

Detached Attachment – An expression of Godliness¹

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Today's society is a result oriented society. It is all about being successful in whatever we do in life. We need to have lofty goals, achieve them and celebrate the success. Only then we are respected in the society, cared for or respected. Therefore, children are to be taught very early in their life how to be successful. This is the preoccupation for most parents today.

The path to success – Today's Paradigm

We have a certain understanding of how to succeed in what we do. This understanding comes from what we have been taught in today's educational system. The steps are as follows: First we need to develop a deep desire to achieve something. Then we need to set goals for what we want to achieve. Once we develop a deep desire we will work hard to meet the goal. Logically therefore we will achieve the goal. Achieving the goal is a total measure of success. Once we achieve success, we can celebrate it and enjoy the day for all the hard work we have put to achieve the goal we set forth with. This is the same lesson (or a cook book approach to success) being taught from a kindergarten school to the most reputed business school in the country offering a fancy MBA program.

For a person who has some grey matter (and also some grey hair) this will read like a text book recommendation. In his life he would have had several experiences that would have challenged every aspect mentioned above. The most striking thing would be the grand rule that "the logical outcome of putting hard work is nothing but meeting the goal" may not have been true. After genuine hard work and even showing results, somebody else may get the promotion or salary hike. This person would have utmost vented his anger and disappointment by resigning his job and going elsewhere. The second issue that will be challenged is the very meaning of success. This person, notwithstanding how many times he got salary hikes or missed promotions will begin to ask himself what exactly is success. He would have the nagging feeling that there is something more than getting promotions and salary hikes. Therefore he will come to the conclusion that keeping this as the measuring yard stick for success will be less meaningful. If the maturity is even more this person would have realized that this measure of success is itself a moving goal from time to time. In any case, even if he meets the goal most of the times he may not be a fully satisfied person in life.

The third issue that this person will also begin to challenge is the assumption of deep desire. His experience would have taught him that the main villain is "developing deep desire" as it prepares an individual *ex ante* to face up to too much stress. At times, it also tempts the person to resort to all kinds of means and reach the goal by hook or crook. The "means is

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less important than the ends idea” will improve his propensity to succeed but it will also slowly build internal conflict.

What it really means is that success is a costly affair today if we go by this paradigm. One may win the battle but lose the war. Achieving success may be at the cost of health, family and friendly relationships and even internal peace of mind. What is the true value of success if we can't have a peaceful sleep every night? Do we have an alternative paradigm to be successful in life? What is the reference frame for us to benchmark ourselves on this count? Shri Krishna offers a completely different perspective to us on these matters in *Bhagavad Gitā*. We shall see one śloka from chapter 4 in order to understand this.

Work & Freedom

Lord Krishna says that various activities that He performs does not taint Him or gets into Him (or gets attached to Him) in any manner (न मां कर्माणि लिपन्ति). Further He says that there isn't any covert or overt desire, anxiety or enthusiasm in Him regarding the results of the activities He performs (even though He is in the thick of activities) (न मे कर्मफले स्पृहा). The one who knows this aspect of mine and is able to experience such a similar feeling will not be bounded by the activities (कर्मभिर्न स बध्यते) one way or the other.

न मां कर्माणि लिपन्ति न मे कर्मफले स्पृहा ।
इति मां योऽभिजानाति कर्मभिर्न स बध्यते ॥ 4.14

*Na mām karmāṇi limpanti na me karmaphale spruhā
iti mām yohijānaati karmabhirna sa badhyate*

According to Lord Krishna there is a simple measure of success in activities that we engage in. It is our ability not to get bound by the activity. Getting bound or constrained by an activity essentially means that the effects of the activity and the outcomes affect a person seriously. On account of this the person may develop mental stress, serious health problems, sleeplessness or restlessness, over activity and ecstasy leading to abnormal behaviour and unusual activities. In fact the list of things that can happen to a person can be much longer than what has been enumerated here.

This is an antidote to the current paradigm of work and success. In order to understand why getting freedom from the effects of work may be a valuable approach, let us revisit the current paradigm of work and success. The “deep desire” aspect of the current paradigm is nothing but a mechanism to glue the work and the results expectation with such a strong adhesive that even at the slightest adversity that one faces or likely to face in his/her work antennas will open up. The fear of the result adversity will channelize all the valuable and vital energy into results management than focusing on work. The outcome of this results management could be either abandoning the work altogether and get into a downward spiral of mental depression or up the ante and invoke the “ends more important than means” rule and manage the results by hook or crook. Both are undesirable outcome from both the work perspective and the personality development of the doer. This scenario is

what Lord Krishna refers to as getting tainted by work or getting affected by results and outcomes of work.

Detached Attachment

What do we have to infer from Lord Krishna's message in the Gitā? The only way to avoid this trap is to practice detached attachment to work. At the outset this may sound like an oxymoron. People may come to a quick conclusion that this is an unworkable idea. How can one work with detachment? We need to understand the two words "detached" and "attachment" carefully. First we need attachment in doing work. Attachment happens in three ways:

- (a) Elaborate planning, setting goals and targets, identifying the kind of things to be done to accomplish the task etc.
- (b) Putting the best foot forward in terms of the available resources that can be committed for the work
- (c) Deep physical and mental involvement in the work that we are doing as it progresses, almost taking it to a level of passionate working

The idea so far is no different from what the current paradigm is trying to preach us. The difference, though, comes from the second term. Being detached is all about developing a certain orientation towards the results and outcomes as they begin to unfold. Being detached has three attributes:

- (a) Being completely indifferent to the results
- (b) Just ignoring the outcomes as though we have not even recognized them
- (c) Being in a state of mind similar to one where nothing pertaining to the results is cognizable to us

Developing such an approach to work will relieve us from a lot of wasteful thinking, mental stress and needless pressure. Most importantly work (and the outcomes) will cease to bother us too much. It will catapult us into a path of increased activity, joy of working, learning, taking the results in whichever way it unfolds. While all these may sound conceptually fine two questions will bother us.

How can we get into this mode of working? The only practical way that this can happen is to leave the responsibility of the results to someone than taking it onto our head. Our ancestral wisdom time and again says the responsibility for the results lay in the hands of the Lord. It is the grace of the Lord that showers one outcome vis a vis another. We need to deeply reflect on this concept and imbibe it in our life. We will find the responsibility for results will go out of us and we will work rather fearlessly (unmindful of the outcomes).

The other question that will bother us is will this result in better and greater outcomes than our current model? The answer is an emphatic yes. If you are in doubt closely observe a two or a three year old child. It follows all the principles that we listed above. The child does not bother about outcomes as it has left it to the parents to worry about it. The child is indifferent to outcomes. That is why if it fails in accomplishing the task by one method it

does not get upset and gets into depression. It simply abandons it and gets on to the next method. In fact it goes on and on in this journey keeping the parents on the toe all the time in this process. It is no wonder psychologists claim that the child at this age is in a very steep learning mode. If you are still not convinced yet that this can produce enormous success, reflect on the vast knowledge our ancestors created, in the fields of science, psychology, astronomy, medicine or language processing. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Detached attachment in short is nothing but an expression of Godliness in the world of work, activities and outcomes. Let us get inspired by this idea and march on our way to prosperity and glory!