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Number 5  
June 2011



Isaac Goff, founder of Dharma Trading, with his sons David and Sampson

## Dharma Trading Business

*Tie-dye enthusiasts and textile shoppers who visit Dharma Trading Co. in San Rafael, California, like its laid-back atmosphere, but those shoppers might be surprised to learn that this 40-year-old company is a multi-million-dollar business, shipping several hundred pounds of dye each week to Australia, Europe and the Americas. The company has supplied dye to people like Cirque du Soleil and Hollywood filmmakers. Isaac Goff, the company's founder tells its story...*

### It all began with an acid trip!

That's LSD for those who didn't grow up in the 60s. My own acid experiences led me to see that there were planes of existence beyond the one on which I normally spent my days. I also came to see that drugs could offer a glimpse into, but could not open those worlds to me permanently.

Drugs were like an elevator – they took me up, let me look around, then brought me back down. I realized I needed a spiritual path – a staircase that would allow me to climb steadily up and into those levels.

Understand that this is not about advocating the use of drugs, just the telling of the story of my own life experiences.

After some years of poking about and false starts, I discovered Subud.

Here was a spiritual path that fitted my personality and could lead to an inner guided life. Now, it's more than 42 years later and I have to say, it's worked for me, more or less. ▶

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## *The underlying idea was to put into daily practice what I was learning in my spiritual life*

Back in 1968 it led to an epiphany that gave birth to Dharma Trading Co.

### **The Big Picture**

It was in Los Angeles during a visit by Bapak, the spiritual leader of Subud. In a moment of revelation, I came to see that each of us is born with certain talents – strengths given to us by God. They come to us through no effort of our own – gifts.

In my case, it was a feel for business and a knack for organization. I understood that these gifts came with an obligation to use them, and use them for the betterment of my own life as well as that of mankind. I understood Bapak to say that starting an enterprise, working with other Subud members, and eventually donating a portion of the profits to social projects was Subud's big picture.

In that moment I saw visually that if I used these talents my life would work – it would be like the "iron filings" demonstration we all saw in school where the magnet causes the iron filings to align themselves in one direction. I saw that in the same way, using my God-given talents would cause all aspects of my life to align themselves and allow the power of God to guide my life.

So I gave up the idea of turning on, tuning in and dropping out (to New Mexico as a craftsman). It was clear that business was my future and so, returning to Berkeley, I immediately began helping a Subud lady friend with her business. It was Dharma Pillow Works – she made zafu and zabatan meditation cushions for Zen meditators. Mostly I stuffed pillows with kapok. She was also a weaver and had contacted a Peace Corps project in Ecuador and imported some hand-spun yarns. After a few months she got pregnant and she sold the business to some folks from the San Francisco Zen Center. By agreement, I took the correspondence files on the yarn.

During 1968 I tried importing the handspun yarns from Ecuador and selling it mail-order to weavers, but it was a mess – ads ran, yarn didn't arrive on time; it wasn't working.

So I decided to open a store in Berkeley from which I could sell the yarn while doing the mail-order business. I needed a name and chose Dharma Trading Co. because the word "Dharma" in the Subud context kind of means to me, "Acting in a way that is in accordance with God's Guidance".

### **A Trip to Mexico**

I had \$2000 saved from a trip to New York where I taught in Jr. High School as a substitute and drove a taxi at night. I borrowed another \$2000 from my Aunt Rose and in early 1969 I went down to Mexico in my van with my dog Baba (named after Meher Baba, a spiritual leader with a following in Berkeley at that time). I looked for yarn ("lana" in Spanish – which also turns out to be slang for "money"). So I was driving around rural Mexico asking people if they knew where I could find money.

I did find sources of hand-spun and natural yarns and with the van full, I returned to Berkeley, and in July of 1969, I opened Dharma Trading Co. on University Ave. just down from the U.C. Berkeley campus. I allocated that \$4,000 to rent, deposits, shelves, inventory, etc. as shown in the original piece of paper I planned it on. (And saved all these years and now can't find!)

The underlying idea of the business was to put into daily practice what I was learning in my spiritual life, and when the business was profitable, use the profits to provide for my own needs and to fund social projects for those less fortunate. This was reflected in the businesses principles and goals which are still posted on the wall at Dharma and on its website and in the social projects we support Dharma Social Projects.

### **Guiding Principles and Goals**

From the beginning, my goal was to run a successful business without compromising my principles, which are similar to search giant Google's stated goal of "Don't be evil"

I didn't want to become what I viewed then as an evil businessman, or a profit-driven kind of guy. I wanted to see if I could get involved in business without sacrificing my ethical values. ▶

Therefore, Dharma Trading Co. was started on the principle that it's possible to be involved in business while maintaining good ethical values. This is to say that one can be successful in business while acting honestly, truthfully and fairly. Therefore, honest, truthful and fair treatment of customers, suppliers and employees is the most important goal of the company while it tries to make a profit.

Our goals are...

- To be a company that keeps its commitments to its customers, employees and suppliers.
- To "blow our customers' minds" with the excellence of our customer service.
- To make Dharma a great place to work.
- To make a profit.

We have succeeded in keeping to these ideals as evidenced by the exemplary reputation Dharma enjoys for its customer service, honesty and straightforwardness.

### **Our Environmental Scorecard**

Our Environmental Scorecard is something we're working on. Here's what we've been able to do so far:

1. We gave up styrofoam packing peanuts and replaced them with a packing material made from potato starch. It seems to do a good job of protecting the jars, and can be dissolved in water after. It costs us a lot more but what the hey.
2. The black containers for packing the dyes are now made 100% from ground-up recycled plastic. (A black color pellet is added to the molten plastic to give it a uniform color.)
3. We reuse or recycle incoming cardboard shipping boxes.
4. All of our new shipping boxes are now either partly or 100% made from recycled cardboard.
5. The plastic bags we use to protect the clothing are made from 30% recycled material.
6. We have been using Soy inks to print our catalogs and flyers.
7. The catalogues and flyers are being printed on recycled paper.
8. More of our clothing products are made without the use of chemicals.
9. We recycle our waste paper, bottles, cans.
10. We use 95% Post consumer recycled paper products in our warehouse and store.

### **Over the Last Forty Years**

Over the last 40 years a lot has happened – to Dharma and to me.

We started as a yarn store and then added dyes for Tie-Dye and then fabric paints, then T-shirts, then clothing, and on and on. I opened the store in Marin County in 1975, and closed the Berkeley store sometime after.

The company has operated a storefront on San Rafael's Fourth Street since 1975, though most of our business comes online and over the phone. We have grown from a single small retail store to a predominately e-commerce business with 70 full & part time employees, 30,000 square feet of office/warehouse/retail space and sales in many millions of dollars.

We started mailing a catalogue in the early 70's and the mail-order sales quickly overshadowed the store's and became the focus of the business. Later, in the early 90s when the internet was born, I built a rudimentary web site for Dharma which continues today, developed and perfected by other talented people who work here at Dharma. Hundreds of employees have passed through on their way to other lives. Some really great people who have joined in making Dharma an honest, straight talking company!

I've been involved in many other projects and businesses over the years, sometimes for years at a time, sometimes out of the country, but I've always kept Dharma Trading going and continued to develop it. I still come to work at Dharma part-time and my sons David and Sampson work here as well. These days, I'm more involved in the several social programs Dharma has initiated and funds for disadvantaged children in Bolivia and elsewhere:

Myself and all the folks who work at Dharma continue to this day trying to keep Dharma a Fair, Honest and Straight Talking company.

It's been a long strange trip!

Web site: [www.dharmatrading.com](http://www.dharmatrading.com)

# Dharma Trading Social

*As Bapak suggested, Dharma Trading uses a part of its profits to support social projects. Isaac Goff explains...*

I believe we have an obligation to share our good fortune. We believe in "Social Entrepreneurship", which for us means "helping others help themselves".

We also like the idea of giving children a fair chance at a full life and many of our projects have focussed on them. It is the efforts of the staff at Dharma and the support of our customers that make these projects possible.

Many of our projects have been located in Bolivia. We work there not because we have any particular connection to Bolivia, but rather because that is the door that has been opened for us. We partner with Solidarity Bridge, a Catholic charity under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Chicago which conducts medical, enterprise and educational missions to Bolivia.

## **Children's Heart Repair Project**

Since 2005 we have been funding open-heart surgeries for children in Bolivia at the rate of about one a month. These are children who are poor beyond your wildest dreams; they would have no future unless someone came up with money for an open heart surgery to repair a hole or replace a valve in their hearts. To date we have repaired about 50 little hearts.

On visits to Bolivia, I had a chance to meet some of the children whose open heart surgeries we have made possible. Meeting them and their parents was very emotional and very real. If one has children, or even if not, it's possible to understand the deep gratitude they feel for the saving of their child's life. For the latest on this program see: <http://www.dharmasocialprojects.com/heart.html>



*By the end of 2010, Dharma had screened 39,715 children in its Children's Vision Program in Bolivia*

## **Children's Vision Program**

During a 2004 trip to Bolivia I discovered that there does not exist a program for screening young children for vision problems as is common here in the USA. The cost of a private eye exam and corrective eyeglasses is totally out of reach of the poorest children, the indigenous kids for the most part.

Enabling children to see well seems like a worthwhile thing to do for a lot of reasons. So, Dharma to the rescue!

In partnership with Solidarity Bridge, we established the "Children's Vision Program" and hired a Bolivian coordinator and three assistants to go into the schools and orphanages in the poorest areas and test the kids for vision problems.

Those who test with problems are taken on Saturdays to an ophthalmologist for a complete eye exam. The ophthalmologist provides a prescription for eyeglasses for each child which are then emailed to Dharma in batches.

We in turn, email the prescriptions to China where our agent arranges the manufacture. The finished glasses are then sent by Fed Ex to Bolivia for distribution to the children. Dharma covers all the costs to enable this to happen.

By the end of 2010, we had screened 39,715 children and 1,236 teachers and provided glasses for 3,385 children and 493 teachers.

For the latest on this program see: <http://www.dharmasocialprojects.com/vision.html>

## **Sewing & Weaving Co-Ops**

In 2003 an old friend asked me if I would be willing to come with him down to Bolivia and try to develop some work for a sewing cooperative there. Bolivia is a very poor country with many problems and the level of poverty there is something we rarely encounter here in the United States. ▶

From that beginning, Dharma Trading has gone on to help several small sewing cooperatives to produce blank clothing for Dharma which we import and sell without profit in order to provide work for the coops. Over the years we have provided many hundred's of thousand dollars of income for some very poor folks. Among the co-ops we work with are:

Give  
and you will  
receive

**Warmis** is a co-op on the outskirts of Cochabamba of women who crochet and sew clothing.

**Kanchay** is a sewing co-op we helped initiate which sews a major part of our Bolivian children's dresses.

**Tata Estaban** is a vocational training program for graduates of a Catholic school in a town in the mountains which sews clothing for us.

**The Weaving Co-op** weaves the alpaca shawls available on our website.

The goal here is to provide work and therefore income so these families can improve their situation and sort things out themselves.

Dharma continues to expand its support for social projects both locally and elsewhere. Our newest effort is expanding the Children's Heart Repair into Paraguay.

For the latest on these and our other programs see:  
<http://www.dharmasocialprojects.com/index.html>



*Dharma supports weaving co-operatives in Bolivia. Isaac and his son David visit to meet the people*

"Give and you will receive" may sound like just a slogan or a only a quote, but I am here to tell you it has been true for me – emotionally, spiritually and financially.

## Preparing for World Congress

*David Hitchcock writes...*

The Zone 7 Council gathered for a meeting in Puebla, Mexico just before Easter. I have chosen a couple of aspects to briefly share:

### Preparing for the 2014 World Congress

We met and received a preliminary report from the initial core group, chaired by Fernando Fatah Nieva, (within the Mexican Congress Organizing Team – COT), were treated to a tour of the convention centre, immediately adjoining the historic/heritage site of Puebla. We then had an opportunity to share, ask questions and discuss how the rest of the Subud world, and particularly Zone 7, might support Subud Mexico (with only 50 to 75 active members) in this ambitious endeavour.

I had an opportunity to test with the male members of the COT, KCs, IHs & WSA about the Congress ▶



*Top: Attending the Zone 7 Council Meeting in Puebla.*

*Below: Puebla Convention Centre*

