

# The secret behind detached attachment

*B Mahadevan<sup>1</sup>*

The art of doing a job very well revolves around the idea of getting deeply engaged with the work that we do. While this is an important aspect and an undisputable fact, what we do not seem to have clarity on is the meaning of the term “deeply engaged” and its larger implications. A straightforward meaning of this is to put our body, mind, intellect and the senses into the work that we do and give full attention to the job at hand. Another way to describe this is to put the best foot forward.

A researcher in a laboratory has a greater propensity to succeed if he/she is able to have a concentrated attention on the research work. Even if the researcher encounters several obstacles and unknowns he/she needs to have a focused approach to the job on hand in order to succeed in the discovery process. One can say the same about the CEO of a company in his/her efforts to improve the market share. The rule cannot be any different for a student, an entrepreneur or a sportsperson.

In today’s terms, this would mean physical, intellectual and mental engagements. By intellectual engagement we bring in considerable analytical thinking into the work we do. By mental engagement we let the mind get involved, pick up its own emotions arising out of work and outcomes. This may unwittingly lead us into mental stress, job burnout and other hazards.

## **The art of doing a job effectively**

This method of doing a job effectively has its own implications. This is because quite often people successfully accomplishing tasks have also paid a significant price in the process. Some might have completely neglected their personal health and instead focused on the job on hand. Others ignore their personal life to achieve this, not paying enough attention to the relationships with their children and the spouse. Some others give up their social life, other interests that they may have and instead focus only on these. All these happen due to the fact that most would have encountered enormous pressure, mental tension and stress in the process of accomplishing the task successfully. Therefore, to address the mental stress and pressure they would have ignored other aspects of their life.

All these behavioural responses seem perfectly aligned with our original definition of “being deeply engaged” in the job. Unfortunately, in today’s style of working these are taken for granted in order to succeed in work. Individuals are least bothered about these issues until a major catastrophe hits them personally. A job achieved at the cost of destruction of one’s own personality may appear well executed for the organization. But it cannot be so from the individual’s perspective. Even for the organizations, this method of claiming success is faulty as it is unsustainable in the long run.

---

<sup>1</sup> *B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.*

How do we solve this problem? How can individuals escape the tyranny of mental stress and health hazards even when they put their best foot forward? In chapter 5 of *Bhagavad Gītā*, Shri Krishna suggests a certain orientation with which an individual should engage in the world of activities. Let us look at it in some detail.

### **The Lotus Leaf in the Water**

Shri Krishna suggests two steps to completely do away with the stress. Step one is to get detached from the work (*saṅgam tyaktvā*) even while engaging in the work. This is a confusing statement. How can one engage in work in a detached fashion? Since engagement and detachment are simultaneously proposed, it is clear that it is pointing to two related aspects of work. The engagement pertains to physical engagement in the work. This is akin to putting the best foot forward as explained above. The detachment pertains to mentally disengaging from the outcomes and results arising out of the work.

This introduces another complexity. How is it possible to manage both at the same time? This is like two parts of one's self working in an independent fashion. This is not a utopian idea. When somebody takes the responsibility for the outcome other than the doer it is possible to achieve this. A two year old child is not worried about the outcomes and implications of the activity it is engaged in. The child merely concentrates on the work at hand. That is why the child will never be stressed out or exhausted in any manner. On the other hand, the parents are stressed out as they seem to be worried. Similarly, the daily wages employee helping in the construction of the most beautiful art gallery or a temple in the city is not bothered about the results. He will simply do his job of dressing the stones and shifting them from his place of work into the proposed building. It is for the supervisor or the *stapathi* (the master sculptor) to worry about this.

In both the above examples, this has been possible because the doer has left the responsibility for results and outcomes to somebody else. Shri Krishna suggests a very similar approach to handle the problem on our hands. Therefore as the second step in the process, He suggests that the doer of the work should simply leave the results and outcomes in the hands of Brahman, the ultimate divinity. This is best done by making it as an offering unto Brahman (*brahmaṇyādhyā karmāṇi*). If the doer of an act knows how to do this, all the mental stress will simply evaporate leaving no trace of stress on the him/her (*lipyate na sa pāpena*).

Shri Krishna gives a simile to describe the state of such a person. He says that such a person will be like a lotus leaf in the water (*padmapatram-ivāmbhasā*). Although the lotus leaf stays in the water all the time, when we take it out, we notice that it is perfectly dry (indicating that it is unaffected by the moisture even a bit). In the same manner, a person in the thick of activities in the world will not at all be tainted by the after effects of work, whatsoever.

ब्रह्मण्याधाय कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा करोति यः ।  
लिप्यते न स पापेन पद्मपत्रमिवाम्भसा ॥ 5.10

*brahmaṇyādhāya karmāṇi saṅgaṃ tyaktvā karoti yaḥ  
lipyate na sa pāpena padmapatram-ivāṃbhasā*

## **Offering our work and outcomes**

The recommendations finally boil down to this act of making our work and outcomes as an offering to the God. This can happen only under the following conditions:

- (a) One should be able to **loosen the vice like grip on outcomes** that stems mainly out of “what is in it for me” approach to doing everything in life. This is possible only when we critically question this attitude to life. If we are able to relate this attitude to the enormous mental stress we will potentially go through there is a real possibility of progressing in this dimension.
- (b) We must have a **deeper trust on the Divinity**. For most of us, the ideas of God, its transcendence and its omnipotent and omniscient nature are at best theoretical. We invoke them from time to time to solve some petty and immediate problems such as getting a promotion, passing an examination etc. After that the idea disappears into the background. We need to deepen this thought and elevate it from a mere transactional dimension to a deep experiential dimension.

These two are inevitable components of the journey we need to make in order to effortlessly surrender all our actions and their outcomes to God. That is the only way to reach the state of detached attachment. For this effort of ours, the reward we will get will be a life which will be increasingly tension free. Is it not worth the effort?

.