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Dharma, Ethics, and Right Action

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Nearing the end of a period of exile in the forest, the five Pandava brothers find themselves in dire need of water. The eldest, Yudhisthira, sends his brother, Nakula, in search of water. After a time, Nakula comes upon a shimmering lake filled with vibrant lilies and lotuses. Eager to quench his thirst and gather water for his brothers, he rushes toward the lake. A booming voice surrounds him: "Do not take this water. It is my property, and taking it without permission is an act of violence. Answer my questions first, and then you may have as much water as you would like."

Nakula, desperate for a drink, does not heed this warning. Upon tasting the water, he collapses on the lake shore. Eventually, when Nakula does not return, Yudhisthira sends another brother in search of Nakula and of water. One by one, each brother leaves to find water and, disregarding the voice's warning, succumbs to his thirst and collapses beside the lake.

When none of his brothers return, Yudhisthira, fraught with worry, goes in search of them. Upon seeing the glistening lake, he is overjoyed and rushes to the water. He then notices his lifeless brothers. Incredulous and distressed, he wonders who or what could have caused this calamity to befall his great and powerful family.

The booming voice addresses Yudhisthira: "Do not take this water without my permission. It is my property, and taking it without answering my questions is an act of violence. Your brothers did not listen to me and tried to take what is mine. If you answer my questions, you can have as much water as you like."

Yudhisthira, the son and representation of Dharma through the epic, replies, "I do not covet what is yours, nor do I wish to take what is not mine. We all must answer for our actions. I will answer your questions."

Yudhisthira satisfactorily answers each question—a dialogue that itself constitutes a wide-ranging discourse on wisdom, truth, and spirituality—and is given a reward of choosing one brother to revive. Surprisingly, Yudhisthira chooses Nakula rather than Bhima with his incomparable strength or Arjuna with his legendary warriorship.

Yudhisthira offers his reasoning: "Nonharming and noncruelty are the highest of virtues, which I will always uphold. When we sacrifice this virtue we sacrifice ourselves, and so I will not violate this. I will not harm, nor will I be cruel—Nakula shall live." The brothers, all raised together, were born of two mothers, and Yudhisthira explains that it would be cruel to allow only sons of Kunti—himself, Bhima, and Arjuna—to live. The choice of Nakula, a son of Madri, gives both mothers surviving offspring and thus upholds the virtue of nonharming.

Because Yudhisthira values nonharming above profit or pleasure, he is given another reward—all of his brothers will be restored to life. Dharma reveals himself to be the one who has been questioning Yudhisthira, saying he wanted to come and see his son, and to test him. Dharma is pleased at his son's commitment, understanding, and application of nonharming and grants him three more favors. For the final favor, Yudhisthira asks for the virtues of good character such as an ability to overcome anger and a mind devoted to charity, truth, and austerity.

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Dharma grants him these virtues, then explains that merits like truth, self-control, purity, uprightness, modesty, steadfastness, and charity constitute dharma itself. The doorways through which one can enter into dharma include the practice of virtues such as nonharming, noncruelty, freedom from malice, equanimity, tranquility, and purity.

Adapted from translations by J. A. B. van Buitenen,
K. Ganguli, and K. Dharma[1]

Dharma: A Framework for Action and Pinnacle Human Aim

The characters of the Mahabharata are presented with various situations that ask them to grapple with the enigma of dharma. In *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Wendy Doniger writes that the epic helps to both "deconstruct" and

"problematicize" dharma. Dharma is described as a subtle, malleable, inconsistent, and vague construct[2]; its nuances and fluidity can only be revealed through practical application in the trials of life.

Life provides the ultimate testing ground for moving from an abstract theory of dharma to a meaningful and useful foundation from which to make decisions. Throughout the epic, the Mahabharata's characters are challenged to simultaneously uphold virtue and follow dharma in the face of complex, potentially problematic situations. These situations afford readers the opportunity to contemplate dharma's meaning as a practical philosophy of living.

The Sanskrit root of the word *dharma*—dhr, to sustain—sheds some light on its complex meaning.[3] Essentially, any endeavor that sustains both the individual and the world around her is a practice of dharma.[4] Richard Miller describes the word dharma from its root, ṛta, to be in harmony with the totality of the universe.[5] When our way of living is congruent with our dharma, we can sense the same feeling of harmony within ourselves as we align with universal harmony. These more general definitions are key to applying dharma across circumstances and over time. They help us to understand dharma as a pinnacle aim or intention from which to base conscious decisions. Moreover, considering dharma in this way helps us to undertake actions that support ourselves within a context of harmony that extends to others and the surrounding environment.

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A Guide to "Right Action"

Dharma provides a backdrop through which we can foster the discernment to determine the right action to take in response to life situations. Each time the characters of the Mahabharata are presented with a problem and have difficulty discerning right action for the given context, they are advised to take the action that will benefit, support, or sustain both themselves and the world.[6] These stories provide concrete examples to help us move from abstract ideas of what might be "right" or "good" in a given situation to practical application of dharma. Each instance clarifies the alignment with dharma that guides right action.

Practicing virtues and ethical qualities such as nonharming, equanimity, and tranquility is taught as a way to actualize the harmony of dharma, as demonstrated in the story at the beginning of this chapter. These virtues form intentional practices that can direct us toward action that supports the realization of dharma.[7] In yogic teachings, the yamas and niyamas essentially comprise the practice of these virtues in reference to interaction with oneself

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and the world. For example, working with the yama of *ahimsa* may mean asking a client to explore what it means to be nonharming to the body, mind, and other beings. In this way we can create an embodied, applied meaning of these virtues, or ethical practices.

Practice 2.1 Virtues and Dharma

Sit in a comfortable and relaxing space with a journal or piece of paper. Take a few breaths and elongate the exhale. Notice the body, scanning from the top of the head to the feet. Note any areas of tension and slowly cultivate an intention to relax these areas; allow each exhalation to help release tension.

Dharma is that which sustains you and the world around you. It is experienced as both inner and outer harmony and is comprised of such characteristics as truth or steadfastness. What do these concepts mean to you?

Choose one or two of these ideas:

- truth;
- steadfastness;
- that which supports and sustains you and the surrounding world; or
- inner and outer harmony.

What does it feel like to connect to these concepts in this moment? Where do you notice them in your body? Is there a color or image that presents itself as the recognition of these characteristics? Breathe into that space of truth, steadfastness, sustenance, or harmony and allow it to become tangible—something that you can lean into and trust.

Write down any notes about that space—words, images, affirmations.

The practice of the virtues, including nonharming, equanimity, and contentment, helps to strengthen or reinforce dharma. Choose one of these virtues to explore. What is its feeling, shape, image? Where is it in your body? Let the quality you have chosen become tangible. What does it feel like? What happens to your muscles, posture, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs?

Notice your relationship with yourself as you practice the virtues and align with dharma—that which supports and sustains you, inner and outer harmony. What would it mean to walk around for a day embodying the characteristics of dharma and the qualities of nonharming, equanimity,

and contentment? What thoughts and beliefs would you hold? How would you interact with others? How would you speak? What would you do?

Over the next week, explore what it means to stay connected to this idea of dharma as that which sustains you, inner and outer harmony, and truth. Notice how the practice of the chosen virtue may assist in this alignment with dharma. Notice how this awareness affects you in terms of muscle tone and tension, postures, thoughts, emotions, energy levels, beliefs, and relationships with others.

Reconciling the Personal and the General in Dharma

Many yogic texts provide a roadmap of the steps that constitute a virtuous, fulfilling life leading to the actualization of dharma. A difficulty comes when the action being asked of an individual seems to be in opposition to upholding the virtues. The Mahabharata explores this question of reconciliation between one's actions and the virtues' highest aim: We are asked to grapple with what to do when right action opposes the ethical life, when satisfying one (right action in support of dharma) seems to violate the other (virtues like nonharming).

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Because he is the son of Dharma, Yudhisthira's story throughout the text symbolizes this struggle between dharma and virtue. The lake story reveals that nonharming is the virtue Yudhisthira holds as his highest aim and intention, yet he takes part in a war that kills teachers, family, and friends. How could dharma or the virtue of nonharming be seen to be upheld through the actions of war? How does Yudhisthira, who holds nonharming in such high regard, come to terms with his harmful actions in the battle? How does one work with the subtlety of dharma?

Yudhisthira is tested many times to prove his commitment to nonharming and his understanding of the nuances of its application in various circumstances. First, in the story above, he chooses Nakula to live over his other brothers, who have been portrayed as more important to Yudhisthira's ultimate success. Another key test comes when Yudhisthira is about to enter heaven and refuses if he is not allowed to bring a dog that has served as his loyal companion. The dog reveals himself to be Dharma, and by choosing his canine companion over entrance to heaven Yudhisthira again demonstrates the virtue of nonharming. In his final test, Yudhisthira sees his brothers and wife in a hell-like realm. He chooses to stay and comfort them rather than

going to heaven. Dharma is again pleased at his commitment to and proficiency at both understanding and practicing nonharming.

Although he successfully demonstrates practical understanding of nonharming in these instances, Yudhisthira struggles with the decision to go to battle and whether it violates his commitment to this virtue. Yudhisthira seeks the advice of Bhishma, a great warrior and counselor, to resolve the conflict between actions deemed necessary for the sustenance of the world in his role as a king and his commitment to nonharming. Bhishma advises him on discerning between a general, abstract ideal of dharma and one's own individual dharma. Dharma and the virtues that lead to it always include that which sustains the individual and the world, but the action needed in a particular circumstance can appear to be in opposition to fulfilling dharmic demands. This ambiguity of dharma and the virtues necessitates clarification through life circumstances.

As a king, Yudhisthira's dharma is to take action to benefit his subjects and the world, even when that action conflicts with virtues such as nonharming. Bhishma encourages him to carry out his work as a king for the good of society. Through the roles we assume in the course of our lives, we have the opportunity to explore these virtues, or ethical qualities, and our own personal expression of dharma in relation to an abstract notion of dharma. Because Yudhisthira was presented with the responsibility of undertaking the role of king, he can be comforted in the manner in which he assumed that role and in how his actions benefited the whole of the kingdom.

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Arjuna, too, is torn between his dharma—as a warrior—and the higher human aim of nonharming. At the moment of the start of the battle of Kurukshetra, Arjuna becomes unsure of being able to discern right action. Does satisfying dharma mean fighting his family and teachers and fulfilling his role as warrior? Or does it mean preserving his family and teachers and neglecting his role for the sake of nonharming? Which is the correct path of dharma that exemplifies the qualities of nonharming, equanimity, and contentment? Krishna counsels Arjuna that his dharma as a warrior is to fight; this action of battle is essential for the sustenance of the world and of Arjuna's family. As engagement in battle is the action being called for, undertaking it does not violate dharma or preclude a virtuous life. Krishna counsels Arjuna on the importance of one's personal dharma, saying, "Look to your own duty; do not tremble before it…"

Arjuna, a warrior, and Yudhisthira, a king, are both taught to apply virtues and dharma within the context of their life circumstances to help them fully grasp the meaning of these esoteric concepts. The fulfillment of dharma, and the virtues that lead to it, differ from one person and one situation to the

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next. Over and over, the reader is reminded that the practice of virtues is neither rigid nor black and white; living virtuously can be difficult and full of confusing contradictions.

Core virtues emphasized in the Mahabharata include truth, self-control, nonharming, equanimity, tranquility, patience, lack of anger, forgiveness, and kindness in thought, speech, and action.[8] These intentions form the foundation for the contemplation of right action in each circumstance so that dharma can be fulfilled even when a situation is complex.

Eudaimonic Well-Being: Another Practical Philosophy for Living

Chapter 1 introduced the concept of eudaimonia as a well-lived life, representing the pinnacle aim of being an "excellent" person. Eudaimonic well-being relates to a steadfast expression of joy, often differentiated from a transitory experience of (hedonic) happiness and conceptualized by meaning, purpose, flourishing, and self-actualization.

Central to yoga's teachings is the concept of awareness, from which features similar to eudaimonic well-being, such as steadfast joy, emerge. Moreover, because it includes ideas of meaning and purpose, flourishing, and self-actualization, eudaimonic well-being provides a significant parallel to concepts relevant to the discussion of dharma—actions promoting inner and outer harmony and those that sustain the individual in relationship to the world.

Another interesting parallel between yoga philosophy and the teachings of Aristotle is the emphasis on the virtues as a means to experience dharma and eudaimonia, respectively. As mentioned above, and according to Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, the concept of dharma can be understood as responsibility for one's actions, which includes this alignment with the virtues.[9] Similarly, Aristotle teaches that eudaimonia results from acting in alignment with virtue—that "happiness is a certain activity of the soul in accordance with virtue."[10] Active, practical exploration guides us to apply the virtues to our own circumstances. Through this lens of ethical living, we can evaluate our actions, thoughts, and beliefs to discern a path of action leading to eudaimonia.

Just as yoga teaches that the practical application of the virtues in life is important to the realization of dharma, Aristotle taught the importance of the practical application of the virtues for the realization of eudaimonia. The exploration of these ethical principles allows each individual to apply the

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practices to their own circumstances to determine right action, leading to eudaimonia (Aristotle) or dharma (yoga).

Contemplating what brings about eudaimonic well-being—more specifically meaning, purpose, and steadfast joy—can help us develop insight for right action. This discernment in turn promotes healthy states of body and mind, as well as more positive relationships with others and the environment. We can gain clarity into those actions that cultivate eudaimonic well-being and those that lead us further away from it. The practices of the virtues are essential to this cultivation of eudaimonic well-being and dharma. As we access greater clarity through practice of the virtues we may shift away from habitual patterns that perpetuate suffering.

Engagement With the World

Many traditional sources of yoga emphasize the necessity of worldly experience for the realization of unchanging awareness. The Samkhya Karika (v. 57–61)[11] expresses that material nature (phenomena of body, mind, and environment) functions solely for the liberation of the spirit. As already discussed, the Mahabharata (and the Bhagavad Gita contained therein) also teaches the necessity of bringing yogic practices into the test of life so we can grasp their nuances. Only through the application of virtues and dharma in life's circumstances can we challenge our comprehension of these concepts.

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Ultimately, each individual must reconcile the difficulties of living virtuously in the face of inevitable challenges; we dive into and actualize the meaning of the practices. The distinction between upholding these concepts in isolation and in relationship to the world and life events—philosophy in action versus intellectual endeavor—is vital in both yoga and Aristotle's teachings. Through the yamas and niyamas of yoga we can contemplate these virtues as a path toward dharma and eudaimonic well-being.

In the Mahabharata, the battlefield symbolizes the crossroads in life where one is asked to determine, amidst difficult circumstances, ethical and virtuous action that sustains and benefits oneself and others. These challenging moments call for discernment and proficiency in applying abstract concepts to real situations. Through the very obscuration of dharma or virtuous action we can grow in our understanding of these concepts. Anchoring to unchanging awareness and the emergent attributes of equanimity, eudaimonic well-being, and contentment facilitates the clarity from which to act in alignment with dharma.

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Krishna tells Arjuna,

> When he…is content with the self within himself, then he is said to be a man whose insight is sure…
>
> (2.55)[12]

Being grounded in inner contentment strengthens the capacity for insight because this foundation connects us to awareness. From this connection, we can explore any situation and apply the virtues to realize eudaimonic well-being and dharma. Life experience helps us to develop the wisdom to distinguish actions that perpetuate suffering from those that align us with eudaimonic well-being and dharma. We can explore the actions that help cultivate deeper contentment, equanimity, steadfast joy, and inner and outer harmony—as distinct from those that lead us further from these qualities.

On the battlefield, when Arjuna begins to doubt whether he should act at all, Krishna is unequivocal. He teaches Arjuna not to relinquish his duty and to perform the action for which he is called. Rather than detaching or renouncing, the Bhagavad Gita asks us to engage in life for the fulfillment of our dharma:

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> Perform necessary action; it is more powerful than inaction…
>
> (3.8)

> Renunciation and discipline in action both effect good beyond measure; but of the two, discipline in action surpasses renunciation of action.
>
> (5.2)[13]

Krishna teaches that necessary, right action is preferable to inaction or renunciation.

> What is action? What is inaction? Even the poets were confused—what I shall teach you of action will free you from misfortune. One should understand action, understand wrong action, and understand inaction too; the way of action is obscure. A man who sees inaction in action and action in inaction has understanding among men, disciplined in all action he performs.
>
> (Bhagavad Gita, 4.16–4.18)[14]

The reader is being asked to contemplate the differences among action, inaction, and wrong action and to discern when action is inaction and vice versa.

Dharma and Virtue in Action

There are instances when we need to take action to support or help others, or ourselves, and we do not—action through inaction. I have worked with clients who understood that the source of their stress, pain, or suffering was a changeable and habitual way of relating to themselves or the world. Examples include not being able to "find time" to do an exercise, breathing practice, or meditation; how a person holds tensions in their body in response to others; and beliefs like never being "enough" or being unable to do anything about a situation or experience. As long as they continued these habits of either behavior or belief, their patterns of physical tension and the way they interacted in the world would be repeated—action through inaction.

We can support such clients in becoming ready to change by building recognition of their habits through journaling, meditation, inquiry, and introspection. We can also focus on building confidence and self-efficacy for change. The virtues, or yamas and niyamas, of truth, acceptance, patience, contentment, kindness, and nonharming are essential to this work. *Tapas,* a fiery quality of discipline and self-control, also helps clients appreciate and recognize their own inner strength to change.

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I have also worked with people who seem to be taking lots of action through trying many different healing modalities but resist changing the deeper beliefs or relationships with life that are at the core of their suffering—inaction in the midst of action. Here again the support of virtues such as truth, self-control, steadfastness, patience, kindness, and equanimity have been key in helping these clients explore their resistance and foster specific right action.

The Bhagavad Gita teaches practitioners to shift their focus from the result of the action to the manner in which action is taken and to the action itself.

> Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action; avoid attraction to the fruits and attachment to inaction!
>
> (2.47)[15]

> Fixed in Yoga, perform actions.…It is said that evenness of mind is yoga.…Yoga is skill in action.
>
> (2.48–2.50)[16]

> Always perform with detachment any action you must do; performing action with detachment, one achieves supreme good.
>
> (3.19)[17]

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The path of yoga is not a renunciation of or distancing from life—philosophy and action are not separate endeavors. Rather, yoga teaches equanimity in action. A shift in the focus underlying action allows us to gain insight and to undertake right action in alignment with virtues that fulfill dharma and eudaimonia. Furthermore, connecting to contentment, steadfast joy, or eudaimonic well-being in the midst of action allows us to explore patterns of reaction to the body, mind, and world that may perpetuate suffering.

On Meaning and Suffering

This shift in how we undertake action can be explored through the concept of *meaning,* which eudaimonic well-being also encompasses. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Viktor Frankl teaches that if it is to alleviate suffering, meaning must be concrete, action-oriented, and serve an individual's unique present-moment circumstances:

> For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment….One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment.
>
> (pp. 108–109)[18]

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Frankl's emphasis on recognizing one's own specific meaning for one's unique circumstance mirrors Krishna's instruction. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna teaches Arjuna that it is better to perform one's own dharma than to try to do another's—the latter can create harm.

> Your own duty [dharma] done imperfectly is better than another man's done well. It is better to die in one's own duty; another man's duty is perilous.
>
> (3.35)

> Each one achieves success by focusing on his own action…Better to do one's own duty imperfectly than to do another man's well; doing action intrinsic to his being, a man avoids guilt. Arjuna, a man should not relinquish action he is born to, even if it is flawed…
>
> (18.45–18.48)[19]

Aristotle, Frankl, and yoga all teach a path of action in life for the alleviation of suffering. Aristotle and yoga emphasize the inquiry into virtues, whereas Frankl teaches the specific assumption of meaning to determine action.

The term *eudaimonic well-being* encapsulates these varied teachings to foster a way of meeting life with equanimity, contentment, steadfast joy, and meaning or purpose. The path of action formed in such states supports and sustains us, alleviates suffering, and promotes eudaimonic well-being itself.

Frankl describes a specificity of meaning that arises from life circumstance. Arjuna and Yudhisthira are likewise taught the specificity of dharma for each person and that life brings the opportunities to explore one's own personal expression of virtues and of dharma. Neither philosophy necessitates the projection of an externally generated meaning or dharma onto our lives. On the contrary, our life's meaning is offered to us through various circumstances. This understanding shifts the focus to exploring the present moment to cultivate eudaimonic well-being and dharma.

Frankl says,

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> *[I]t did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*…stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead…think of ourselves as those who were questioned by life…Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.
>
> (p. 77; emphasis in the original)[20]

Meaning is revealed in our very engagement with life. Every experience, even those that create suffering, is an opportunity to explore concepts such as action in alignment with dharma. This moment-to-moment recognition of meaning and dharma comes from being present and responsible to life in a manner that facilitates connection to awareness and its concomitant eudaimonic attributes. From such an orientation to life we can inquire into the actions that both foster well-being and benefit those around us.

Yoga therapy facilitates this process as we help clients transform their relationship to phenomena of the body, mind, and environment. Dharma then becomes a practical enterprise, as Krishna tells Arjuna:

> The doors of heaven open for warriors who rejoice to have a battle like this thrust on them by chance. If you fail to wage this war of sacred

> duty, you will abandon your own duty and fame only to gain evil.… could any suffering be worse?
>
> (Bhagavad Gita, 2.32–2.36)

> [T]he world does not flee from him nor does he flee from the world; free of delight, rage, fear, and disgust, he is dear to me.
>
> (Bhagavad Gita, 12.15)[21]

When life presents the opportunity to actualize your path and navigate toward your dharma, it is an occasion to celebrate. Through the battle he faces, Arjuna has the opportunity to align with dharma (that which supports himself and the world) and the realization of unchanging awareness from which eudaimonic well-being, equanimity, and contentment emerge. By meeting life's obstacles—not by fleeing or avoiding them—we can actualize our dharma. These are opportunities for deeper insight from which eudaimonic well-being and steadfast joy can be realized. If we consider that Arjuna is killing his old beliefs and patterns that perpetuate suffering, he is faced with a choice of change: continue his patterns and suffer, or let these patterns go to find another way of navigating life, a path on which he is connected to a deeper aspect of himself. Arjuna is being asked to take responsibility and engage in life in a way that leads to the fulfillment of dharma and connects him to unchanging awareness. These teachings demonstrate the importance of both honest, dedicated inquiry and practical action as part of such a path.

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For Aristotle, the ethical concepts are guideposts for well-aligned action. For Frankl, meeting life events with responsibility and finding the concrete, unique meaning of each situation mitigates suffering. In the Bhagavad Gita, remembering our dharma and connecting to unchanging awareness helps us to understand what action to take.

Yoga teaches a methodology that combines ethical inquiry, physical practices, breath, and meditation to develop the discrimination to identify right actions—those that lead to connection to unchanging awareness and thus the emergence of eudaimonic well-being. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that suffering arises when we do not understand, accept, or take responsibility for action in alignment with our dharma. This philosophy of engagement with life calls for us to be fully present to experience as a means of alleviating suffering.

Therapeutic Application

Illness, pain, or disability can shift one's sense of identity. A disconnect can develop between who we are in the present moment and who we were or

want to be. Clients can experience shifts in social connection, belief in their ability to fulfill intentions and purposes they held for their lives, and discord between who they are and who they want to be.

As their identity changes, clients' sense of meaning may shift as they may not be able to interact with life as they once did. Whereas in health the body is often in the background and transparent to experience, in illness the body may move to the forefront and become the lens through which life is experienced. Our field of attention may narrow so that all of life is filtered through this pain experience—relationships, work, and play can all fade into the background.

This shift in identity may create an experience of suffering as we come to terms with who we are in the present. The ideas of eudaimonic well-being, dharma, and meaning can help clients foster a different relationship to pain, illness, or disability. The changing contexts of life afford us the opportunity to explore right action to sustain and support ourselves and the world around us. Yoga therapy becomes a methodology to understand life's meaning within this context.

The explanatory framework of yoga therapy (discussed further in Chapter 6) describes this connection to both unchanging awareness and to eudaimonic well-being as a foundational experience from which we can shift habitual patterns of relating to the body, mind, and world. Yoga therapy enacts a process to help clients reconnect with meaning and unchanging awareness with its attributes of eudaimonic well-being, equanimity, and contentment regardless of their circumstances. The path of yoga helps clients reconnect with who they are outside their pain or illness experience, and provides a methodology to inquire into the nature of suffering. The illness experience then becomes an opportunity for exploring meaning, equanimity, the nature of awareness, and eudaimonic well-being, a point that cannot be overemphasized in describing a yoga therapist's role and scope of practice.

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Yoga therapy works differently than allopathic medicine's diagnosis-driven model. Rather than one set of practices for a musculoskeletal condition, another for a psychological condition, and still another for a physiological condition, yoga therapy steps back to consider more broadly the whole being, the very nature of suffering, and inquiry into its alleviation. The yoga therapist co-facilitates a process by which the client explores these same questions. The yamas and niyamas of yoga can be a starting point for intentionally reorienting to what arises in the body, mind, or relationship to external circumstances. Through ethical inquiry, the person learns new ways of meeting thoughts, emotions, feelings, and sensations. For example, as a client is asked to consider the meaning of *nonharming* or *contentment,* she learns the habits of posture,

muscle tension, thoughts, or beliefs that create pain or foster discontent. By holding a posture or way of thinking with contentment, she begins to shift the way she relates to what arises in her body, mind, or world. She may learn how many of her reactions and relationships to these stimuli are harmful or indicative of discontent, and how to shift to their opposites.

We can ask a client in pain to work with a shift in their own identification with physical, mental, and environmental phenomena to foster the qualities of eudaimonic well-being. This practice of ethical inquiry represents active engagement on the part of the client to redefine their own relationship to illness and pain to one that supports both the individual and those around them—a relationship that enhances meaning, value, purpose, and agency even in the face of change, illness, and pain. Working with the yamas and niyamas facilitates a reevaluation of life's meaning. This setting of intention, and its embodiment through yoga practices like asana and pranayama, are crucial in the shift toward a life well-lived.

Just as pain can reorient identity and meaning to create suffering, it can be a powerful motivator of change to facilitate reconnection to eudaimonic well-being. Discrimination and ethical inquiry can prompt a reevaluation of our relationship to the body, mind, and environment, and illness, pain, or disability can create the life challenge needed to practically implement these tools and realize eudaimonic well-being.

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Practice 2.2 A Dharma Meditation Walk

Set aside some time for an unhurried walk outside.

As you move, feel the activation of the muscles that propel the body, the body's changing position in space, the constant shifts in the surrounding world. Deeply notice the physical experience of walking, along with your mental and emotional responses.

Pause at your halfway point before turning for home and consider how you might experience your travels differently when connected to attributes like meaning, purpose, inner and outer harmony, and unchanging awareness. Allow these attributes to become stronger, noticing how and where you feel and experience them in your body. Notice whether there is a word or image that helps you to affirm and make this experience more tangible. Let this feeling fill every cell and space in your body. Connection to these attributes can become the foundation from which all action taken aligns with dharma.

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As you continue on your walk, notice whether you can stay connected to these feelings and attributes. Notice how you would move and take in the world while connected to the experience of meaning, purpose, inner and outer harmony, unchanging awareness. Continue on your way, exploring how your experience shifts with this awareness.

Notice when movement might disconnect you from this meaning, purpose, inner and outer harmony, and unchanging awareness—and how you return to it.

As you end the walk, notice what you learned about moving and interacting in the world from this connection.

As you go about your day, notice how you can always connect back to unchanging awareness, meaning, purpose, and harmony. Notice how that connection can shift your physical posture, including held tensions or perceptions of your body, and your thoughts, emotions, and interactions with others. Notice how your dharma—actions that supports you and those around you, inner and outer harmony—as well as meaning and purpose can become tangible.

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Clinical Examples

"Chris" Was Experiencing Low Back and Sacroiliac Pain, Worry, and Anxiety

I asked Chris to settle into a sense of meaning and purpose. What did that mean to him? What did it look like? Feel like? He provided an image of a redwood tree running through the center of his body. Leaning into this image offered a sense of strength and wisdom.

We worked with strengthening that image, feeling it, and bringing it into different postures. First, we chose poses that helped him feel the image more strongly—*virabhadrasana* (warrior) I and II. Then we worked with postures that challenged these sensations. Chris worked with staying connected to strength in postures where weakness arose, which for him included restorative backbends like *supta baddha konasana* (reclining cobbler's pose).

Through carefully guided inquiry, beliefs arose: of not being strong enough in life, not being able to voice what he wanted. Chris practiced using the redwood image in his daily life, evoking it each morning and evening. This practice included visualization with postures that enhanced the capacity to feel the intention of strength in his body (e.g., warrior postures) and

postures that challenged this felt sense (e.g., restorative backbends). His home practice was a means to strengthen his intention so that he could bring it into his life in circumstances that challenged his feelings of strength and ability to voice what he needed.

"Jade" Had Chronic Back and Hip Pain

Jade spoke of fear around new situations. We worked with what contentment or allowing would feel like, and the image she arrived at was that of an ocean. We strengthened the sensations associated with that image with postures that helped her to access allowing and contentment—in this case forward folds, which we modified to protect her back and hip by limiting the depth of the posture with bolsters and blocks. We then worked with postures that challenged Jade's ability to allow contentment and stay connected to the ocean within; for her, such poses included backbends and strong postures that require arm strength (e.g., plank, side plank).

Conclusion

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Yoga teaches a path to align with unchanging awareness, a path through which equanimity, contentment, and eudaimonic well-being can be realized. This connection can inform action that supports cohesion with oneself, others, and the world. Dharma is a complex concept that embodies this alignment, guided by the ethical practices of the yamas and niyamas.

An active engagement with life can follow from this connection to awareness and the exploration of ethical practices that support our unique dharma. Yoga, Aristotle, and Frankl all teach that life constantly presents us with the opportunities to actualize meaning and identify right action. Through receptivity to life itself, we can dive into our circumstances in a manner that connects us to awareness with its emergent attributes of equanimity and eudaimonic well-being, which in turn changes our relationship to experience and ultimately the very nature of suffering.

The practices of yoga teach ways to identify habits, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs that obscure the clarity we need to actualize meaning, dharma, and eudaimonic well-being. Yoga can help us disentangle from those patterns that perpetuate suffering. The discernment and wisdom we cultivate helps us to meet life in a way that connects to meaning and purpose in each action. By honoring the life that arises, rather than blocking or shutting off from it, we find the anchor of purpose.

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Our suffering arises from wanting the life in front of us to be different from what it is. Instead, if we work with what is present, we find our meaning within that very experience of life. When clients meet chronic conditions and explore meaning within the illness experience, their suffering may change. When I work with clients with diagnoses such as multiple sclerosis (MS), fibromyalgia, or chronic pain, we explore such concepts and work to help them remember who they are beyond their pain or illness. From a personal exploration of the virtues, dharma, and meaning within the context of their current condition, they can learn to identify the "right" action to better their lives—and the lives of those around them. The outcome is diminished suffering and enhanced eudaimonic well-being.

A gift of the stories of the Mahabharata and the complexity of these teachings is that they transcend time and place to be applicable to contemporary readers. Dharma and the virtue ethics are affected by a range of factors including one's current roles, stage in life, and societal environment; dharma shifts with circumstance. The stories highlight the ambiguities of dharma and the virtuous life and remind us that these ideas are meaningless in a vacuum—they must be applied to life and acted upon.

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