

Evolving Oneself through Work¹

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One of the most pre-occupying thoughts in our mind in today's lifestyle pertains to work. We are constantly worried about the type of job opportunities and career options ahead of us. There are several good reasons for us to work. The top of the list is to make a living by earning our livelihood. There are other reasons as well for us to work. It makes one active, feel healthy and productive. Moreover, by doing work we are able to spend time usefully. This is perhaps one reason why an increasing number of senior citizens consider having another career post-retirement. Otherwise, given the current strong influence mass media such as TV has, we may end up becoming lethargic and subdued to the vast majority of TV episodes flashing in front of us 24x7.

A number of people from the womenfolk have also taken to working (as a serious career choice). Especially in big cities, this practice is prevalent and is seen as the means to close the gap between life aspirations and wherewithal to meet such aspirations. In developed western countries such as the US, even the students have to work to fund their living and educational requirements. Thankfully we are not yet "so developed" to force our students to imitate the same practice in India also.

Our long term goal in working life

Given such a trend and perspective towards work it is not surprising that we catch up early with the younger minds and orient them towards ideas pertaining to work. It is very common to see schools introducing a few sessions on career counseling for students while they are in 9th or 10th standard itself. Some experts are invited to educate the students about work, what to look for in the future, what could be some of the career goals etc. The young minds are exposed to such career counseling sessions from then on during multiple occasions. Once they reach higher secondary education the exercise is repeated, and it continues while they are in college. Even after they graduate and take up a job, these opportunities are made available to them periodically by institutions having expertise in the subject. These exposures shape the mind of every individual in terms of the need for working, the ultimate goal in working life etc.

If we carefully analyse the career counseling advices given, it falls into two categories. One set of advice pertains to what types of job opportunities are available, the educational background and the skills required to secure such jobs etc. The other part is about what is the trajectory to be pursued once we have set into work. This is called career progression. For the most part, career progression is understood as a mechanism by which one can get faster promotions, better salary and perquisites and improve the opportunities for locating better options both within an organization and outside. An individual who has been good in meeting these attributes is generally considered to have a better career progression trajectory and a successful person in his/her working life. Such people would have changed

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job several times and in the process climbed up the ladder with good salary gains. In a way these attributes and signs of success invariably sets the long term goals of working life for every one of us.

Searching for Meaning in our Work Life

While the current thinking on long term goals of working life remains so, there is increasing evidence from practice that people are deprived of meaning in their work. Work practices seem to induce more stress and job burnout among individuals. This threatens to affect their health as evident from increase in the incidence of chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes even among the young working professionals. Is there a problem with respect to our perspectives towards what must be our long term goals in working? Is there something more than promotions and salary increases that we need to focus on as we mature in our working life? Are there ways by which we can conclude that we have matured even as we continue to work for economic and social reasons we discussed before?

Lord Krishna offers certain perspectives in His discussion on Karma Yoga, which might perhaps provide us newer dimensions. We shall see one perspective now.

Lord Krishna says that an individual does not reach (न पुरुषोऽश्नुते) a workless state (नैष्कर्म्यं) without starting the work (कर्मणामनारम्भात्). Further he says that one does not also attain a state of supreme fulfillment (न च सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति) by just giving up work (संन्यसनादेव).

न कर्मणामनारम्भात् नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्नुते ।

न च संन्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति ॥ 3.4.

*na karmanaam anaarambhat naishkarmyam purusho ashnute
na ca samnyasanaat eva siddhim samadhigacchati*

Self-Evolution: The Primary Goal in our Working Life

There are two interesting, albeit subtle messages in this sloka. First of all, Lord Krishna suggests that we begin our journey in the working life to eventually evolve to a state of worklessness. A workless state is one in which we experience fulfillment and contentment while engaging in the thick of work. By that it means while we work, the effects of work does not bother us too much and we can be in “a free state of mind”. Clearly this will indicate that we have evolves our “inner-self” and have developed a strong character. Viewed in this perspective the long term goal of life is to reach a state of worklessness. The second message we get is that work is the only means for the evolution of our “self”. By giving up work we actually give up the possibility of evolution of our “self”.

We need a good example to understand this issue. If we carefully observe a world renowned sportsperson (say cricketer) or a musician, he/she would have started his/her career with a

different understanding of his/her profession. He/she would have initially thought that the profession is all about becoming famous, earning well etc. However, as the person goes through his/her career, the perspective changes. He/she will begin to see the career and profession as philosophy and a way of life. Once he reaches this state, his/her actions will carry more meaning and purpose and eventually when he/she hangs the boot, there will be a feeling of fulfillment and contentment. All great personalities who have walked through their career paths, be it a government or corporate, job, in the field of performing arts or public service will share a similar experience, albeit in varying degrees.

We should not confuse this with our popular understanding that we work to earn our living. While that objective is also important it cannot be the only or the most dominant goal that guides every choice we make in our working life. Any attempt to discount the need for evolving our "self" through work must be kept under check. Otherwise in the long run it will prove to be counter-productive.

A person pursuing a career path bereft of the need to evolve one's "self" will end up being "internally poor" on the day he/she hangs the boot for good. It is not a good idea to feel (in our heart) like a "defeated person" at the end of an apparently successful and long professional career. While we want to be conscious of what the outside world thinks of us, we are also answerable to our own "inner self". The choice is ours in making the right balance in our career choice and goals.