

Values in Business

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There has been a long history of philosophical debate as to the complex nature of value, or ethics, as well as the validity of business or its purpose in society. Other than to clarify some terms, that debate is not the scope of this article. Far greater minds, both religious and secular, have explored these issues in depth. Instead, let's explore the applications of Vedanta, especially as it relates to the modern business experience. Let's look at what the attempt to bring values, particularly spiritual values, to business means today.

Before we can even begin to discuss this subject, we have to clarify what is meant by business. For the purposes of this article, 'business' will be defined broadly. Business not only refers to the organization or institution engaging in trade, but also to the act of engaging in that profession. Business can be for profit or not-for-profit. It can employ thousands or encompass the self-employed. Business involves all actions related to one's occupation or profession, whether that be as a retail merchant, teacher, or monastic.

There are some who have the general feeling that the very subject of 'business ethics' or values is an oxymoron, like 'hot ice.' Indeed, the world, including the business world, can appear to be a harsh desert for those attempting to lead a spiritual life. The tendency in business, just as in the world, often appears as selfishness, as a pull toward separateness, toward *avidyà màyà*.

However, our experience in business should not be fundamentally different from the rest of our life. Our life is an integrated whole, not separate compartments. We can't spend our time at work in a way that is harmful to our spiritual values and expect to grow spiritually. The mind, wherein our thoughts and actions make their impressions, is the same at work as it is at home. The thoughts and actions we undertake at work become a part of us at home also. This is the fundamental reason why we can't have two codes of values that are in conflict: 'business ethics' for work and 'personal ethics' for home.

We must find a way to lead our business life in harmony with our inner life. All sincere spiritual aspirants struggle with integrating their inner life with their outward actions. This is the universal struggle we all experience. Without finding a place of balance, a harmony between the 'spiritual' and the 'secular', or the outer and the inner, we will experience frustration and discouragement.

Based upon this frustration, some see business as a necessary evil. Necessary to provide income, but little more. It is to be endured, not embraced. However, since most of us aren't called to the completely contemplative life, we have to engage in some form of business. This being the case, we'd better find a way to minimize the negative effects of work, or perhaps to turn our business endeavours into a spiritual aid. Business, like work in general, is in itself neither good nor bad (or, from a relative point of view, business can be good or bad depending upon what we make it). How we engage in business and our intentions in doing so are what will determine its impact on our life.

As Krishna stated in the *Gita*, all of us must perform action, our very nature will force us into action. None of us can escape work. So the question, as it applies to business, is which values will turn work into an aid to our spiritual growth.

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But let's clarify what we mean by values. Let's look at the basic meaning as given in a dictionary: 'Value is that quality of anything which renders it desirable or useful.'¹ In this light let's look at which values in business would render it useful for spiritual growth. Here the philosophy of Vedanta has much to offer the spiritual aspirant. Vedanta offers a perspective that nurtures values conducive to business. Each of these values needs to be complementary to one's inner practice.

1. *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d edn. (New York, 1987), 2103.

Unity in Variety. This seems to be the basis for all ethics and values, in business as well as our individual lives. It is the belief in the interconnectedness of all life that creates the golden rule, or the value of business ethics. One of the key corollaries is that there are no ‘situational business ethics.’ You can’t have one set of rules for business, and another for your personal life. There is one set of values or ethics for all individuals. There is no ‘class’ structure in ethics.

As this applies to business, if you attempt to achieve personal gain by another’s loss, you will find yourself poorer. Perhaps it won’t be apparent at first, for financially you may seem to succeed, but in the long run you will be sowing the seeds of failure. By recognizing and acting on unity we can celebrate the variety of life. In business this means we don’t have to fear differences in others, but can embrace the fascinating variety of life.

Win/Win. Related to the belief in the unity of existence is the goal to create business relations that are ‘win/win’. These are mutually beneficial relationships where both parties gain in an atmosphere of free choice and mutual respect. As we grow and evolve, we recognize that there are several levels of business interaction. The lowest I’d call Exploitation (or Win/Lose). This is where one seeks gain at any cost to others. The end justifies the means; values are ignored. This is the business equivalent of the brute or bully. The next level is Competition. This is where the majority of business and individuals live today. The focus is internal: on the business or the self, not on the big picture. Whether an interaction is beneficial to another is not a concern. This is the business equivalent of egotistical behaviour: the gains to oneself may appear to be real, but it is based upon the ephemeral nature of all things. Developing the value of ‘win/win’, the only interactions or relationships an individual would welcome in a business environment would be mutually beneficial.

Karma Yoga. One of the foremost values in business is the ability to approach work as selfless service or worship, called karma yoga. Business can become karma yoga (instead of just busyness) when we are engaged in selfless action without regard to the results. This has immense ramifications in business. To the degree that we can practise karma yoga we experience freedom from anxiety over the effects of our actions; freedom from the cravings of ambition. Without becoming overly attached to the results of our actions we can work without fear, focusing on the job in front of us. We can live in the present moment. As a result we can give our best effort to the job at hand, not letting worry or longing distract us. Karma yoga also teaches us that motive is as important as action. We must strive to have the right intentions as well as the right actions.

Service. All of the really successful companies have established their success on the bedrock of customer service. This value is easily spiritualized into serving the highest aspect in man: seeing the customer as a manifestation of the Divine. Of course, following Ramakrishna’s advice, we should be devotees, not fools. We should use all our abilities to engage in service that treats us as well as our customers respectfully. There is nothing spiritual in a ‘lose/win’ relationship. This is the business equivalent of self-abuse.

Work as Play. Vedanta allows us to maintain perspective: to see the big picture—it's all the eternal play of the Self. From this point of view, challenge is now embraced instead of feared. As the Self, what is there to fear? Of course, few of us can maintain this attitude but, to paraphrase the *Gita*, 'even a little knowledge of yoga relieves one of great fear.' We can work with a real sense of cheerfulness, knowing that the results of the 'game' are not in our hands.

Higher Purpose. Business is not the be-all and end-all of life. With a higher goal in life we experience a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. It becomes much easier to keep our sense of balance at work when we have a higher purpose that transcends all business endeavours. And with this value, it is much easier to resist the temptations to let the end justify the means in any business decision.

Surrender/Patience. Related to karma yoga, surrender is a key value in business. You must recognize when you are 'pushing on a string'—when something just isn't going to happen. Whether this be a promotion or the hope of getting a new customer, the ability to 'let go, let God' is a valuable tool. It is also by surrender that we learn to keep our ego out of our way. Anyone on the spiritual path must develop patience and perseverance (or they will become immensely frustrated indeed!). These two values become essential in any business endeavour.

Openness. When you can surrender, you allow yourself to become open to new possibilities. It is the stance of openness in business that often allows a new way of looking at something to occur. It encourages a flow of creativity in yourself and others—particularly when you share an attitude of openness with your business associates. This also reinforces the ability to celebrate variety: when you are open to others, you are tolerant and accepting. In business these values gain you respect even among your noble competitors.

Reflection. Business provides the opportunity to complement one's personal meditation practice. By focusing on the work at hand, practising concentration and mental discipline at work, the mind is less likely to wander when you ask it to sit quietly at home. Of course, this assumes that your work environment is not too full of distractions and negative input.

Business as the Health Club of Spirituality. As far fetched as this may seem, business forces each of us to exercise our spiritual values in an environment that resists such efforts. It is in the arena of work that most of us come to grips with our real level of spiritual unfoldment: this is where 'the rubber meets the road.' It is easy to talk about detachment or seeing God in all, but when we are pressed into action, we discover our shortcomings. As long as we don't give up, we should be thankful that there is an arena that provides us the opportunity, indeed may even challenge us, to exercise our spiritual values.

Vedanta provides a worldview that embraces both the spiritual and the physical in a vision of unity. It provides a synthesis to the conflict between business and spirituality. If we look at business as an arena to develop the values necessary for spiritual practice we find that the opportunities to give work a spiritual turn are unlimited. Business then provides a chance to express one's deepest convictions and experiences as a form of service and worship—whether of a Personal God or the underlying unity of existence.