



Finding Your Dharma as a Path to Yogic Healing Part 1

Helping your students discover their purpose in life can be a vital component of yogic healing.

by Timothy McCall, MD

You might not think that helping your students find their dharma, or life purpose, could play a major role in their recovery from illness, but in my experience it can. One of the things I discovered in interviewing the dozens of students who served as the case histories for my book *Yoga as Medicine* is that almost every one of them had gone through some kind of major life change during the course of their yoga therapy. They switched careers, left dysfunctional work or personal relationships, and often tried to find a way to give something back, to make the world a better place.

The Bhagavad Gita, India's beloved ancient scripture, speaks in detail about dharma. Krishna, in advising the reluctant warrior Arjuna, tells him that it is better to do your own dharma poorly than to do someone else's well. Only when you figure out what you are uniquely able to do, and carry it out as well as you can, can you truly feel fulfilled in this life. Your dharma need not be lofty, but it should be something that feels right to you, and something that in one way or another makes a contribution. Your calling might be, for example, to be a painter who brings joy to other's lives through your work. Or to work in a nonprofit, bringing vital services to those who otherwise might not get them. Or maybe it's to be the best parent you can be to your children.

The Connection Between Living Your Dharma and Health

When you aren't doing what you're supposed to, life can feel pointless. When your existence feels empty, or even just vaguely unsatisfactory, it can be difficult to thrive physically and emotionally over the long haul. You choose the habits that can lead to either health or disease, and someone lacking a sense of purpose may have a tough time finding the self-motivation to make healthy lifestyle decisions regarding diet and exercise. Boredom and restlessness can make the abuse of drugs, tobacco, and alcohol seem more alluring.



Although, as far as I know, the question hasn't been studied scientifically, my guess is that those who lack a sense of meaning are also more likely to have their stress-response systems activated in a constant or repeated way, which is known to undermine health in myriad ways (see *Yoga for Stress and Burnout*). If this speculation proves correct—and the theory does seem to fit the facts—we would expect a higher incidence of emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression, among those who haven't figured out their life's purpose. We could also expect a wide variety of other maladies, from high blood pressure to autoimmune disease, since the mind can play a prominent role both in causation and, in those who can use the mind to foster relaxation and insight, healing of these and most other illnesses.

Look Within

Although they may try, no one else can tell you what your dharma is. Indeed, when someone else is pressuring you to make a certain life choice, it usually reflects what they want for you, not what you want or need. While some enlightened masters may correctly apprehend what's best for their students, in general a yoga therapist shouldn't be trying to figure out their students' dharma so much as providing the tools that help their students figure it out for themselves.

Yoga teaches that all questions involving intuition or wisdom—and finding your dharma is a case in point—are accessed from within. It's hard to hear the voice of intuition, however, in the din of the busy world, especially when your mind is busy, too. So the first step in helping your students find their dharma is to give them practices to quiet the mind. A variety of yogic tools, from asana to pranayama to chanting, can do this.

What you are trying to do is facilitate pratyahara, the turning of the senses inward. The breath is crucial in this regard, because it is the direct link to the autonomic nervous system, which includes both sympathetic and parasympathetic branches. Make the breath slower, deeper, and smoother, and you calm the nervous system. Calm the nervous system, and you begin to calm the mind. Calm the mind, and the voice of inner knowing becomes more audible.

For students who are ready for it, meditation is probably the most powerful yogic tool for studying the mind and accessing inner wisdom. Many people give up on meditation too early, though, because they think the busy mind they notice when they try to sit means they aren't "doing it right" and therefore aren't benefitting from the practice. The fact is, recognizing the nonstop chatter of your mind is the



first step toward quieting it down. And studies have demonstrated that even those who feel like they "can't meditate" show physiologic benefits from making the effort. Meditation tends to unfold its benefits slowly over the months and years. It may feel torturous at first, but to those who can stay with a regular practice, ideally for at least 20 minutes every day, profound changes can occur, not the least of which may be a growing sense of what you are here to do.

In Part 2, we'll discuss in more detail how to help your students find their dharma and bring it into reality.



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