



# Why Am I Here? Unlocking Your Purpose

When I asked my friend Laura what her life purpose was, the single mom and full-time accountant chuckled and said, “I’m just trying to survive and get through the week. I don’t have time to think about that.”

BY ANGELA AMBROSE



For many of us, the idea of finding our life purpose seems daunting and unattainable, reserved only for the Mother Teresas and Gandhis of the world. We may think we are too busy to ponder such philosophical fluff. But the yogis believe this longing for purpose is an essential part of who we are and that our world will never be complete until we find it. They use the ancient Sanskrit word *dharma* to describe our unique vocation or path that brings meaning to our life and allows us to serve others.

“Purpose is fundamental – it’s not a luxury,” says Richard Leider, life coach and author of *The Power of Purpose: Creating Meaning in Your Life and Work*. “It’s fundamental to health, healing, happiness, longevity,

and ultimately, creativity and productivity.” Put simply, it’s the reason you get up in the morning. After 40 years of research and study, Leider has distilled life purpose down to this basic equation:

**Gifts + Passions + Values = Purpose**

“If you get up in the morning and use your gifts for something you feel passionate or purposeful about, that you’re interested and curious about, in an environment that fits your values, there’s a pretty good chance you’re on purpose,” says Leider. Whether you have a passion for music, drawing, teaching or working with numbers, you can use your unique gifts to contribute to the world.

## Purpose Adds Years to Your Life

A growing body of research illustrates the profound effects that life purpose has on all aspects of your body, mind and spirit. According to the Blue Zones research, people who know why they wake up in the morning live up to seven years longer than those who don’t. Other studies suggest it can reduce your risk of heart disease, improve your brain health and cut your risk of Alzheimer’s in half.

When your purpose involves doing good for others, you may get a “helper’s high.” Your body releases endorphins, a feel-good hormone that boosts your mood, decreases stress and gives you a feeling of overall wellbeing.

Your life purpose acts like a sophisticated GPS system that guides you on a path to fulfillment because each day you prioritize what matters to you, and you live your life with more focus and meaning. Without it, we can get lost in a sea of busyness: the long to-do lists, demands of work and family, and the constant pings of technology that distract us from our authentic self.

## Hit the Pause Button

Most of us barely slow down long enough to grab a burger at the drive-through or pause long enough to notice the constrictions and stress building up in our bodies and in our lives. This frenzied lifestyle is one of the biggest obstacles to connecting to who we are at our very core. Uncovering our true calling requires that we slow down and reflect.

“By getting still, we can begin to see beyond our conditioning. We see beyond our distractions and we feel and get connected to a deeper sense of ourselves and who we are,” says Rod Stryker, founder of ParaYoga and author of *The Four Desires: Creating a Life of Purpose, Happiness, Prosperity and Freedom*. “In this day and age we’re more distracted. There’s a barrage of sensory input coming our way. And if we miss slowing our minds down, we miss seeing 80 to 90 percent of existence. Our senses and our rational mind only perceive 10 to 20 percent of existence and there’s a lot to be seen that can only be done with a still mind.”

Each of us needs time alone to quiet the mind. Try taking long walks or hikes in nature, journaling, listening to music, praying, meditating or rolling out your yoga mat. Then begin to reflect and ask yourself meaningful questions:

*What unique talents or gifts do I have?*

*What do I feel passionate about?*

*Am I living a life that is in line with my values and priorities?*

According to the yogic tradition, your soul has four desires: The first is *dharma*, the drive for purpose, which helps shape all of the others. The second is *artha*, the desire for means (money, security, food, health). The third is *kama*, the longing for pleasure in any form

## Are You Still Searching?

- Do you wonder if there’s more to life?
- Do you feel you may have missed your true calling?
- Do you have a successful job, family and house but still feel empty and unfulfilled?
- Do you yearn to make a difference in the world, but don’t know how?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, chances are you are still trying to uncover your authentic purpose – your reason for being here.

(intimacy, sex, family, friendship, art). The fourth is *moksha*, the desire for freedom and spiritual realization. Only by honoring all four of these desires can you achieve happiness and a complete and balanced life, explains Stryker.

## Seek Out Trusted Friends

Another way to get in touch with your true self is by using trusted friends or family members as sounding boards.

“Very often our friends and family know us better than we know ourselves,” says Stephen Cope, senior scholar-in-residence and global ambassador at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health and author of *The Great Work of Your Life: A Guide for the Journey to Your True Calling*.

“You know that you have a couple friends who, if you say, hey, does this dress make my butt look big? They’ll say yes. I find those friendships incredibly precious. You create around you a surround of mirroring so you can see reflected back who you really are.”

If you’re having a difficult time identifying your unique gifts or talents, Leider suggests taking five index cards and writing at the top, “What are my gifts?” and passing them out to five people who you trust and know well.

To help achieve your purpose, set specific goals with deadlines that can serve as benchmarks. “When you’re trying to tackle something so big, you get small,” says Cope. “You break it down into its smallest workable components.”

Share your goals with friends who will hold you accountable. If you have a close friend who is also struggling to find her purpose, commit to working together and follow up with each other on a regular basis to track your progress.

When choosing friends or family to help you, be very selective in seeking out people who are open to the idea of you changing for the better, warns Stryker. The closest and most trusted people in your life can help you uncover your purpose; however, some family members and friends may project their expectations and desires on to you or be resistant to change, hindering your progress.



### Find Work with a Purpose

We've all heard the old adage, "Do what you love and the money will follow." But for those with families to feed and stacks of bills to pay, the idea of quitting a job or changing careers can feel like leaping off the proverbial cliff.

First, ask yourself, how much money do I really need? Am I willing to make any sacrifices in order to pursue a job I love? Instead of simply making a living, can I make a difference? Sometimes finding more fulfillment means being okay with having less material stuff.

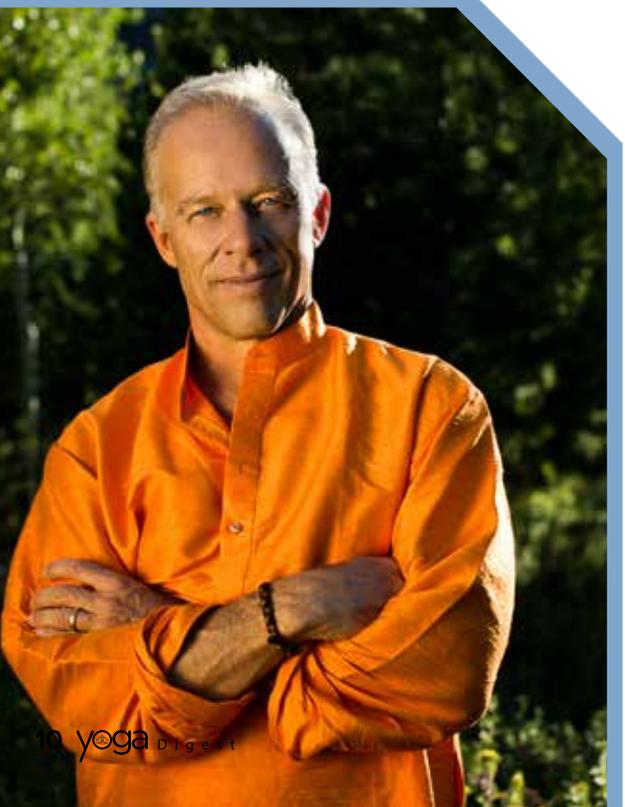
The average American spends about 60 percent of his life working; yet, according to Gallup data worldwide, only one out of five people wants to get up and do his job. What is the consequence of doing a job that is out of sync with your values and your passions?

"If you do something that's just a job, it's going to kill your spirit and your energy. And if that's the best you can do, okay, then you'll have to find purpose outside of work," says Leider. "But if you can find work that fits (your purpose), you're going to be paid more because you're going to be more engaged, more fulfilled, more wanting to get up and go do this."

In Cope's first career, he worked as psychotherapist in a thriving practice. "I got to a big fork in the road when I was 40, and I really had to say, wow, I've devoted 20 years of my life to this career. I'm good at it. I'm rising in the ranks, but it's no longer my passion, my calling. And I had to make a huge midlife shift into a new dharma."

After a deep period of self-inquiry – including meditation, journaling, psychoanalysis and consulting with friends – Cope took the leap and left his psychotherapist

Photo by DJ Pierce



## Tap Into Your Purpose through 1:2 Breathing

Sit comfortably and bring your attention to the breath. Breathing only through your nose, inhale to a slow count of four, then exhale to a slow count of eight. (You can use any ratio of 1:2 breathing with the exhale being twice as long as the inhale.) Practice this relaxing breathing technique for at least three to five minutes, then reflect on the questions below.

career to pursue his love of yoga, meditation and contemplative traditions. He went on to become the founder and director of the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living in Stockbridge, Mass.

"Dharmas evolve over time and change. You have to be constantly listening and attuned to what's calling you now," says Cope. Through the years, his role at Kripalu has changed, and now, as global ambassador, he focuses on teaching and fundraising, and also spends much of his time pursuing his latest passion, writing. But through all his various roles, his aim has remained the same, to improve people's lives by helping them gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

"There are a lot of detours that people take that are not useful – what I call the "romance of dharma" – the idea that dharma is something huge and heroic and impressive and it means we have to give up selling insurance to go to Paris to paint," says Cope. "The truth is I find most people are already somewhere in the field of their dharma. Their calling, their passion is already somewhere around them. They've already stumbled on to it in some way. A lot of the early stages are about truing it up. They're about aim. What is it precisely that lights you up?"

### Purpose Requires Practice

Like yoga, living our purpose is a practice that requires daily effort. It's not a bumper sticker we just plaster on the back of our car for all to see. It's the driving force of why we get up in the morning eager to start our day.

Leider describes his true calling as helping unlock the power of purpose in the life of every person he meets. "Purpose is compassion in action," says Leider. "I bring it in every role I'm in. I bring it all day, every day to every person I transact with. I try to be conscious and awake on a moment-to-moment basis."

Just because you're a parent or in a helping profession such as a teacher, doctor or firefighter doesn't mean you are automatically living your purpose. For example, if you're a teacher who shows up in the classroom every day, but your job feels like drudgery and you drag yourself out

of bed and dread going to work, you are not living your dharma. Your purpose is not a goal or a role. It is a mindset that combines your gifts, passions and values that you can bring to your job, family and community each day.

"Purpose is cradle to grave. Your purpose doesn't leave once your job is done or when your kids leave home," says Leider. "That's why so many people have such a tough time with the retirement transition, for example, because they've lost their identity. They've lost their reason to get up in the morning."

Research shows that, on the average, people who retire die sooner and get sick more often than their peers who continue to work or stay active in the community. But retirement can actually be the ideal time to expand or reinvent your purpose as you gain more time and freedom.

During major life transitions or crises – such as retirement, divorce, serious illness or death of a loved one – you become more vulnerable and discover how precious your relationships are and how unpredictable life can be. A crisis can make you pause, take a step back and figure out what really matters to you.

### Be Authentic

Your purpose should be tailored to your individual talents and passions. If you try to adopt another person's purpose as your own, you will likely struggle to find fulfillment.

"It's better to do your purpose or duty badly than to do someone else's well," says Stryker, quoting the Bhagavad Gita, the 2,000-year-old spiritual classic that tells the story of the great warrior Arjuna who struggles to uncover his true calling. With the guidance of his divine mentor, Krishna, he learns to fully embrace his dharma and discovers that each of us has a unique, sacred vocation that requires action.



## Start Finding Purpose Today!

Stuck and don't know where to start? Leider suggests writing the following words on a post-it, "Grow and Give," and putting it on your bathroom mirror where you can see it as soon as you wake up and right before you go to bed.

"Every day for one week ask yourself, how did I grow and how did I give today? At the end of the week, you'll have a much clearer sense of what your actual purpose is, where you're blocking it and where it's showing up," says Leider.

Like Arjuna, we can become paralyzed with fear and doubt. If you're struggling to find a job that embodies your purpose or are afraid of making a big change, look for a hobby that you love or community service that you find rewarding and brings meaning to your life outside of work. With time, it may eventually blossom into a vocation that brings you long-lasting fulfillment.

You don't need a grand purpose, such as starting a non-profit organization or finding a cure for cancer, to make a difference. If you do your job in a way that is aligned with your intrinsic values and what you care about, you are fulfilling your purpose no matter what you do – whether you are cleaning houses for a living, cleaning up the environment or cleaning out a patient's blocked artery.

"It's about living authentically, in an expansive way that is true to the call of your heart," says Stryker. "What do you want on your tombstone? Not how much money in the bank or what you had, but what did you live for?"

Living your purpose means bringing your gifts, passions and values to every aspect of your life – your job, your relationships and your community. When you focus on helping others, you begin to realize that the big house, six figure job and new car may bring temporary pleasure, but true, lasting fulfillment comes from reaching outside ourselves and making a difference in the world around us.

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## Ponder Your Life Purpose

- What skills seem to come naturally to you?
- What activities do you find so engaging that you lose all track of time?
- What fascinates you or makes you feel alive?
- What books, TV shows or movies are you drawn to?
- Are you living a life that supports your values and priorities?
- If you only had one year left to live, what would you change?
- If your best friend were to write your obituary, what would you want them to say?
- What lasting mark do you want to leave on the world?