

Zen and the Art of Liking Your Job

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February 24th, 2003

Do you like your job? Would you still keep your job if you were not paid for it? What would you love to be doing if money were not an issue? Each of these questions is likely to have two different answers - one for your inner voice and one for your boss. Both are tough judges. During a job interview we are expected to make a convincing impression that the position we are applying for is exactly what we need to make our lives complete. Many people can play this game very well. The most difficult questions, however, come from within: what is the right job for me and what should I do with my life?

The conventional wisdom of numerous self-help publications has a simple answer: be honest with yourself, find out what you really love to do and pursue your dreams no matter what. This seems to be the path to true happiness and fulfillment and it is truly difficult to argue against this advice. Po Bronson in his recent talk at Wharton, provided numerous very insightful examples of people, who summoned enough courage to overcome their fears of the unknown and switched jobs in search of the more fulfilling future.

Being an advocate for taking proactive action myself, I would like to point out, however, that this approach alone does not seem to address two very important questions. The first question applies to the best-case scenario: assuming that you did get the job of your dreams, how long will you be happy with it and what will it take to make the sense of fulfillment last? The second question is concerned with the less cheerful, but fairly common situation: you don't like your job, but due to often very understandable circumstances, you must do it. Is there a way to live a happy and fulfilling life despite this?

In the past, the place of one's birth and the status of one's parents, with rare exceptions, determined the geographical location for the person's entire life, and his or her occupation. Given limited choices there was no point in asking 'What should I do with my life?' but rather 'What should I do to make my life more fulfilling given my lot?'

Today we live in a different world. We commute, change jobs, states, countries, and receive multiple degrees, generally driven by the search for better and more fulfilling existence. There

is nothing wrong with this, but perhaps there are some lessons regarding how we should live our lives to be learnt from our less 'fortunate' and more stationary ancestors?

Like the necessity to work, the continuous search for the meaning of one's existence has also occupied a permanent place in the human history. There are many schools of thought, philosophies and religions, but all of them, to a different degree, attempt to provide models for meaningful and virtuous living. Eastern philosophical thought started to gain popularity in the Western world in recent times. One of the reasons for such interest, in my opinion, is its clear emphasis on contemplation, self-reflection and cultivation of the inner world, "the inner universe" of the practitioner.

What does Zen have to do with liking one's job? I will try to answer indirectly by sharing some insights I received from one of the business school professors in a private conversation regarding the purpose of work in one's life. The professor's answer to my question was short and took me by surprise, since it did not quite fit in my mind into the framework of the traditional business education: "The primary purpose of work", he replied "is not to make a living, but to achieve the highest degree of self-awareness, or enlightenment."

The formal philosophy of Zen Buddhism pursues exactly the same goal - full self-realization and enlightenment through practice. The interesting thing, however, is the fact that in Zen philosophy virtually any daily activity, including work, could qualify to be called practice, as long as it is done with the 100% concentration and devotion. I have to confess that what follows is my personal and limited interpretation of the subject. One of the Zen nuns told me in a personal conversation that she would not be able to explain the concept of Zen to anyone - she simply lives it. This seems to be the case.

The problem with having enlightenment as the ultimate goal, however, is that very few people can explain what it really means. A more comprehensible explanation, in my mind, is that Zen practice empowers the practitioner to achieve the state of inner harmony and peace regardless of the external circumstances life has to offer.

There are a few schools of Zen, but all of them emphasize sitting, silent meditation (zazen) as a way to "obtain freedom from the wild "monkey mind" that runs chattering about and reaches for the "sky-mind" of Zen emptiness." Surprisingly enough, the seemingly easy concept of non-action, or sitting still for a considerable period of time, can be a very difficult task for most people. The Zen practice of emptiness aims at creating the inner space inside our minds and hearts to which we can have access at any point in time. Such state of the "sky-mind" allows us to be both the observers and the participants of the intricate flow of energies in our daily lives.

The observer side of ours keeps an eye on what is happening and maintains the link to our higher self, while the participant side allows us to be involved in the action and live our daily lives.

From a purely philosophical perspective, Zen, as well as Buddhism in general, teaches that the nature of all things in this world, both good and bad, is finite. It teaches that each event has both negative and positive sides and it is in our power to learn how to embrace both. We are free to choose our prevailing state of mind and derive joy and fulfillment even from the most mundane and routine events. After all, each event, no matter how insignificant, constitutes what we call our lifetime, which passes into the irrevocable past with every second. We might as well learn how to find positive sides in everything regardless of whether or not we truly like what we do.

So what is the right job for me and what should I do with my life? Just as the life of each person is unique, so the answer to this question is unique. My goal in writing this essay was to share my view that while the diligent and methodical (sometimes radical!) search for the right job is important and will yield certain results, even more important is the inner transformation and understanding of our place and our role in this world.

I do believe that people should strive towards a better future, look for more fulfilling jobs and life styles, as well as for opportunities to continue personal growth. This might mean taking risks, experimenting, making mistakes and sometimes going in reverse. It is inherent in the human nature. On the other hand I believe that it is our attitudes and the inner philosophies that ultimately determine how content we feel with our lives and with ourselves no matter where we are and what we do in life.

The Zen tradition is just one of the many schools developed and refined by humanity in an attempt to bridge the gap between the inner and outer worlds we, humans, exist in. If nothing else, perhaps its "sky-mind" philosophy could be beneficial for some people in helping to find a meaning and purpose in each task or job at hand. After all it is up to us to choose to view our lives as exciting, meaningful, but often difficult journeys, rather than a random search for immediately gratifying opportunities and rewards.

****Note: this article was originally published in [The Wharton Journal](#) on February 24th, 2003.****