

[Work Is Worship](#)

Category : [English](#)

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Work Is Worship

Career and family should not be viewed as separate from religious life.
They are integral to fulfilling your dharma.

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Over the last year, I have met with a surprising number of Hindus visiting our Hawaii temple and monastery who have shared the concern that "We are so busy with our professional and family life that we have little or no time to devote to religion." Their perspective is based on the concept that work and worship are totally separate. Worship is what is done in the temple and shrine room. Work is what is done in the fields, the factory or the office. The attitude is, "We are working to earn money to support ourselves; we are worshipping to receive the blessings of the Gods." The two realms are unrelated when viewed in this way.

This, of course, is not the highest Hindu perspective. Great souls tell us that work—when performed in the right spirit—is worship. What is it that transforms work from a secular pursuit into a religious one? It is the overview that through the process of living life we unfold spiritually. It is the knowing that through fulfilling our natural duties in life, honestly and to the best of our ability, we make spiritual progress. Why? Because work puts us in situations where we interact with other people, especially when we hold our dharmic responsibility over an extended period. Through interacting with others, we learn important lessons and, as a result, gradually deepen our understanding, improve our behavior and become a more spiritual person. In doing so, we work through the karma we created in the past and create new karma to be faced in the future. With this in mind, we can see that our daily work contributes to our spiritual progress just as much as attending pujas in the temple, worshipping in our home shrine, going on pilgrimage, singing bhajans, meditating or studying scripture. Paramaguru Yogaswami captured the essence of this perspective when he said, "All work must be done with the aim of reaching God."

From the Hindu perspective, all of life is sacred, and performing our duty is dharma. Dharma is a rich term that means "way of righteousness, religion and fulfillment of duty." From this lofty view, every deed is a part of our religious practice. Everything we do is an act of worship and faith. There are no purely secular activities. Our worship in the temple is part of our dharma, and our work or occupation is part of our dharma.

We all have certain duties in life. It is the duty of children to go to school and become educated. It is the duty of adults to earn an income to properly raise, educate and care for their children. Our natural profession in this life is based on the professions we have fulfilled in our past lives, plus the karma we bring into this life. This is our svadharma, our ideal pattern in life, and fulfilling it to the best of our ability causes us to make spiritual progress. The mystic law is that no challenge can come to us that exceeds our inner ability to rise up to overcome it. Paramaguru Yogaswami stressed this point to his devotees in Sri Lanka a half century ago: "Do your work. Work is svadharma—following your pattern."

One day, after I had explained all of this, a devotee from Los Angeles asked, "How can I bridge the gap in my life? I have a job that I don't enjoy, and my boss is not kind to me. It's only my few minutes in meditation that give me any solace. My work doesn't seem like worship at all!" In response, I offered four remedies: 1) integrate religious practice into the workplace; 2) seek opportunities to help and serve others; 3) strive to see all your actions as serving God; 4) utilize your efforts at work to

strengthen your powers of meditation and worship, and build good character.

1. Integrate spirituality into your work

A basic way we can make our work a form of worship is to introduce religious practices into our work routine. Doing this, even in small ways, brings blessings to our place of work and gives it a more spiritual atmosphere. Many devotees take a five-minute meditation/yoga break twice a day. Others keep a small photo of their guru or chosen Deity nearby to keep them uplifted and reminded of their highest aspirations. A woman in Maryland said that twice daily she sits for a moment, breathes deeply and basks in appreciation for God's ever-flowing grace. A New York grocery store owner keeps a shrine in the corner where he does puja every morning, asking Ganesha to bless his business for the day and remove any negative forces and obstacles. The stone craftsmen here on Kauai perform a ceremony each morning at the worksite before commencing their work of erecting Iraivan Temple, and once a year hold an elaborate ceremony to worship their tools, so that God may work through those tools in the year to come. My Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, tells us: "Ganesha influences events slowly and subtly, in unseen ways. Situations will change for you, unexpected doors will open, and accustomed ones will close as you are propelled through His grace toward your inevitable glorious future."

2. Seek ways to serve

Gurudeva told a group of devotees, "Give and give until it hurts." He was prescribing the means to overcome selfishness—a quality that is as prevalent today as ever. He was also pointing to an effective way to make our work part of our worship. The secret lies in helping others in selfless ways—with no expectation of payment, presents, praise or prestige. This is a spiritual practice known as karma yoga, or union through service. Karma yoga produces spiritual progress in that certain past negative karmas can be mitigated, meaning lessened, as well as new positive karmas created for the future. Normally it is thought of as service done at a temple or ashram, but it is wise and prudent to extend it as widely in your life as you can, such as helping others in your workplace beyond what is expected, willingly and without complaint. This counteracts the instinctive tendency to only serve oneself, to promote one's own goals and career and to help others only begrudgingly—which ultimately makes you a lonely, unhappy, limited person. The fact is, the more selfish we are, the less happy we are. And the less selfish we are,

the happier we are. Gurudeva gives an excellent summary of the benefits of karma yoga: "Through service and kindness, you can unwind the subconscious mind and gain a clear understanding of all laws of life. Your soul will shine forth. You will be that peace. You will radiate that inner happiness and be truly secure, simply by practicing being kind in thought, word and deed."

3. Dedicate your actions to God

The Hindu concept that work is worship defines a lofty, refined way of living—taking each situation, each duty, each challenge and encounter as an opportunity to grow, to learn, to serve and thus mature into your highest spiritual potential. No matter what type of work it is, be it at home or in an office building, whether pleasant or distasteful, interesting or monotonous—with the right attitudes, willpower and persistence, you can transform it from secular labor to a spiritual exercise that will advance you on the path and uplift you and all those around you. This can be achieved by perceiving all your spiritual, mental and physical actions as fulfilling the will and design of God, rather than merely fulfilling personal ambitions. Try this, even at work. Yogaswami's words to a young man just starting his career were, "You are going out to work. You must dress well and look dignified. Everything should be an offering to God. The world is an altar."

4. Work on yourself

All the good habits and self-control we develop in our outer life are useful in our inner life as well. For example, if we develop good concentration in our school studies as a youth and carry this on in our adult life by being focused on the tasks we do at work, we will have developed a strong ability to concentrate. So, when we sit down to meditate, our thoughts are naturally concentrated and it is easy to control the mind. However, if we let our mind wander during our studies and as an adult daydream while working, when we sit down to meditate, we will find it impossible to control our thoughts.

Another important ability we develop in our work is willpower. Willpower is the strength to carry out one's decisions, wishes or plans. People who regularly make plans and fail to carry them out lack willpower. For example, a student plans to get up early all week to study for his tests, but when his alarm rings, he shuts it off and

decides to continue sleeping instead. We cultivate willpower by finishing and doing well every task we undertake—in fact, doing it a little better than our expectations. Nothing is done with half our mind thinking about something else. Nothing is dropped in the middle. Developing these two important habits produces an indomitable willpower. First, finish each task. Second, do it well. My guru taught, again and again, "The more you use your personal, individual willpower, the more willpower you have."

The workplace is a veritable classroom for spiritual progress. Life brings us many opportunities to fail and every opportunity to succeed at the tests it offers us as we strive to be the best we can be. If your boss is mean to you, be grateful for the karmic challenge and go out of your way to be kind to him. If, as a homemaker, your daughter continually makes you furious, study out how to control your anger. If you find a fellow employee intolerably annoying, look to yourself to see what it is that keeps you from accepting him just the way he is. The list of opportunities is endless.

One of the profound beliefs of Hindus is that God is in all things. Therefore, for us, there is no meaningful division between secular and religious life, for God is always there, in our job, in our boss, in our projects, if only we are subtle enough to see that truth.