

## **How to Make Wise Decisions**

**by Reverend Jaganath Carrera**

*As we act, so we become in life.*  
Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Most of us know the importance of good decision making. Decisions can lead to happy or unhappy consequences. In a game show, if you choose what's behind curtain one instead of curtain two, you might lose or gain a small fortune. Much of our life experience feels like that, feels like a gamble. We make countless choices everyday, but we are seldom sure if what we choose will bring the results we seek.

Some decisions are major and can lead to wonderfully transformative or disastrous consequences. Marrying the right or wrong partner is one such choice. Other times, the choices don't seem so vital, but can still strongly influence how we experience our life. For example, repeated bad or wise decisions may not reveal their fruits for many years. Think about the consequences of eating chips, ice cream, and cola every day verses a nice salad and whole grain bread. Enjoyable or difficult lives are also made of decisions such as these.

The sacred wisdom of all faith traditions has always emphasized the importance of making wise decisions in order to live fulfilling, happy lives. The following quote, which is attributed to various people, reflects this:

*Sow a thought, and you reap an act; sow an act, and you reap a habit; sow a habit, and you reap a character; sow a character, and you reap a destiny.*

Here is a list of good guidelines that can help us make wise decisions and experience fulfilling lives.

### **Know dharma**

Dharma is a difficult word to translate. It has many important meanings: righteousness, truth, duty, and law, for example. But maybe the best overall definition for dharma is, "that which brings about harmony." That's why teachings regarding our behavior – morals and ethics – are found as the foundation of all spiritual paths. In Yoga, these tenets, reminiscent of the Ten Commandments, are presented as the Yamas and Niyamas of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (Book II, Sutra 29).

The idea is that until our minds regain their essential nature of clarity, focus, and objectivity, we need guidelines to help us make decisions. This means that our behavior is not so much based on what we *feel emotionally*, or what we should do (that is too often based on personal desires or selfish attachments), but rather what will bring the greatest benefit, harmony, and growth for all involved.

These principles are based on a deep observation, experience, and understanding of both human nature and the ways of the world. Being familiar with these time proven tenets of behavior and acting according to them will go a long way to ensuring wise decision making.

### **Keep the mind clear, focused, and calm**

A good worker knows the value of using the best tools for the job. In decision making, the mind is the tool we use. Before employing it, we need to make sure it is in proper working order to get the job done properly. Clearing and focusing the mind is something like making sure that the razor is sharp before shaving. If it is, the task is easy and safe. If it is not, we might cut as much skin as hair.

The *Bhagavad Gita* presents a wonderful teaching about the importance of our state of mind in making decisions. It is advice given by Lord Krishna to his disciple Arjuna who is having a terrible time making the right choice regarding whether or not to fight in a war to regain his kingdom.

*If your mind is unsteady and wandering, many-branched and endless are the thoughts and choices. When your mind is clear and one-pointed, there is only one decision.*  
(Ch. 2, V. 41)

A regular practice of meditation is a great way to get the mind in decision making shape. Fifteen or twenty minutes every day will help a lot. Chanting, prayer, selfless service, Hatha Yoga, and introspection are also great ways to cultivate a peaceful, clear mind. A clear, unbiased mind will lead to more options, more creativity, more patience, and more adaptability.

Use that well prepared mind to get clear on what the goal of the decision is. Think (and repeatedly remind yourself, if necessary) of what it is that you're trying to achieve. Sometimes, we get so tangled in details, the opinions of others, and the anxieties of possible unwelcome outcomes, that we lose our way.

### **Include Introspection**

Difficulties making decisions are not limited to circumstances outside ourselves. Sometimes, it is a shortcoming in our own thinking: jumping to conclusions, ingrained bad habits, or entrenched desires that cause us to make mistakes. That is why we often make the same mistakes over and over again. The externals of the situation may be different, but our weaknesses remain the same. We forget to assess our past mistakes, habits, lessons learned, and tendencies.

Identify how you have made mistakes in the past. What tempted you away from the wise decision and why? Self-analysis is an important and integral part of wise decision making.

### **Make sure you have enough information**

You may have noticed that the elements needed to make a wise decision have more to do with us and not the matter in question or external factors. But it's also important to know that difficulty in decision making can also be the result of a lack of pertinent information.

To gain the information you need, consult authoritative sources and people knowledgeable in the area you are researching. Look at the history of the matter in question when applicable. Past performance often can give important clues to future performance. Knowledge empowers and frees us.

### **Have courage**

One reason why we have anxiety about many important decisions is that we fear what will happen to us if we make the wrong choice. Fear paralyzes the mind and makes it seek comfort instead of seeking the right choice.

There is a risk when acting on any decision. We can't avoid risk, but we can minimize making a bad decision by following the principles presented here. Remember,

the most important objective for a seeker is to learn and grow. How many of us would trade what we have learned in this life for the chance to be younger, but forgetful of all the lessons learned? I've never come across anyone who would. That shows us that learning is even more important than youth or a longer life. Be bold, call on your inner strength, use reason, and look before you leap – then leap. Even if you make a mistake, you can't really lose. Every experience is meant to teach us, to bring us closer to the experience of our True Self.

Reflect on this vital truth: no decision is wrong if you learn the lesson and grow from it.

### **Have patience**

We're in the habit of expecting immediate results. Just as a planted seed doesn't give fruits overnight, the ultimate outcome of a decision may not materialize right away. Like a good gardener, we need to nurture our decisions and remain watchful for the plant to sprout and grow well.

By maintaining a vigilant/mindful attitude and allowing time and circumstance to do their part, we will learn the worthiness of our decision. Keep in mind that immediate or short-term effects of a decision do not necessarily indicate if it was the right one. Some of our best choices feel awful at first; some of our worst choices initially feel good. Time will tell. Every experience can be an occasion for growth. Just don't doze off and miss the lesson(s) behind the results.

### **Have faith**

As we said above, no matter what the immediate or long-term outcome of any decision, if we can learn from it, it is the best for us. The entire universe is here to bring us the experiences we need to grow and to realize the unlimited, boundless peace that is our True Nature.

Faith is not just a belief in something, and it is not blind. Faith is a state of knowing, of certainty. Ultimately, faith is the experience of the one Spirit or Consciousness behind everything. It is the remembrance that you are a beloved child of God. Know that there is not a minute, second, or moment when you are not being watched and cared for by the One who created you. Faith will sustain you even when your strength fails.

Cultivate faith by thinking of all the great blessings you have already received in your life. Many of us can find plenty of reasons for gratitude. For example, think of your family, friends, the comfort of having a home to live in and food to eat, and the grace of having teachings to guide you through life.

Chant, pray, meditate, serve others with loving kindness, and receive inspiration and encouragement from realized beings, their teachings, and the stories of their lives. Do even a few of these things regularly and your inner wisdom will awaken, and your faith will grow.

### **Wise decision checklist**

- Use the principles of dharma to guide you.

- Make the mind as clear and focused as possible.
- Examine your inner thoughts about the subject at hand, and assess past similar decisions.
- Consult experts and research the subject. Make sure that you get all the information you need.
- Don't let the mind fall prey to unwarranted fear. Remind yourself that you are loved and cared for by the Divine. Call on your Divine inner nature to come forth.
- Remind yourself that the ultimate results of your decision may take time.
- Keep the faith. Affirm the truth of this simple prayer; "I am Thine, All is Thine. Thy will be done."