Wisdom from Ancient Indian Philosophy for the Corporate World

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[Abstract] Management, in its broadest sense, is defined as “getting things done through and with people”. The most important focus of management is said to be ‘man management’. Based on empirical studies of employees, theories that were developed and are the basis for Western management, have found acceptance all over the world, including India. However, in applying these theories to the Indian setting, certain adjustments were made in order to accommodate for differences in culture.

[Keyword] Ancient Indian; Indian philosophy; Karma; Bhakti; Jnana; wisdom; spiritual development

India has many sources of ancient wisdom. The Vedas, a collection of ancient scriptures (Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva), the Upanishads, Puranas and Ithihasa, ‘Bhagavad Gita’, and the epics ‘Mahabharat’ and ‘Ramayana’ all contain many nuggets of management principles and practices. The wisdom inherent in these scriptures can be extended and applied to current Indian management problems and especially to fine tune and adjust western thoughts to an Indian setting. We are going to elaborate on the trio Karma, Bhakti and Jnana. These particular concepts complement the many western theories on how to:

1. Inspire employees to excel in work
2. Enhance employee commitment to the organization.
3. Use knowledge to achieve business excellence.

While there are many prescriptive themes in Vedic literature that help us achieve the aforementioned, these three central themes of Karma, Bhakti and Jnana (Mascaro, 1962) help reach the listed objectives in a very unique way by combining it with spiritual development of an individual. Briefly, the practice of the trio has both physical and emotional effects. At the physical level, one can be transformed from being self-centered to unselfish to selfless and at the emotional level one can become conscious of ones emotions. After reaching this awareness, then comes the change from the lower to the higher emotion, to being committed and loyal. This helps in clarifying thoughts on the future. In the modern business context, they can be interpreted as three levels:

1. **Karma** - Creation, Action, Work (Level 1) LIFE
   (Here the stages are; Creation of an employee, propelling him into action and resulting in fruitful work)

2. **Bhakti** - Devotion, Commitment, Loyalty (Level 2) LOVE
   (Here the stages are; Devotion to a goal, commitment to a process and loyalty to an organization.)

3. **Jnana**- Knowledge, Understanding, Wisdom (Level 3) LIGHT
   (This allows for a systemic view of the process of creating overall good for all stakeholders as
opposed to only personal and/or organizational wealth, understanding the effects of the past and the ability to foresee the future.)

The cultivation of these three elements lead to form an individual’s attitude towards all aspects of life, including work life, and hence can therefore be extended to an organization’s and society’s benefit. The three tenets propound that action without knowledge is destined to fall apart. Action with knowledge but without devotion leads to crass commercialism. Mere knowledge and devotion without action are unfruitful. Thus, action is to be performed with knowledge, with a heart full of devotion and without attachment to the fruits of selfish action. The practice of synthesizing these three separate predispositions in every employee, action, emotion and reason, is the central theme of the Indian ethic, Dharma. Now I will explain each component of the trio with respect to the previous listed objectives.

Level One – LIFE
Karma or action can be Shreya (the appropriate) or Preya (the pleasant). Ancient literature has always sought to synthesize the Shreya and the Preya (Kamalakar Mishra, 1990). For an individual, the pursuit of truth would lead to the ability to discern between what is “appropriate” and what is “pleasant”. An individual who chooses the appropriate attains happiness (in the long run) and one who chooses pleasant or easy options, loses sight of his objective. Being truthful, in an organizational setting, is a long-term necessity for survival, keeping in mind society’s and other stakeholders’ (appropriate) good in permanent sight. In order to attain such goals of truthfulness, firms may employ methods in human resource management that may be ‘pleasant’ but not ‘appropriate’ and hence, fail in the long run. Such compelling decisions based on the short term perspective are also evident in employee’s choice of ‘pleasant’ work ethic as opposed to ‘appropriate’. This leads us to ask a question as to why and employee even works at all?

What is the absolute motivation or incentive to work and what would be appropriate behavior in the workplace? Mahabharata (12th & 13th books) conveys the quintessence norms of behavior; this essence can be applied to managing human resources. A more telling reiteration of ‘work ethic’ is hard to find. Mahabharata emphasizes man attaining his ultimate goal in life, Moksha (self realization). Man is expected to achieve this goal by synthesizing the different facets of Dharma, Artha and Kama. Theses concepts have many meanings. In an organizational context they can take on the following meanings:

- **Dharma**: Code of conduct
- **Artha**: Material attainments - wealth, the apparent reason for action
- **Kama**: Desire
- **Moksha**: Excellence in work, to go beyond material desires; the non-apparent reason for action.

In some sense, Kama drives attainment of Artha. The Dharma not only keeps a check on Kama so as not to indiscriminately pursue artha but also channels action to attainment of Moksha. One can detect in this aspect of Indian philosophy the similarities with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow identified that the source of motivation for working is satisfying a
hierarchy of basic needs which include, security, social, ego and self-actualization. Man’s behavior can be explained in terms of his experiences and by which of his needs are met. When a particular need has not been met, the drive to fully attain it, can considered fuel for that directs the activities of an employee; it determines what will be important to him/her and shapes the employees behavior accordingly. Therefore according to Maslow’s theory, the level of motivated behavior is seen by the kind of activity a person is engaged in. The tension experienced within that individual, pleasant or unpleasant, arises when the individual is attempting to meet his or her need and is therefore very purposeful or goal directed in the type of actions they take to achieve this end. A need that is satisfied is no longer a source of tension, hence according to Maslow, only unmet needs are the prime source of motivation. If dissatisfaction, discontent and restlessness are the root cause of all activity, then the words of Chris Argyris that today’s bountiful economy is supporting an unhappy society appear true. This gives a very pessimistic picture of human endeavors.

While western thought talks about action propelled by individual drives, the Vedantic philosophy view the role of personality with its internal predispositions for motivation being secondary to societal considerations in guiding behavior. The unfolding of selflessness in the form taking action towards societal good and betterment of the world is the ideal to be pursued. Hence for all people, action is inevitable but not in the same way Maslow proposed, that individuals are need-driven. Man cannot escape having to work, according to Vedanta, he must work in order to attain both Abhyudaya (worldly excellence) within the ambit of Dharma and also strive to attain Nishreyasa (spiritual excellence). Vedanta defines the importance of all desires of man, from the material and sensory to the moral, ethical and transcendental in its concept of Purusharthas (values sought by man). However in sharp contrast to Maslow’s need based theory, Indian philosophy holds that the four aspects are not “needs” but “what always exists”. The word kama, desire, constitutes the entire range of human cravings and satisfactions at the sensory level. The second, artha (wealth), is the instrument for satisfying kama (desire).

The third, Dharma, means ethical sense and helps to discipline and regulate the pursuit of the first and the second. Therefore, it would still be possible for one to strive for the greater good and during process, also experience spiritual excellence without necessarily being affected by the material costs of the endeavor. Man could then attain Self-Realization, a concept that is profoundly higher than self-actualization, because it is no longer limited to the individual but ultimately elevates him to a higher plane. This idea of selflessness is the cornerstone of the Vedantic worldview. Accordingly, Human values in management proceeds from Dharma (Swami Ranganathananda 1986)

To be more specific, by committing ones-self to this higher plane of Self-Realization, one can become a better worker, a better manager, a better teacher and so forth. The Upanishads declare that the Light of the Self illuminates everything in the world. The Gita makes it clear that whatever beauty, power & prosperity we find in the world, all come from the light of the self. In order to approach Self Realization, it is necessary to work or perform action. Working is then the process of realizing the potential contained within us and capable of being used for a greater good. The seed, is a potential tree cannot realize itself until it sprouts and grows
from stage a sapling to a fully-grown tree.

The Gita presents the same concept, but in a different manner, namely that one can perform one’s daily activities or work, as a form of worship to the Lord. Work is then seen as an offering to God for his pleasure. Then, every act, however secular, becomes a spiritual act if performed with the spirit that the doer is a medium doing the Lord’s work. The beauty of this attitude or Bhavana (disposition) is that when we do our work with this devoted spirit, we would strive to constantly better ourselves. We would go beyond what we think we are capable of, because work has become an expression of devotion and loyalty to the Lord. Work that is done with complete devotion becomes a thing of joy, a play or sport (Lila). Taking duty as a sport means we work committed to the work itself, in devotion to the Lord, and therefore enjoy doing work.

This concept has two merits; first, it helps one stretch one’s capabilities far beyond what one thinks is possible and second, since the work is done as a token of commitment, it improves the quality of work-life. There are a number of different approaches in the west. Theory X, a western approach on motivating employees, emphasizes the need to constantly goad and push people to work, dangling in front of them a carrot as a reward and using the stick of punishment. Theory Y, however, takes a more positive view of employees as being willing to work and suggests freedom and believing in employees abilities as means of motivation. Theory Z comes up with a collaborative strategy of work and motivation through discussion & empowerment. Here we would like to suggest the Vedantic approach or Theory V as a strategy of enhancing employee performance by appealing to an employee’s sense of devotion or commitment to the higher cause of organizational and societal good. This would bring out exemplary performance with self-realization. The motivator here is the higher objective of Moksha, which will ultimately drive the proper action.

Indian philosophy does not by any means underestimate the value of result–oriented work. Rather, the attempt is to synthesize work with Ananda (joy). Work then not only brings joy to the person but also becomes more fruitful & fulfilling. The fulfillment of earthly needs is also accomplished, in the same way when the tree grows, it bears fruit naturally, and the need is to water not the outer twigs but the inner roots. This in essence is Intrinsic Motivation and also the essence of Karmayoga. This thought is now mirrored in the Western concept of ‘Flow’ by Ken Thomas, who describes an intrinsically motivated employee as one who genuinely cares about his work, looks for better ways of doing it and is energized and fulfilled by doing the job well than by the extrinsic rewards that the job would bring him.

The word Karma has its root in the Sanskrit word ‘Kris’, meaning to create or creation. Creation is the beginning of a journey towards a future existence, requiring effort, work and self-control the whole way. Karmayoga is governed by a simple logic that what we do now in due course confronts us later in life. Every action of ours produces two kinds of results. One is the seen, i.e. observable result, which is the successful achievement of objectives of work. The other is the unseen result, the consequences of these actions taken to reach the work objectives that is left on the mind of a person. If for example a person gets a new hospital ward built with his donation, then the seen result is the new ward for the patients to use and
the unseen result is the satisfaction he gets out of the noble deed. Likewise a person who accepts a bribe may acquire wealth but also is afflicted with stress and guilt.

The unseen result also has the tendency of imprinting or conditioning the mind & induces the person to repeat the action whenever opportunity arises. This mark, with the possibility of reappearing is what is called Samskara. Everything we do, every movement of the body, every thought we think leaves an impression on the mind and even when such impressions are not evident on the surface, they work on the subconscious. What we are every moment is determined by the sum total of these impressions of life. This forms character. This line of thought is similar to the western idea of causation of Personality. Indian philosophy goes further and explains how karma yoga helps mould personality.

The seen result of work can be of two kinds:
1) The accomplishment of the objectives of work
2) Any personal benefit to the doer in the form of monetary reward, fame etc.

The doctrine of Karmayoga says that we should work un-influenced by any thoughts or anxieties about the rewards but only work to accomplish the goal set forth. If all work is done this way, the person becomes less and less self-centered and the work assumes its finest quality. This is expressed in the Gita by the saying “yoga is skill in action”. “Karmayoga is a system of work and ethics intended to attain freedom through unselfishness” (Swami Vivekananda). The Gita says that the expectation of reward should not be the motivating force. There is another reason why eliminating thoughts of reward benefits a person. If a person is obsessed with the thoughts of benefit to himself he may resort to dubious means to increase his own reward.

Indian thought goes further and elaborates on how Karmayoga helps build character by leading an individual in his life through values and ethics. Dharma or our ethical sense helps us regulate and discipline effort. Dharma shapes the Human values in management. The attainment of perfection and excellence in work is an effort to attain Moksha. This excellence comes to a person practicing karmayoga- where yoga means self realization- Yogah karmasu kaushalam. Therefore, work is the ethos from conception through construction to conclusion, consequently Karma is work and work is life. This aspect of the Vedanta philosophy shows us the way to a life in harmony with our environment. When applied in the organizational sense, it shows us the merit of work in line with organizational mission and values. According to Western thought, the basic motivation to work is the fulfillment of basic, security and ego needs. Sadly these can only create an atmosphere of rivalry and antagonism among employees. On the contrary, Self-realization through Dharma elevates an individual spiritually and fosters a sense of commitment to the organization. Like an individual striving to achieve self-realization, organizations should also have a corporate dharma. Here profit making does remain, as one the main drivers of performance, but is subordinate to service to the customers, to employees and to society. The Present day definition of business is that it is an instrument of wealth and welfare, functioning for desired goals through result oriented means, these
results no doubt lead to short term success but can eventually cause a conflict of interest between employees and the organization. Whereas, according to Indian thought business is created as an instrument of wealth and welfare, in order to achieve goals by following ethical means, helps to create wholesome employees who are ethically strong and who emanate positive vibes to their community. The method of achieving this state would be by:

- Making every employee aware of his relevance to the organization
- Highlighting his role in fulfilling this relevance
- Enabling the employee develop a sense of identity with his organization
- Creating a work atmosphere that is conducive for an employee to explore his inner potential.

Management guru Peter Drucker referred to profit not as the end of business but a score of its effectiveness; complimenting that notion, Vedanta exhorts an enterprise should be profitable and practical though its core objective is sarva loka hitam (well being of all people).

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<tr>
<th>Artha \ kama</th>
<th>Dharma</th>
<th>Moksha</th>
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<td>(Triggers)</td>
<td>(Mode of pursuit)</td>
<td>(Realization)</td>
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**Level Two – LOVE**

Bhakti, the devotion to work, is the bond or union between people. Bhakti marga is the route of devotion, to process and people. There is faith and everything flows from it. Just as a devotee does not seek reason to understand God, having accepted a guru, equivalent to a manager, employees would willingly follow his instructions with absolute trust. (S Balachandran et al, 2003). In this role, the manager is endowed with referent and knowledge power. A manager who can generate faith is quite effective. He has to make sure that:

- His concerns are for the organization and his subordinates
- Understands organizational requirements, tasks and goals
- Is fair and just in dispensing rewards

Let us come back to our original question namely, Why work, and add to it another question, How to Work? From the earlier discussion, follows the answer to both questions is one and the same, call it self – realization, or work as worship or work as sport. Ancient philosophy sees these as different versions of the same reality of work-life and work ethic, which is spiritual in essence but material in expression. Work then loses its separate identity and becomes spiritual. Self- realization is a state where one feels unity with all and therefore wishes good to and for all. Universal love is the very nature of our real self. Love synthesizes the good in oneself and towards the good of the others. Bhakti and love makes work-life a life of joy and tremendously improves the quality of work-life. Love forms the basis for the work ethic; it removes the dichotomy between individual good and organizational good. Moreover, for the leader-manager love can be the remedy for the problems employees face. A manager, if he loves his subordinates can naturally convince them. The unconscious mind of the employee would then instinctively know that the intention of the manager is to do good and not to harm to him. There may be certain doubts regarding the introduction of the love factor into a work
(1) Love does not mean refraining from punishing a guilty employee but would be like a parent correcting a child for its own good, without enmity.
(2) If the manufacturer or salesman loves his customers, he will make an honest supply thereby raising goodwill & customer loyalty.
(3) The spirit of healthy competition is not incongruent with love. Healthy competition does not mean letting down or putting another but rather striving for one’s own betterment. It should mean that after seeing others flourish, one too is inspired to become greater; it surely does not mean taking pleasure in overtaking others.

This commitment & concern for employees is seen in action at Telco, an automobile & engineering company of Tatas. Since the inception of Telco at Jamshedpur, India, the entire system of labor relations was built around the concept of Vatsalya or love for the employees. The buzzword in industries is now is quality. It is not possible for an employee to give quality products if he lives in a slum or in deplorable conditions. What is required is physiological, moral and spiritual well being to be achieved in order to attain harmony. At Telco great stress is laid on how employees live. The environment is made congenial, and the family of the employee is treated like an extended family of the organization. Enormous investments have been made to provide quality housing, education and medical facilities and environmentally upgrade the company’s surroundings. This is reflected in the employees imbibing the concepts of harmony & aesthetics and enabling them to produce quality products.

The same attitude of love was also extended to the development of suppliers of the company. Instead of having contractual obligations, the organization went out of its way to treat suppliers with a great deal of compassion and under this enlightened guidance; the suppliers too were able to achieve remarkable results. The Gita encapsulates the secret formula for success through devotion to process:

To action alone have you a right
And never to its fruits.
Let not the fruits of action be your motive;
Neither let there be in you
Any attachment to inaction.

This explains process orientation. Take care of your actions (process), and never consider that you have control over the fruits (results). You ought not to make the result the objective: take care of the process and the result will follow. The critical success factors in the Bhakti marga are leadership, commitment to customer, attention to process, loyalty to people and enthusiasm for improvement in order to achieve business excellence (G kanji, 2003).
Level Three – LIGHT
This is route is an intellectual one; here, the manager knows what needs to be done and why it needs to be done. By having an intellectual understanding and accepting the goals and adopting the proper methods, the person commits himself to the task. The manager that pursues this route, explains, discusses, consults and encourages participation, ownership of decisions and commitment from employees. The concern for others arises out of the awareness that everyone is working towards the same goal. The focus here is on organizational objectives like customer satisfaction and continuous improvement.

Modern management is centered on the concept excellence and achieving excellence. Jnana is the process of discovering human identity in all its absoluteness as Existence- Knowledge – Bliss. It identifies the goal of life as reaching an end state of bliss and has attributed highest value to it. All action therefore is regarded as instrumental to achieving Jnana. In an organizational context this would read as a constant process of evolution to better in order to ensure customer satisfaction and ultimately long term survival.

Jnana takes a systemic view on the process of creating overall good for the shareholders as opposed to personal or organizational wealth. This requires an impersonal orientation on the part of the Leader or head of the organization. While organizations today talk of ideals like ‘organizational culture’, ‘super ordinate goals’ and ‘organizational values’, the foundation of the concept of selflessness behind these labels is often forgotten. Jnana alone can impart wisdom, and freedom from biases. So it is a journey towards freedom and attaining a wide and unlimited perspective. It intervenes by removing selfishness that interposes itself between the situation and the decision.

_ The mind is said to be twofold:
The pure and also the impure;
Impure, by connection with desire;
Pure, by severing the connection with desire._  
_ Maitri Upanishad

Eliminating selfishness through knowledge is a critical need for ensuring a leader’s credibility with all stakeholders as it brings in clarity of thought. They are then able to deal with complexity and ambiguity well due to their understanding of the environment and not get carried away by extremes. An understanding of the real world, that is full of contradictions (maya) complimented by the belief in karma philosophy, will make a leader more effective. When a business leader experiences such a transformation he or she metamorphoses into a business guru.

Again, what does it mean to say “problems” in management? What we term as problems today are nothing but the solutions discovered yesterday. Jnana helps us to look business environments from this perspective. Then the future is really not a mystery. The past modified in the present alone is the future. The present is but a product of the past; the future is the product of the present. So a mid course correction can be made to modify the future. Today when speed is the deciding factor, mid course corrections have assumed significance.
While we can all learn from our mistakes, this is a long and time-wasting route to a goal. It is always better to learn from business knowledge rather than from business mistakes. Business knowledge is based on an understanding of business culture. A combination of Jnana (acquired knowledge) and vijnana (discriminatory, logical knowledge) would help the leadership in management, by continuously improving all aspects of the organization in order to delight the stakeholders.

Herein lays the wisdom of going back to our own heritage, to look within and find insights into the domain of management. Vedanta suggests that by using business knowledge (Jnana) the organization will be able to achieve the best results through leadership (Karma) with business devotion (Bhakti). This philosophy guides individuals to free themselves from the shackles of selfish, sense-related desires and aim at liberation through self-realization. This alone can perpetuate the successful performance of individuals, teams and organizations.

Glossary
Ananda—permanent, autonomous inner bliss, which is man’s essential character.
Artha— the economic aspirations of secular life.
Bhakta—devotee of God
Dharma—the mode of rightful conduct in secular life.
Gita, Bhagwad Gita—a compendium of the gist of Indian psycho-philosophy, included within the Mahabharata.
Guru—a revered exemplar and teacher, especially of spiritual idealism.
Kama—the desires of secular life, lust.
Karma—the human thoughts, words and deeds.
Lila—the divine, cosmic play at the empirical level
Mahabharata—the world’s longest epic poem, in Sanskrit, highlighting the ethico-moral battle between right and wrong.
Maya—the apparent, impermanent reality, the folly of taking the transient for the permanent.
Moksha—emancipation from the cycle of repeated physical births and deaths for the permanent.
Preya—apparently pleasant, though actually harmful
Shreya—the truly wholesome, though often apparently repelling.
Samskara—the accumulated residual impressions of our thoughts, words and deeds.
Upanishad—visions of the ultimate Truth contained in the concluding part of the Veda.
Vatsalya—love and affection.
Vedanta—the concluding philosophical observations of the Vedic seers, also called the Upanishads.

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Philosophy - On Philosophy as Love (Philo) of Wisdom (Sophy), and that we must know the Truth to be Wise. Most importantly, all Truth comes from Reality thus we must know Reality to be Wise. Quotes on Philosophy, Truth, Reality by Famous Philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Montaigne, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Einstein, et al. Education - Plato, Michel de Montaigne, Albert Einstein and Jean Jacques Rousseau on Philosophy of Education, both for the Individual and their Responsibility to Society. On True Knowledge of Reality as Necessary for Education of Critical Thinking. Encyclopedia - Information on the history of encyclopedias (a number of prominent philosophers have contributed articles), the French Encyclopedists, true knowledge and free online resources. This page lists some links to ancient philosophy. In Western philosophy, the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire marked the ending of Hellenistic philosophy and ushered in the beginnings of Medieval philosophy, whereas in Eastern philosophy, the spread of Islam through the Arab Empire marked the end of Old Iranian philosophy and ushered in the beginnings of early Islamic philosophy.