



PUT YOUR SPIRITUALITY TO WORK

Conversation Starters for the Workplace

1.24 VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY

When we subsume our desires for worldly outcomes within a larger desire for spiritual outcomes, it elevates our desires and we make different decisions.

WHILE READING spiritual literature, we've so often come across quotes like:

Strong desire is the origin of pain. (from the Buddhist "Lotus Sutra")

Where there is no desire, all things are at peace. (from the Tao Te Ching)

When it comes to "satisfying desires" – the third of four life goals, called *kama*, in India's ancient culture – *desire* seems to be portrayed as a barrier to spiritual progress. Yet desire seems to be a natural part of being human, and certainly a strong motivator for achievement at work. Can we be spiritual and still aim to fulfil desires – particularly at work?

Few would argue that we should abandon basic desires such as good health, enjoying one's family life, and gaining respect in one's community. But what about the typical desires we have at work, such as making money to support our chosen lifestyle, or gaining promotions, better job/project assignments, and praise?

Let's see how attempting to satisfy these desires can either aid us on our spiritual path or get in the way...

When it comes to the desire for money to support our chosen lifestyle, we have experienced making financial choices based on inflated desires rather than on our real needs – such as buying a larger home than we truly needed. We were following what the Jain text, Uttara-Dhyayana Sutra, warns about:

The more you get, the more you want; your desires increase with your means.

Rampant consumerism is all around us, feeding this inflation of desires to buy more than we need and forcing us into long, pressure-packed work hours to meet large financial obligations. The best antidote we've found is to ask, "In relation to my spiritual view of life, what are my true needs? How can I aim my lifestyle, and thus my income requirements, on those needs rather than on the marketing-prompted desires for more and more?"

When it comes to desires for career advancement, top executives we've interviewed typically look at promotions (and they've had many of them!) the same way that S. K. Welling, former President of HMT International, does:

I was once selected as a candidate for the Chairman's post, but I had no thoughts that I should aspire for that post. You might say I'm not a man of ambition. Yes, I have ambition, but I am not ambitious. There is a difference. If you are ambitious you bring pain to yourself since it is desire-based. So I always tell the people, "Whatever has to happen will happen. Whatever is not to happen will not happen. So let's be off."

What about our desires for gaining better job/project assignments and praise for our achievements? The question we ask ourselves is, "What is the basis for these desires? Is it a self-centred desire to gain something for ourselves?" Often, self-centred ambitiousness brings about a *decline* in our work performance rather than a rise. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:47, 49) Krishna gave Arjuna the antidote for this kind of folly:

Desire for the fruits of one's actions brings worry about possible failure. Then your anxiety robs your energy. Work performed with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done in a state of calmness. Equanimity – the serene mental state free from likes and dislikes – is truly the ideal attitude in which to live your life. This is the secret art of living a life of real achievement!

Ultimately, when we subsume our desires for *worldly* outcomes within a larger desire for *spiritual* outcomes, it elevates our desires and we make different decisions. Ananth Raman, Chairman of an American firm, Graphtex, told us:

The desire that life must have a purpose, the desire to add value, and the desire to set an example are the basic principles that I use to evaluate and take all decisions when I am dealing with a customer, or an employee, or a competitor.

When it comes to satisfying our desires at work, we've found it helpful to embrace the attitude, and behaviour, of "voluntary simplicity"¹, in accord with ancient Taoist advice:

Manifest plainness, embrace simplicity, reduce selfishness, have few desires.

So, ask yourself: "When I draw from my spiritual foundation, how does it simplify my life and work desires?"

This article is an excerpt from the book, *Put Your Spirituality to Work: The Basics*. To download the full book of articles, as well as additional book chapters, articles, workbooks, and research on the subject of "spirituality and human values for leadership and work", visit our website: www.globaldharma.org

¹A term popularised by Duane Elgin in his book *Voluntary Simplicity*