

The World of Duality: Relevance to our Work¹

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Every one of us constantly engage in work 24x7. Nobody escapes this universal rule. Even the 8 hours of sleeping that we do on a daily basis is also an important and useful work. We seem to be subjected to another universal rule pertaining to work. This is judging the results and through that making our own assessment of how we have done the work and whether the results are commensurate to our efforts. Let us return to this simple example of sleep. Let us start by setting a “target” that we must get 8 hours of sound sleep. In simple terms sound sleep refers to a condition in which any considerable amount of sound made around the sleeping person will not disturb his/her sleep.

Once we get up from sleep, the first thing we may notice is that we did or did not sleep for the targeted 8 hours. This can, for example, potentially bother us and make us feel that despite our best efforts to get a good sleep for 8 hours we slept for only 6 hours. For those who get too much into such a thought process, it is almost certain that they may not get 8 hours sleep tomorrow or the day after. They will burn some midnight oil “worrying” about how to get longer hours of sleep, which will further induce some more sleeplessness. For such people, even sleeping pills cannot solve the problem at hand. If this is what can happen to a simple act of sleeping, imagine our plight with a host of work that we do on a daily basis.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that our levels of happiness, satisfaction etc. are all related to the work we do, the outcomes we get from the work and our own assessment of these outcomes. Some feel that work is not rewarding enough. Despite putting efforts the results are not commensurate enough. This dampens the spirit of doing work and leads one into a vicious cycle. The interconnection between work, outcomes and assessment needs to be well understood otherwise, we may end up in a situation that work can be a boring activity and an act of drudgery. Many in the modern society already feel this way and they escape from the clutches of work through a ritual called “weekend getaway”.

Lord Krishna offers some insights to Arjuna pertaining to the interconnection between work, outcomes and assessment. Further He provides some advice on how we need to handle these aspects. We shall take a look at this in some detail.

Work, Outcomes, Assessment and Feelings

In *Bhagavad Gitā*, Lord Krishna points to Arjuna that if he engages in work with a certain understanding, the effects of work will not bother him at all. Since the imminent problem at hand for Arjuna was whether to engage in war or not, he takes the example of war itself to drive home this idea. According to Lord Krishna, war leads to a result which could be either winning or losing (*jayājayau*). This will in turn lead to an outcome of gain or loss (*lābhālābhau*) and it affects the person engaged in the war by way of happiness or

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otherwise (*sukha-dukhe*). He urges Arjuna to engage in work by treating the pairs of opposites alike (*same kṛtvā*) so that the work and outcomes does not bother him (*naivam pāpam avāpsyasi*).

सुखदुःखे समे कृत्वा लाभालाभौ जयाजयौ ।

ततो युद्धाय युज्यस्व नैवं पापमवाप्स्यसि ॥ 2.38

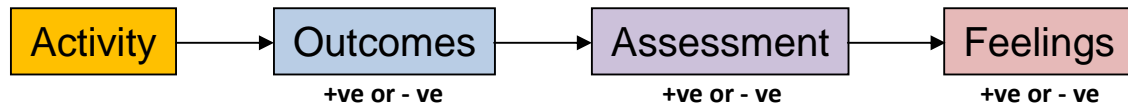
*sukha-dukhe same kṛtvā lābhālābhau jayājayau
tato yuddhāya yujyasva naivam pāpam avāpsyasi*

A framework for understanding work and outcomes

Although this *śloka* refers to war and the outcomes, through this *śloka* Lord Krishna indeed points to a generic framework to understand the nature of work and outcomes and its effect on an individual engaging in work. Irrespective of any work that we engage in, we must understand clearly four related components and their logical connections:

- Work – The activity that we do keeping certain targets and results in mind
- Outcome – The actual outcome that accrues to us once we finish the work
- Assessment – Outcome per se does not make any sense to us until we assess it using some yard sticks (we use the term performance measurement to indicate this)
- Feelings – Our happiness or sadness is a function of what we found after assessing the outcome of a work

To give an example, somebody wants to get a promotion next year and puts his/her best efforts in all that he/she has been doing on a daily basis towards this (work). The work he/she performs leads to outcomes (for example he/she obtained new business for the month, his/her sub-ordinate complained about his/her attitude etc. – these are outcomes). There is an assessment of his/her overall performance by his/her superior at the end of the year (known as performance appraisal). Once he/she gets to know the rating, the realization comes that he/she may or may not get the promotion and this will lead to happiness or depression in the individual.



There are some fundamental principles in this framework that we need to understand. First of all, the four components always exist in any work and they are strictly in the order indicated. You cannot jump one step and go the next. It always happens sequentially. Except for work all the other three belong to the domain of “duality”. By duality we understand that it can be positive or negative or good or bad. There is no guaranteed mechanism to say that only the good part of the duality will manifest in the case of the last three components all the time. In other words, in life, there is an element of surprise with respect to the last three components. Unless we understand this part and know how to handle this, work can

be drudgery and a boring act as mentioned before. Therefore, the focus must shift to this aspect.

Sensible approach to Work

The master stroke of Lord Krishna lies in addressing this aspect of handling the world of dualities that are associated with the work. He urges Arjuna to develop mental equipoise towards the last three components of the framework. That is the only way to ensure that work cannot leave any trace of ill feeling or bad taste in an individual. There is a popular misunderstanding of these ideas. Developing mental equipoise does not mean stop setting targets for what we want to do. This framework never prohibits one from setting targets. It merely addresses the aftermath of that when the reality unfolds in a manner throwing surprises at times. It enables one to set targets without a sense of fear or apprehension of whether it will be attained or not.

Similarly, developing mental equipoise does not mean developing a casual attitude or approach towards performance appraisal, outcomes etc. It merely prepares the mind to a state of gracious acceptance of outcomes and assessments. In the absence of this attitude, bad result means hatred or ill feelings and good results means climbing to cloud nine. On the other hand, developing mental equipoise will lead an individual to a state of mind wherein these aspects will stop bothering. In this process, a lot of mental energy will be freed up, which can be gainfully redirected towards the work itself.

An individual taking such an approach will eventually find that this increases the propensity to succeed in work, although the longing to succeed and the fear of failure has long faded to the background. This is the ultimate goal for us with respect to engaging in work. This is the basic prescription of Lord Krishna in *Gītā*.