

ISAAC GOFF, FOUNDER, DHARMA TRADING COMPANY



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Textile craftspersons and businesses who visit [Dharma Trading Company's website](#), or its retail store in San Rafael, California, like its laid-back atmosphere, excellent service and low prices, but they might be surprised to learn that this 46-year-old company is a multimillion-dollar business, shipping thousands of pounds of fabric dyes & paints, silk fabrics and cotton clothing each month to USA, Canada, Australia and Europe. 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 allowed me to see that there were planes of existence beyond the one on which I normally spent my days and that drugs could only 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 fit my personality and could lead to an inner guided life. Now, it's more than 46 years later and I have to say, it's worked for me, more or less.

But I mention the above only because it led to an epiphany that gave birth to Dharma Trading Co.

The Big Picture

It was in Los Angeles in 1968 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 to use them for the betterment of my own life as well as that of mankind. 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 correctly would cause all aspects of my life to align themselves and allow the power of God to flow through and guide my life. I already heard Bapak 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.

So I gave up the idea of turning on, tuning in, and dropping out. It was clear that business was my future and so, returning to Berkeley, I immediately began helping a Subud lady with her business. It was Dharma Pillow Works - she made Zafu and Zabuton 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 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 them via 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. (That led to some strange interactions!)

I did find sources of hand-spun and natural yarns and with the van full, I returned to Berkeley. 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 business's principles and goals which are still posted on the wall at Dharma and on its website and in the social projects we support.

Guiding Principles and Goals

From the beginning, my goal was to run a successful business without compromising my principles. 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.

Over the Last Forty-Six Years

Over the last 46 years, a lot has happened — to Dharma and to me. We started as a yarn store and then added fabric dyes for Tie-Dye and then fabric paints, then T-shirts, then clothing to dye and paint, and on and on. I opened a second store in Marin County in 1975 and closed the Berkeley store some years later. While the retail store continues to provide for local artists and craftspeople, 95% of our business comes from our website and annual catalog. We have grown from a single small retail store to a predominately e-commerce business with 70 full & part-time employees, 35,000 square feet of office/warehouse/retail space, and sales in many millions of dollars. We started mailing a catalog in the early '70s 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 website for Dharma, which was later, and continues today, to be developed and perfected by talented people who work here at Dharma.

Hundreds of employees have passed through on their way to other lives. Some really great people 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.

I, 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, and rewarding trip!