turns out that the process of unification requires saying 'no' to actions that do not support dharma—saying 'no' to detours, and to side channels of all kinds, even to some pretty terrific side channels. It requires snipping off all manner of 'other options.' The root of the word 'decide' means, literally, 'to cut off.' To decide for something means at times to decide *against* something else."

Decide.

The Latin root of the word: *de-* 'off' + *caedere* 'cut.'

If we want to live our dharma full out, we MUST (!!!) cut off other options and unify our energy in the direction of our chosen sacred duty.

We can view this on a macro and a micro level.

Macro-wise, we need to decide what our big picture dharma is and decide what will be cut off. You can't do *everything.* We need to be willing to say "no" to some good stuff to create the space for the great.

For me, that meant cutting off my role as an administrative CEO creating a business that allowed hundreds of teachers to share their wisdom and focusing ALL (!) of my energy on my work as a teacher.

For you?

Micro-wise, we need to eliminate all distractions on a day-to-day level. We need to know what our masterpiece days look like that, if executed consistently over the long run, naturally lead to the successful achievement of our aspired outcome. We need to know when we do our best work, how we distract ourselves and FOCUS all of our energy on consistently showing up fully.

That also requires a strong and healthy "No" to all other little projects that sound great but aren't quite it.

How are you doing with this? Have you said a big enough "YES!!" to your primary project and taken the time to truly map out your ideal day and then disciplined yourself to execute it more and more consistently?

One good decision in the process of arriving at this clarity is to cut off the TV and obsessive Internet time. Might want to literally "cut off" the power by unplugging your cable for periods of time each day.

Stephen shares Robert Frost's extraordinarily inspiring story in the context of focusing our energy. (He set his entire life up to become a poet: buying a farm early in his career then moving to London a little later to give himself most fully to his work.)

Keep this passage from "The Road Not Taken" in mind as you contemplate your decisions:

"The Call" is an archetype of the spiritual imagination. It is nothing less than the call to be absolutely yourself."

~ Stephen Cope

*"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."*

On that note, let's take a deeper look at what Frost and other heroes did to create the proper conditions for their dharma to flourish.

CREATE THE RIGHT CONDITIONS

"Frost's genius—like Thoreau's, like Goodall's, like Whitman's—was at least in part his willingness to create the right conditions for his dharma to issue forth. His dharma required a farm—and so he bought one. His dharma required him to give up teaching—and so he relinquished it. His dharma required a period of intense work in England—and so he went.

Like Frost's our job is to make choices that create the right conditions for dharma to flourish. The Gift is indestructible. It is a seed. We are not required to be God. We are not required to create the seed. Only to plant it wisely and well."

God has given us The Gift. That seed is indestructible. It is at the nexus of our talents, our passions and our opportunities to profoundly serve the needs of our world.

Our job is to create the conditions in which that potential can actualize.

For Robert Frost, that meant deciding to be a poet and then creating the circumstances for that to flourish. After failing to fit in in New York City, Thoreau set up the right conditions at Walden pond. Goodall moved to Africa to study chimps. Whitman threw himself into serving wounded Civil War soldiers. Beethoven's days were architected to maximize his energy and productivity.

As Stephen advises: "Having first named and claimed our dharma, we next begin to systematically organize all of our life's energies around our calling."

What conditions do YOU need to flourish?

This is how I can plant and tend the seed of my Gift: _____

Fantastic. What's your next baby step?

WHEN DIFFICULTIES ARISE, SEE THEM AS DHARMA

"The great Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called this experience of aversion 'the pain of pain.' Pain is inevitable, of course. And aversion is a natural response to it. But aversion to the aversion? This is not inevitable, as it turns out. And the kicker: The aversion to the aversion is where the *real* suffering lies. As my friend the American Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein says so often: Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional..."

When difficulties arise, see them as dharma. This does not come naturally to us. Our instinct is to avoid discomfort at every turn. And we live in a culture that helps us distract ourselves from discomfort's every manifestation."

Part I of this Big Idea: We need to realize that it's our resistance to our pain that leads to the deepest suffering.

As Boorstein says: Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.

"When she [Susan B. Anthony] was once asked, 'Do you pray?' she responded, 'I pray every second of my life; not on my knees but with my work. My prayer is to lift women to equality with men. Work and worship are one with me.'"

~ Stephen Cope

"These great exemplars of dharma each took a craftsmanlike view toward life: Do your daily duty, and let the rest go. Poke away systematically at your little calling. Tend the garden a little bit every day. You do not have to exhaust yourself with great acts. Show up for your duty, for your dharma. Then let it go."

~ Stephen Cope

This echoes the wisdom from Kristin Neff's great book *Self-Compassion* ([see Notes](#)) where she tells us: "I once went on a meditation retreat with a wonderful teacher named Shinzen Young, who gave me words of wisdom that I'll never forget. He said that the key to happiness was understanding that suffering is caused by resisting pain. We can't avoid pain in life, he said, but we don't necessarily have to suffer because of that pain... he chose to express these words of wisdom with an equation: 'Suffering = Pain x Resistance.' He then added, 'Actually, it's an exponential rather than a multiplicative relationship.' His point was that we can distinguish between the normal pain of life—difficult emotions, physical discomfort, and so on—and actual suffering, which is the mental anguish caused by fighting against the fact that life is sometimes painful."

Pain is inevitable. Accept that. Work with it. Learn from it. And thereby reduce your suffering and save that wasted energy for your growth and wisdom.

That leads us to the second part of this Idea: "When difficulties arise, see them as dharma."

Our society CONSTANTLY gives us a million distractions and numbing agents to our slightest discomfort.

But what if, rather than turn away from that which challenges us, we leaned into it?

Ryan Holiday would tell us that *The Obstacle Is the Way* ([see those Notes](#)). While Alex Lickerman describes it as turning poison into medicine and tells us (see Notes on [The Undefeated Mind](#)): "From the Buddhist perspective, I told him, all of us have the capacity to make use of any circumstance, no matter how awful, to create value. This ability to 'change poison into medicine,' as it is known in Nichiren Buddhism, makes plausible the transformation of even the most horrific tragedy into something that enables us to become happier. . . ."

Believing in your ability to transform poison into medicine when you don't know how, and often won't except in retrospect, is difficult, I admit. But that's the confidence you have to find. That's the confidence that represents your greatest defense against discouragement."

Are you resisting any challenges in our life and thereby increasing the pain? How can you use this challenge to your benefit by seeing all the ways it's making you stronger? Let's turn poison into medicine.

THE WISE ELEPHANT TRAINER

"But the wise elephant trainer,' said Rambha, 'will give the elephant a stick of bamboo to hold in his trunk. The elephant likes this. He holds it fast. And as soon as the elephant wraps his trunk around the bamboo, the trunk begins to settle. Now the elephant strides through the market like a prince: calm, collected, focused, serene. Bananas and coconuts no longer distract."

Rambha was the woman who helped take care of Gandhi when he was a child.

Gandhi was a terrified little guy and Rambha taught him how to control his mind. Just as an untrained elephant will go nuts knocking everything over when he visits the market, so, too, will our untrained minds grasp and knock things over in our lives.

As Rambha advised Gandhi, the wise elephant trainer gives the elephant a stick of bamboo. The wise human training his mind gives himself something to focus on as well.

In Gandhi's case, that was a mantra: *Rama, Rama, Rama*. (One of the names of God in the Hindu tradition.)

Mantra literally means "tool of the mind" and, as Stephen tells us: "When done systematically, mantra has a powerful effect on the brain. It gathers and focuses the energy of the mind. It teaches the mind to focus on one point, and it cultivates a steadiness that over time becomes an unshakable evenness of temper."

"We work first because we have to work. Then because we want to work. Then because we love the work. Then the work simply does us. Difficult at the beginning. Inevitable at the end."

~ Stephen Cope

We need to focus OUR minds. We can do that via a mantra. We can also do that via clear goals and a clear sense of our masterpiece days and what needs to be done next. Holding that bamboo stick in our trunk, we don't grab every distraction as we go through our days. Rather, we walk through our lives like a prince: calm, collected, focused and serene.

REDUCING YOURSELF TO ZERO

"Gandhi came to believe that any power he might have to affect the world only emerged when he got himself out of the way, and let God do the work. He came to call this 'reducing yourself to zero.' 'There comes a time,' he wrote in the peak of his maturity, 'when an individual becomes irresistible and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effects. This comes when he reduces himself to zero.'"

Gandhi is the hero featured in the final chapter of the book. The Gita was his primary guide and he was perhaps the greatest demonstration of its power made manifest in the world.

His concept of "reducing yourself to zero" is also the perfect description of the fourth key to living our dharma: to turn it all over to God.

Note: This takes EXTRAORDINARY (!!!) discipline. Many people miss this fact. Letting go of your egoic, small self requires you first have a grasp on it.

As we master ourselves—optimizing our lives and actualizing our potential—we are in a position to transcend ourselves and turn it all over to God, creating what Gandhi called "Soul Force" that becomes irresistible.

Here's to doing the great work of our lives as we honor our sacred duties!!!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.