



Week 1 Lesson:

The Dharmic Life

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

~ Mary Oliver ~

How will I live? is a question that has been with me since childhood. Beyond what children are often asked about what we want to “be” or “do” when we grow up, I remember deeper pondering about the nature of my life. I wondered, not so much what I would *do*, but *how* I should, or could, live. While some of that soul-searching was innate, as it is for all of us, it was also brought into sharp focus for me by my grandmother. She was my first spiritual teacher.

In simple, but highly impactful, ways my grandmother consistently invited me to live in the highest way. Often, it would be a short course correction, a few poignant words with power that impressed me at the time and remained with me after. When I was about ten years old, I began to feel the press of the world—many things I thought were important occupied my mind. There was school work, after-school clubs and projects, obligations with friends, and chores at home. One day, my grandmother asked me to do something. I don’t remember what she wanted me to do, but I remember my reply, and the lesson that ensued. I told her I couldn’t possibly do what she asked and offered as my excuse what I thought was truly an impressive list of what I already had to do. I can still hear her say to me, “There are only two things you have to do: you have to breathe, and you have to live until you die. So, how will you live?” Imagine the blessing of being ten years old and having someone you love reveal to you that you have a choice about how you



will live. Even as a child, her words encouraged me to consider my life from the inside out, rather than from the outside in. I did not have to live at the effect of circumstances. That was a choice I was making. My life was to be bigger than that. I could be greater than that.

Fast forward several decades. When I found the path of Kriya Yoga and the ancient Vedic wisdom that informs it, I discovered basic how-to-live teachings that helped me realize the spiritually conscious life of my grandmother's lessons. In Vedic teachings, this conscious life is called a *dharmic life*. To live a dharmic life is to live with a sense of higher purpose. That higher purpose is to awaken fully to our true nature and express it—to fulfill our divine potential and live in harmony with divine will. Dharmic living is spiritually conscious, purposeful, inspired, creative living. It rests on

knowing that a divine benevolent power runs the entire universe and we can learn to consciously cooperate with it. That divine power naturally supports the fulfillment of its purpose. Everything in nature has a place and purpose. Everything comes into expression with purpose and potential. For human beings that purpose is to know the truth about our existence as spiritual beings. The potential that accompanies our purpose is the ability to express our innate divine qualities such as wisdom, compassion, or creativity. Our life is meant to be lived from the inside out—drawing upon the soul's divine qualities and bringing them forth. Guided by the soul's wisdom, living in a way that brings joy to our heart and peace to others.

The Vedic Plan for Dharmic Living

There are four principal goals in the Vedic plan for dharmic living. The first goal for a spiritually conscious, fulfilled life is dharma itself. The goal of dharma is a life of higher purpose, living in harmony with spiritual and natural law. The Sanskrit word *dharmā* is like the word *yoga*. Both words hold profound spiritual meaning with nuances that cannot accurately be translated into



English. Without a direct English translation for either word, we use many words trying to describe them. Dharma means purpose, specifically higher, or spiritual purpose. It is often described as “the way of righteousness,” meaning the fundamental order of the universe at both the gross and subtle levels. The dharmic way is to live in harmony with that fundamental order; perhaps we could call it the Tao! Dharma also means “support,” which refers to its literal meaning as “what holds together,” from the root verb *dhr*, “to uphold, to establish, to support.” It can refer to what is ours to do. It is a word fast entering the English lexicon. You may hear someone say, “It’s my dharma,” meaning, “It’s my life purpose,” or “it is mine to do.” Dharma is generally looked upon as twofold—our overarching dharma to awaken and fulfill our spiritual purpose (which is common to all), and that which is *specifically* ours to do or express. This is often referred to as *svadharma*. We’ll explore that further in the weeks ahead.

Dharma is usually listed first as the foundational aim of life, followed by *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*. *Artha* means wealth, prosperity, or means. This universal life goal is learning how to meet our needs in life and skillfully acquire whatever is needed to fulfill our purpose. Artha is for the sake of dharma, not for its own sake. *Kama* means pleasure. It indicates that a fulfilled life is one that is enjoyed. Since joy is natural to the soul, kama points us toward our full aliveness—expressing the soul. Kama, as well as artha, is meant to serve dharma. If we do not find any joy in what we do, whether it is our spiritual practice or our work in the world, we are not likely to follow through with it. Pleasure and suffering are both indicators of being fully alive, a mode in which we can reach our potential. The fourth aim in the Vedic system is *moksha*, liberation of consciousness—the freedom that naturally arises from Self-realization.

The first step in dharmic living is readiness to live a spiritually conscious life, a decision to embrace life’s four universal goals and begin considering them as a framework for success. This may be an entirely new view of success, with new questions to ask and new benchmarks to

Dharma 365!

A Year of Living Purposefully



consider. Instead of measuring how much we have acquired, produced, or accomplished, we begin to ask: *What do I see as my life purpose? Am I living it?*

The beautiful blessing of a dharmic life is that it is not an accomplishment, not something we ultimately arrive at. Instead, it is the way we live with spiritual purpose, any time we choose to begin. Of course, there is much to learn about what that requires of us, but once we step on the path, Life itself supports us. Dharmic living is joyous learning by surrendered doing. There is no other way.

Paramahansa Yogananda wrote, “You must not let your life run in the ordinary way; do something that nobody else has done, something that will dazzle the world. Show that God's creative principle works in you.” Showing God’s creative principle at work in our lives by doing something that nobody else has done is dharmic living. It is learning how to cooperate with the power that runs the universe and surrendering to its impulse to express through us. No longer living by the press of circumstances, we live by the soul’s radical inclination to fulfill its potential.



Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper? ...

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

*with your one wild and precious life?*¹

¹ *The Summer Day* from [New and Selected Poems](#), 1992 Beacon Press, Boston, MA
Copyright 1992 by Mary Oliver



Lesson Journal:

What does dharmic living mean to me? How do I envision living with higher purpose?

*Am I aware of an innate soul yearning to fulfill my potential? How does that yearning manifest?
In what ways do I experience it?*

What is my response to the declarations in this lesson: I did not have to live at the effect of circumstances. That was a choice I was making. My life was to be bigger than that. I could be greater than that. Is this true for me?

What might a “bigger” or “greater” life be for me?