

A Question of Balance

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I have a problem with the term 'work/life balance'. It implies that life begins when work finishes. The words we use are critical to our self-awareness, our situation-reading and to our learning and development, and yet we pick up phrases like jackets in a wardrobe, trying them on for size and sometimes keeping on something that doesn't quite fit in the absence of anything better.



Our conversations are derived from a variety of sources: education, literacy, sound-bites from the media, parental hand-me-downs and phrases we've picked up from our friends, family or business colleagues. Words are not truly our own. They sit on a large menu from which we make our selection, in an attempt to find the right combination that suits the way we are feeling at any given time.

Interpreting stress

The phrase 'work/life balance' originated in the eighties. It seemed ok at the time: a way of interpreting stress, a reminder to leave the office before dark. It's a phrase we have picked up, taken on board and maybe even formed a goal around. But what if WLB is reinforcing the belief that the working day is simply a prelude to a sigh of relief at the end of it? What if these words are encouraging us to view work as an interruption in our lives?

Balance of opposites

Chinese philosophy has always been intrigued with balance: night and day, high and low, winter and summer, dark and light, black and white, left and right, false and true, female and male, as encapsulated by the yin and yang in the I Ching, the ancient Chinese classic text. The yin and yang represent the negative and positive forces in the universe and the "dynamic balance of opposites".

The Chinese language itself works in a similar way, using antonyms. These are opposite words placed side by side to represent a concept. So 'hei' (black) plus 'bai' (white) represents morality. 'Cheng' (success) plus 'bai' (failure) represents outcome or result. 'Chang' (long) & 'duan' (short) represent the concept of the situation (that's about the long and short of it). So maybe to fully understand certain concepts, one needs to locate and appreciate its direct opposite.

Restoring social order

The Ifaluk are a people that live on an Island in the Pacific Ocean, just a few hundred souls on a piece of land about half a mile in diameter. The Ifaluk don't approve of anger, so they don't have a word for it. They have a similar word, and that word is 'song'. If someone on the island is in a 'state of song', they must have a very good reason for it. For instance, the person causing them to experience 'song' must have acted in a very immoral way. Then, the person experiencing 'song' must find a way to express their feeling in a non-physical, non-violent, controlled manner.

And so 'song' is a sign that the social order of the island has been disturbed, the equilibrium tipped. Balance is only restored when the person causing 'song' has apologized or offered a gift or similar. Until then, the person experiences 'metagu', and feels guilt or pressure from the Ifaluk society until making amends. The conceptual width of balance is far-reaching and people have the power to create language that suits the world they inhabit.

Authenticity

Buddhism - like Hinduism - is based upon the principle of cause & effect and centres round the Noble Eightfold Path, The Middle Way, which is the avoidance of extremes, leading to balance in thought, words and action. In our quest for authenticity in love, in leadership and in life, we can discover a harmony that is enduring, that underlies work, play and all the events and segments in our day, something independent of the divides we create.

There is a flip side to the WLB phrase. Its alternate implications are that our 'work' finishes when the bell goes. This can cause us to switch off when we come home and lose the social disciplines we had at work: politeness, courtesy, interest in projects of others, for instance.

This could mean we disconnect from our loved ones and the lives they are leading. But true balance is 'karmic': every action performed in one part of our lives affects another. Every extra hour at work is one hour less with our families. Every extra hour in bed could mean one less working on our goals.

Unpacking the phrase

So, work-life balance: a harmless label or an influencing phrase working quietly away in our sub-conscious? For me it's like a dusty old jacket that needs replacing. Our lives are surely not divided up into two opposing parts. It has to be simply a question of balance and what that means to the individual.

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