

Discovering freedom from the effects of work¹

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Think of this situation. You are returning home after a very strenuous day in the office, almost physically exhausted. Half way you notice that there is an accident and they needed someone to take the affected person to the hospital. You spend the next two to three hours in this act. At the end of it you are personally satisfied to know that the person has been saved and is out of danger on account of your timely intervention. It provides joy and satisfaction and all the issues related to physical exhaustion melts away almost momentarily.

The Joy and Agony of Work

We do have pleasant occasions in work related matters. A person who puts in hard work for an extended period of time physically exhausting himself/herself hears that because of his/her work the client could sort out some major confusions and errors at their side. In other cases, the person would have been told that his/her contributions brought a significant difference to the lives of some people. The home maker toils for long hours only to rest at the end of the day late in the night with a satisfaction that she could play a very crucial role one way or the other in everybody's life in the house for the day. A stage artist at the end of a three hour performance senses that the people in the front were magically transformed and at that moment the artists regains all his/her freshness and perhaps is ready for one more performance. In all these cases, work related physical stress melts away and there is no mental stress whatsoever out of doing the work.

It is also a fact that when we engage in work we do not seem to discover joy always. Quite often work leads to agitation of the mind. For example, we put in hard work and somebody else gets the credit or recognition from the peers and superiors. This spoils the rest of the day for us the moment we come to know of this. We carry this bad mood home and spoil that place also. Work at times leaves a bad taste in us. We make a careful preparation of all that is required for an occasion over the last several days. When the occasion turns up, our work is simply brushed aside or ignored. Still worse, it is misunderstood and talked ill of. We wonder why we put in this effort and of what avail was this hard work. At other times, we are weighed down by work as we feel simply that the work to be done is far in excess of what is possible for the day. We catch up as fast we could, be on the run and stretch our physical limits only to return home an exhausted and a dissatisfied person.

These examples inform us of certain aspects related to work that we engage in:

- Work has the potential to leave certain impact or effect on us. The impact could be positive or negative.
- Physical exhaustion is not at all an issue in work related matters but mental agony is.

¹ Mahadevan, B. (2014). "Discovering freedom from the effects of work", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 12 (4), December, 2014, pp 19 – 21.

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- Work by itself is not the reason for drudgery or tiredness. It is the impact that it leaves on an individual that makes the difference.
- Only when the mind begins wandering and evaluating the work and the related issues the impact is created.
- A negative impact makes us feel strongly that work can be a drudgery, very tiresome and so on. On the other hand, a positive impact could take away all the physical exhaustion and make us very refreshing, energetic and cheerful even after a long work session.

The question therefore is what causes these impacts. More specifically, we would like to know how we can prevent the mind from wandering into needless thoughts when we engage in work. We shall look at one *śloka* in *Bhagavad Gitā* chapter 4 to get some ideas related to this.

Experiencing positive impact out of work

Shri Krishna points to three aspects related to work that we may want to address in order to keep the mind under check so that work has a greater propensity to leave a desirable impact on us. The first aspect is to sever the linkage (or bondage) between work and fruits (*tyaktvā karma-phalāsangam*). If we are unable to do this we may be starting with a great propensity to get miserable. The second aspect that Krishna brings forth is to be ever satisfied (*nitya-trptaḥ*). Finally, He says, we need to also develop a state of no dependence on anything (rather absolute feeling of independence). With such a state of mind, Lord Krishna says that even if someone is engaged in the thick of work (*karmaṇyabhi-pravṛttopi*) it as though the person is not engaged in any work (*naiva kincit-karoti saḥ*). By this it is implied that the work leaves no undesirable trace on the individual. All the three ideas mentioned here are counter-intuitive to our current understanding and approach to work. Therefore we need a greater understanding of these.

त्यक्त्वा कर्मफलासङ्गं नित्यतृप्तो निराश्रयः ।
कर्मण्यभिप्रवृत्तोऽपि नैव किञ्चित्करोति सः ॥ 4.20

*tyaktvā karma-phalāsangam nitya-trpto nirāśrayaḥ
karmaṇyabhi-pravṛttopi naiva kincit-karoti saḥ*

Role of our mind in the work we do

The three ideas appear to have a common purpose. By taking these positions even before we engage in work, we can ensure that notwithstanding whatever happens during the course of the work and fruits of the work unfold, our mind will be free from agitations. On the contrary, even if we violate one of the three, we pit ourselves against our mind, which has the habit of looking for some reason to brood over all the time. Let us understand this with respect to all the three aspects.

Linking the work and the results strongly is a sure method to activate the mind towards brooding and agitating. This is because while we may have some locus of control on the work related efforts that we need to put, we may have very little control with respect to the outcomes. Since this is a universal law, glueing these two with a strong adhesive will be akin to a pair of players insisting that since they put together genuine and substantial efforts in chasing the ball and hitting hit hard against the opponent court, they must win the Wimbledon doubles finals. As bad luck would have it the two might have been playing very well only to be stopped by rain and when resuming after sometime, the time was not in their favour. A more pleasant approach to the game of tennis would be to enjoy every moment of the game by putting the result orientation and evaluation process in the back burner.

The idea of being “ever satisfied” is a psychological high ground from which we can operate. If we are willing to begin in this fashion, we have a zero probability to get disappointed with the outcomes and any positive outcome will be an added bonus. This releases huge energy from the needless mind wandering and the released energy will be channelized into the work that we are engaged in. This can only make the work even better and will eventually increase the propensity to obtain the results that we have planned (without constantly worrying about it or evaluating the outcomes and the progress of the process). The logical fall out of these two conditions is that we suddenly discover a lot of freedom. Freedom from fear of results, from the need to scratch somebody else’s back, from mental agitations and from constraints of one kind or the other imposed by systems and people around us when we actually engage in work.

What we actually need is complete freedom from the clutches of work, and the actual outcomes. Therefore, these apparently simple ideas need to be cultivated in our mind. It requires repeated contemplation of these ideas and its usefulness. Only after a long period of contemplation we can make the mind “accept” these ways of approaching work. To speed up this process of mind acceptance we need to keep trying. We also need to grace of Lord Krishna to catalyse this change process in our mind.