

# The Axioms of Meaningful Work<sup>1</sup>

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One of the central themes in *Bhagavad Gitā* is that work is a very enjoyable activity. Not only work is enjoyable, it is the only way an individual can evolve, flower into a full blown personality and lead a life of contentment. This is in direct conflict with our current understanding of work and its effect on us. A vast majority of people all over the world are increasingly complaining of deprived meaning at their work place. When work becomes less meaningful, it invariably introduces enormous stress in a person and results in what is now frequently discussed, viz., job burnout.

The problems of stress and job burnout are not the exclusive domain of office goers. A child studying for the examinations, a home maker attending to household chores, a priest attending to various activities in the temple and a social worker can all experience work stress and job burnout. This is because irrespective of what they are engaged in, they are all doing some work or the other. Therefore, any opportunity of deprived meaning of the work anybody does, will land him/her into similar problems. Given this, we are indeed curious to know how Lord Krishna provides an anti-thesis to this perspective of work and assures us that work could indeed be a fulfilling activity.

In the *Gitā*, there are certain prescriptions to work that Lord Krishna points out to Arjuna. These could indeed become the key principles behind approaching work or for that matter in anything that we do in our life. We shall look at five important axioms of work.

## Axiom 1: There is no state of “no work”

The first axiom that we all need to understand is that there is no such thing in anybody’s life as “not doing any work”. According to Lord Krishna, we are all born with a certain inherent nature (*prakṛtijairguṇaiḥ*) and that will drive all the choices that we make in response to multitude of situations arising in our life every moment. For example, there are several occasions in our personal as well as professional life during which we think many times and go with the intention of not saying anything or reacting to the unfolding situation that we are going to face. Ironically, quite often it does not happen to be so. We end up getting involved in a manner befitting our nature. We have very little control on staying out of action (*kāryate hyavaśa karma*).

न हि कश्चित्क्षणमपि जातु तिष्ठत्यकर्मकृत् ।  
कार्यते ह्यवशः कर्म सर्वः प्रकृतिजैर्गुणैः ॥ 3.5

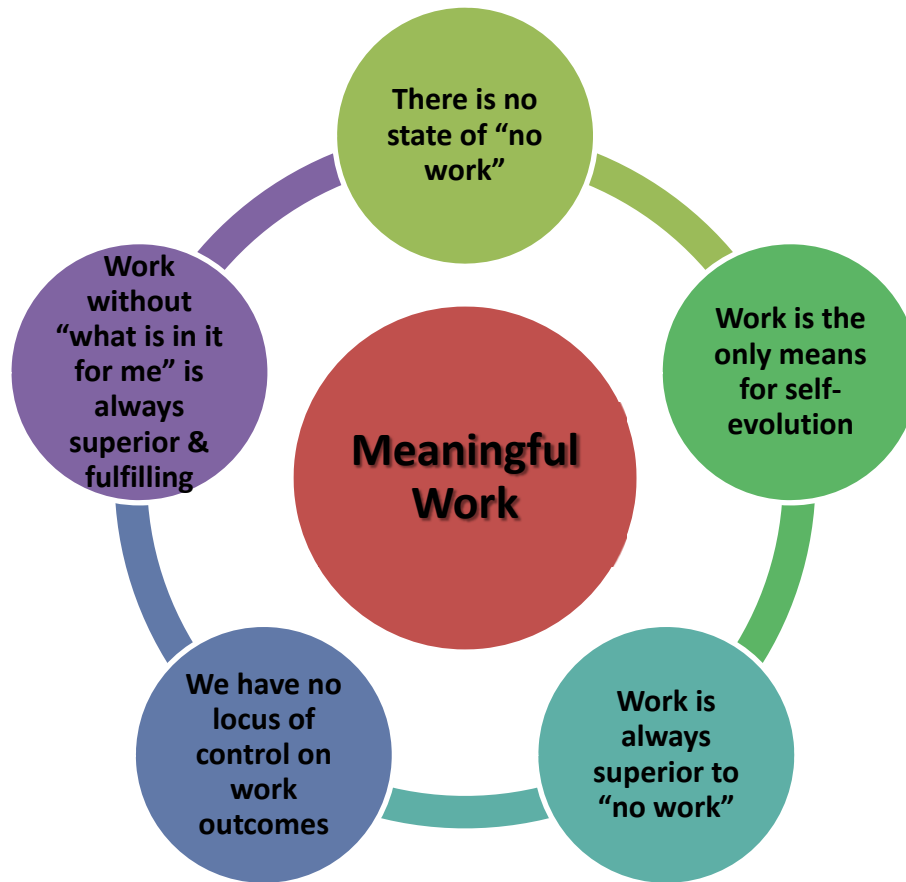
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<sup>1</sup> Mahadevan, B. (2014). "The Axioms of Meaningful work", *Sadguru's Blessings*, Vol. 11 (11), July, 2014, pp 13 - 15.

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*na hi kaścit kṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt  
kāryate hyavaśa karma sarvaḥ prakṛtijairguṇaih*

This axiom has two important implications. First, we need to be clear that instead of wasting our efforts on staying out of action, we may instead want to think about how to engage in action. The second implication is that changing our response to emerging situations is not a superficial activity. It will indeed amount to changing our very nature. This shifts our approach to work from “what to do?” to “how to do?”



## **Axiom 2: Work is the only means for evolution of oneself**

Lord Krishna says that without engaging in the world of work (*na karmaṇām anārambhāt*) we will never be able to reach a state of “actionlessness” (*naiṣkarmyam puruṣośnute*). Actionlessness is a state in which work, its after effects and ramifications will not bother us so much. This points to the maturity that an individual can attain in his/her approach to work. It is the ultimate goal of working and hallmark of evolution of an individual in his/her life. There is no charm in jumping up and down when work brings along with it certain ups and downs. As we all know, currently for a number of us work creates a lot of stress and problems.

न कर्मणामनारंभात् नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्रुते । (3.4)

*na karmaṇām anārambhāt naiṣkarmyam puruṣośnute*

This axiom challenges our own understanding of what for are we working. It suggests alternatives ways of measuring our progress in our working life. While promotions, salary increases and other such parameters are important they will be balanced with the need to reach the state of “actionlessness” in our own efforts to judge progress. The goal of our working life should be to eventually reach a stage where work, its outcomes and ramifications will neither affect us nor stop us from putting our best foot forward as work situation demands.

### **Axiom 3: Engaging in work is always superior to not doing any work**

Axiom 3 directly follows from Axioms 1 and 2. When there is no such state of “no work” and work invariably leads us to a higher stage of evolution it logically follows to axiom 3. Therefore Lord Krishna advises us to engage in work ordained to us (*niyatam kuru karma*) as situations unfold in life and we face the reality. He tells us that work is superior to “no work” (*karma jyayo hyakarmanah*).

नियतं कुरु कर्म त्वं कर्म ज्यायो ह्यकर्मणः । (3.8)

*niyatam kuru karma tvam karma jyayo hyakarmanah*

Imagine that ever since you are born you chose not to engage in any action or work. What would that mean? You would have acquired no knowledge of the world and would have no practical understanding of anything in life. Your skill set will be empty and you will be like a blissfully ignorant and at times a stupid person in life. Therefore even from this perspective this axiom makes more sense.

### **Axiom 4: Other than the work itself, we have no locus of control on other aspects of work**

At a fundamental level work has two basic aspects which are sequential; the effort required to perform the work and the outcome or results. Lord Krishna says that you have the locus of control for the former only. The outcomes are a function of a combination of complex things which we cannot even enumerate fully quite often. Take the simple case of crossing the road and catching a bus. We can put the requisite efforts but may not be able to have a 100% say on the outcome. We would have crossed the road in time but the bus driver for some reason would have chosen not to stop the bus even after our frantic waving of the hand. Alternatively, we would have crossed, the bus could have stopped but even before our turn came to board the bus, driver would have moved from the bus stop. A third possibility is that we were unsuccessful in crossing the road despite our efforts because some other obstruction was will

miss the bus. The fourth possibility is that we not only crossed, but comfortably boarded the bus and reached our destination. There are numerous other possibilities in this case.

Even in this simple example we find that while the effort is ours (*karmaṇevādhikāraṣṭe*), the result does not seem to be in our hands totally (*mā phaleṣu kadācana*). Also what we notice is that it will be difficult to pinpoint who is indeed causing the final result of our catching the bus or otherwise (*mā karmaphalaheturbhūḥ*). It is impossible to identify the direct and indirect entities involved in this result creation process, leave alone controlling them. Even if we have partially identified the entities affecting the outcome, we can at best influence them hoping the result will be favourable to us. This is true of the last ball victory or loss in an IPL cricket match or getting or losing our promotion this year or getting an admission in the college.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।

मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 2.47

*karmaṇevādhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana*  
*mā karmaphalaheturbhūḥ mā te sango'stvakarmaṇi*

The most important implication of this reality about work and results is that wisdom must dawn on us that focusing on work rather than on dreaming for results is more sensible. Furthermore, it will make us more tolerant of outcomes even after we put our best efforts towards a work. Efforts to tweak the results (reports) etc. are unsound in their logic.

### **Axiom 5: Work without attachment (what is in it for me) is bound to be always superior & fulfilling**

Everybody plans for certain outcomes, and commits their best efforts in order to realize those outcomes. However, the message from axiom 4 is loud and clear. If we engage in work by constantly thinking about the favourable outcomes from the work, we have a chance to get disappointed as we do not know how exactly the results unfold. Therefore Lord Krishna says it is very sensible to engage in work without attaching too much with the outcome (*muktasaṅgaḥ samācara*). He further says that any work done with this sense of attachment on outcomes will bind us (*karmabandhanaḥ*). Engaging in work by giving up “what is in it for me?” (*yajñārthāt karmaṇaḥ*) is the way to obtain freedom from after effects of work.

Does that mean we stop setting targets and goals in life? Even a dull headed person will not work without setting certain expectations. What this axiom suggests along with axiom 4 is that while setting goals and putting best efforts to achieve the goals are very important, developing the wisdom and grace with which one takes the outcomes (favourable or unfavourable) when they unfold eventually is the true freedom in doing work.

यज्ञार्थात्कर्मणोऽन्यत्र लोकोऽयं कर्मबन्धनः ।  
तदर्थं कर्म कौन्तेय मुक्तसङ्गः समाचर ॥ 3.9

*yajñārthāt karmaṇonyatra lokoyam karmabandhanaḥ  
tadartham karma kaunteya muktasaṅgaḥ samācara*

### **Making work meaningful**

The practical implication of the five axioms is that people who are actively engaged in work are never tired. They enjoy work, and work is also meaningful to them. On the other hand, those who are actively engaged in the results are very tired. They have less likelihood to do a good job in the first place. They also expose themselves to the possibilities of mental stress and disappointments in life. In a nutshell for all of us who are inevitably engaged in some action or the other the five axioms of work draws the dividing line between a life full of positive activity, fullness and satisfaction and another leading to bad mental and physical health. Let us make an appropriate choice.