

The acid test for reaching the state of worklessness¹

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The moment we engage in the work, all our five sense organs become very active in an involuntary basis. When others talk about our work, comment on certain aspects of our work, it leaves a trace, positive or negative, on us. Even when somebody observes our work (observes the way we do the work), we become very conscious of it and it does leave an impact. The natural fallout of this is that we anxiously await others to acknowledge our work. A homemaker wants the other members in the family to do this to her. The person working in the office also has a similar expectation from his/her colleagues. With the advent of facebook and other such social media, this issue has moved into even greater heights. Today, people load a picture or a joke in a social networking site and wait anxiously to count the number of “likes”. If people close to them do not press the “like button” it spoils the day for the person who uploaded the picture.

Work and Worklessness

Where are we heading in this journey? Should we engage in activities in our life for the love of labour or for the “likes” that we need to gather from people around us, known, near and dear? More importantly we need to also understand if this will have any effect on the work that we do in the long run. It will be useful to first define two contrasting state in this context; work and worklessness.

The *state of work* is one in which one engages in any activity and is in many ways affected, bound or constrained by the work itself. For instance, the results arising out of work will affect the person doing the work. Alternatively, comments and judgments that others make about the work will also affect the doer. Finally, the way others engage in the work and are treated vis-à-vis the doer of the work will also affect the doer. For example, the behavior of people in social networking sites will neatly fit into this description. On the other hand, the *state of worklessness* is one in which none of the above things can affect the doer. The person engaging in the work is so immersed in it that there is no scope for these possibilities.

Honestly, when we all engage in any work we always have a wish list; let anything happen in the work environment, it should not taint me or affect me in anyway. This is exactly the same as being in a state of worklessness as defined above. Unfortunately the reality is different from this wish list and the more we think about it, we seem to be moving away from it. How can one achieve this goal of being in a state of worklessness? What skills and attitude do we need to develop to reach this stage? Lord Krishna points to these aspects in a few *ślokas* in chapter 5 of *Bhagavad Gītā*.

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A person who stays always connected with the quintessential nature of the self (*yuktaḥ*) may while engaging in the thick of activities in the world will still mentally feel (*manyeta*), “I am not doing anything” (*naiva kiñcitkaromīti*). This is the state of worklessness that one can achieve. How does the transition to worklessness happen?

If we reflect on this issue a little deeply we will come to the conclusion that the critical players in this are sensory organs. We have two sets of sensory organs. One set pertains to receiving the signals from the outside world (known as *jñānendriyās*). Only when we “actively” see or hear what is happening outside will we be able to take cognizance of it and begin worrying about it or otherwise. Similarly, when we choose to react to the unfolding event then we need to use our organs of action (*karmendriyās*). Therefore, fundamentally the transition from the state of work to worklessness can happen only when the stimuli and response signals arising out of these organs are simply blocked so that the link is cut at its root.

This is exactly what Shri Krishna is pointing to. He says when a person is engaging the sensory organs of knowledge for seeing (*paśyan*), hearing (*śṛṇvan*), feeling (*sprśan*), smelling (*jighran*) and tasting (*aśnan*) he will behave as though these signals stay at the organs level only (*indriyāṅīndriyārtheṣu vartanta*) and not enter into the field of mental activity to create ripples. In the same way when the actions such as going (*gacchan*), breathing (*śvasan*), talking (*pralapan*), taking things (*grhṇan*) and discharging (*visrjan*) take place he/she will behave in a similar way.

नैव किञ्चित्करोमीति युक्तो मन्येत तत्त्ववित् ।

पश्यन्-शृण्वन्-स्पृशन्-जिघ्रन्-अश्रन्-गच्छन्-स्वपन्-श्वसन् ॥ 5.08

*naiva kiñcitkaromīti yukto manyeta tatvavit
paśyan-śṛṇvan-sprśan-jighran-aśnan-gacchan-svapana-śvasan*

प्रलपन्-विसृजन्-गृह्णन्-उन्मिषन्-निमिषन्नपि ।

इन्द्रियाणीन्द्रियार्थेषु वर्तन्त इति धारयन् ॥ 5.09

*pralapan-visrjan-grhṇan-unmiṣan-nimiṣann-api
indriyāṅīndriyārtheṣu vartanta iti dhārayan*

Become a witness to life’s happenings

What is the implication of these ideas to us? Shri Krishna is proposing a very unconventional role for the doer. He asks the doer to mentally stay away from these and become a mere witness like any outsider. In other words, there is a message that we need to play a dual role; one of a doer and the other of being a mere witness or a spectator to our own acts. This is rather very tough for us to understand leave alone bring it into practice. We need to be first motivated to this idea. We also need some workable idea to bring it into practice. Let us look at these two aspects in some detail.

There is a huge difference between a doer and a witness. Imagine that three people engage in a verbal fight, trading all kinds of charges against each other. This goes on for about an hour and during this entire episode there is one person watching the whole event. The entire episode leaves a bad taste at the end for the three engaged in this fight. Each one is mentally agitated, feels sad about what others told about him/her, plans for a vengeance at a later time etc. On the other hand, for the person witnessing the whole event, it leaves no trace. He/she has no ill-will against any of them and there is no need to even make a value judgment about them or the episode. The thoughts dissolve just like a passing cloud the moment another activity catches his/her attention.

While the idea of witness is definitely appealing, how is it possible to bring it into practice? Think about the artist in a theatre performance. This person may play the cruel role of a dictator in the drama and make every one scared of him by his deeds, gestures and speech in the drama. Yet when the drama is over and he changes his costumes and steps out of the theatre, he might possibly be a very gentle and mild mannered person. The charm is he is managing both the roles. In fact when he is acting he knows very well that that his true nature is different and he is playing a role for the time being. We need to cultivate this habit when we confront many things in our life.

We need to be self-reminded all the time that we are nothing but divinity in the purest form and for the time being we are acting a role with a name, date of birth, gender etc. This is the clarion call of the Upanishads. *Śvetāśvatara Upanishad* proclaims that we are all children of immortality. Once we contemplate deeply and repeatedly on this, there is a possibility to truly become a witness in life. That will allow us to have a ring side view of life and perhaps enjoy it fully without getting involved. This is the acid test to reach a state of worklessness.