



## **Finding Meaning in a Nine-to-Five World** **Can Business be an Environment for Spiritual Practice?**

by Mike Cook

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*Though I do not write about spirituality as a matter of habit, I have chosen to comment on it here in response to the frequent questions I field about work / life balance and values in the workplace.*

In today's business world—where rules change, players come and go, information and skills have very short shelf lives, and job security is an illusion—employees, managers, and senior executives might well wonder whether there is sufficient return for the time they are investing in the workplace. Are we really succeeding in any meaningful way?

What does it mean to succeed now? I am pretty sure that many of us left the reality of a nine-to-five workday or a forty-hour week behind us some time ago. The time we spend at work is irreplaceable and it has increased by significant increments in recent years. *Are we increasing our return on investment as we increase our hours and days in our workplaces?*

In client workshops we've titled "Vitalskills," we pose this question early on: "This is the time of your life—are you where you want to be and with those with whom you want to be spending it?" I can just as easily pose the question to you here in this brief article. Either your answer is an unequivocal "yes" or you better be doing something about it (and I don't necessarily mean looking for another position or company).

There is a limit to the financial return you can expect so long as you are employed by someone other than yourself. Please don't think the answer is having your own business. Speaking from personal experience, I can tell you it is surely not the antidote for what may ail you. However, there is no limit—other than one you set yourself—for the return you can expect in terms of peace of mind and a sense of satisfaction *if* you set up the workplace as the field of play for your spiritual practice.



I do not pretend or intend to be a spiritual counselor or guide. Whatever spiritual practice you define as your own is fine by me. However, I do have my own view on the practice of spiritual principles. I have always thought it was a tragic perspective to think that whatever values I desire to live by must, for necessity's sake, be set aside while I work.

The idea that I can compartmentalize my life into “work life” and “personal life” is to me also silly and delusional. If I cannot practice my spirituality in the venue where I spend the majority of my waking adult life, just what is the point of working, or conversely, having a spiritual practice? Am I saying I have put a price on the opportunity to live my values and exchanged them for a period of each day Monday through Friday? Unfortunately, in my experience, many people have made this bargain for what they consider “practical” or real world reasons. I’d say “sold out” might be a better way to think about it. And when exactly is it that we plan to recover the dignity and self-esteem that we forfeited in this bargain as well? Is being true to yourself not the highest form of spiritual practice?

In the ancient language of Sanskrit we find the term *dharmā*. To live in a dharmic manner is to find and follow our own true path in whatever we do, wherever we are. There are no exceptions unless we sell ourselves out.

The most successful players in business today are those who do live their dharma. They integrate practical, forward-thinking business savvy with spiritual common sense. That means treating your job as your life’s work—behaving and interacting with clients, coworkers, and customers in such a way that you enrich yourself and all those who come in contact with you. It also means choosing work that feels important.

I would offer you four ways to ground your spiritual practice at work:

1. **Accept circumstances without judgment.**

See business realities and the people you encounter at work for what they are and accept them without judgment, thus creating the condition for acting freely. *You cannot control others or your circumstance, but you can choose your path in response to others or circumstances.*

2. **Maintain a healthy humility.**

Never take it for granted that either you or other people are going to be able to manage all the variables to do what is needed. *Offering to support or getting support from others in your work is an act of humility, not a sign of weakness or limitation.*



3. **Have integrity.**

Be completely true to what you know is right and what you feel you must do, regardless of the immediate cost or sacrifice. *Be honorable and behave decently.*

4. **Live in a state of awareness.**

Be fully aware of your behaviors and decisions and the effect they have on those around you. Be tuned into your life's mission and purpose. Ask how being employed where you are and working with the people you do are supporting your purpose and mission. *Stay awake and be aware of each opportunity for self-growth and knowledge.*

Not coincidentally, people who use the workplace as an opportunity for spiritual practice are in many cases the people who rise to the top of their professions. As the world gets flatter, the economic advantages we have experienced may melt away. The time is ripe for a redefinition of personal success. I nominate the active pursuit of spiritual satisfaction as the next candidate.

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