Dharma in the Workplace

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 2:03:16

Good morning. I'd like to welcome you all to this day at Spirit Rock on Dharma in the Workplace. This is the first time we've offered a day on this theme, so from my point of view, the whole day is quite experimental, and we'll just have to see how it goes. But I'm really happy to see you all today.

I found myself filled with enthusiasm as I prepared for this day, because it's a topic I care deeply about, yet I've never really had the chance to explore it with others. I think this could be an interesting opening day for me and hopefully for you as well.

My name is Guy Armstrong, and I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock. I also have a background in various kinds of work, some completely unconnected to Buddhism or dharma practice, which I'll get into shortly. One thing I particularly appreciate about today is that there aren't many opportunities when these two realms can come together—dharma and our relationships in work. Sometimes I wonder if they're meant to be together at all.

I was watching the televised proceedings on C-SPAN this week of the Senate Judiciary Committee conducting an investigation called "Competition in the Computer Industry." The proceedings were chaired by Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah. Three prominent computer industry figures appeared on the panel: Bill Gates of Microsoft, Scott McNealy of Sun, and Jim Barksdale of Netscape—companies currently locked in bitter rivalries.

Basically, the entire hearing was designed to put increasing pressure on Microsoft, which was the real thrust of the proceedings. A federal antitrust investigation is running concurrently. You begin to wonder if concepts like right speech and truth-telling have any place at all in our public forums. The committee chairman, who is very anti-Microsoft, said with complete seriousness, "This proceeding today is not directed to be critical of any one company in particular." Yeah, right. Then Bill Gates, called upon to defend Microsoft's business practices, replied with equal seriousness, "No, Microsoft does not have a monopoly in PC operating systems." Yeah, right.

Often in the world of work, and certainly in public discourse, there's just a parrying of words where truthfulness—and what dharma really means is truth—doesn't seem to have a place to play. So it may be difficult for us to bring these two worlds together.

I also read a story recently in the Wall Street Journal about entrepreneurs who had made hundreds of millions of dollars in various startup ventures, again in the computer industry, claiming that their interest in work wasn't about money. Not about the money. But then they quoted a venture capitalist connected to

one of these startup firms who said, "Oh, well, yeah, the idea is first we do an IPO"—an initial public offering—"so the stock options of all the employees become valuable and they get rich. Then the next step is we aim to get bought out by a larger company through merger and acquisition. They buy us and our stock goes up further, so we get a double pop." Yet the heads of these companies are saying this isn't about money. Excuse me.

In my work life, apart from the dharma teaching I began in 1984, I've also worked as a computer programmer. I worked as a teacher overseas in the Peace Corps for two years in Malaysia. I helped run a small alternative school in Palo Alto in the mid-seventies when such things were quite trendy. What worked best about our school, I'm somewhat sorry to say, was its name: the Renaissance School for Creative Unfoldment. We didn't quite live up to the potential, but it was a great name.

My most recent job outside the dharma world was five years with Microsoft, which I started in technical support because I enjoy introducing people to computers. I moved naturally into sales and then into sales management. That's my most recent experience, and it happens to be with the company currently under federal scrutiny.

I still carry this bag from my Microsoft days—it's my low-cost briefcase. I was reflecting that very much like the company, it's actually held up quite well. It's ten years old now, but it's starting to get a little soiled. That's happening to Microsoft as well, so it's very fitting.

What I'd like us to explore today—and there are many different ways we could approach this issue—is different from some possible structures. This is not a corporate workshop on how to practice mindfulness in the workplace, although we'll certainly touch on that important aspect. I'm not a management consultant, so I won't try to advise people on the best ways to deal with employees or how to establish enlightened HR policies. I don't have any David Whyte poems to read, so some of you may be very disappointed and want to leave right now.

But I am primarily a dharma teacher, and what I'd like to discuss today is the life of work viewed from the perspective of dharma practice, specifically for people committed to following the Buddha's teachings through the Eightfold Path. I think this is a very fertile field for inquiry and investigation. All of us, having been practitioners for some time, have much to share from our own struggles and efforts to bring these two worlds together.

The day will combine some teaching from up front—I do have several things I'd like to share—but I also want to allow plenty of time for discussion, both in our large group where we can all listen to each other, and in different small group formats where you can speak more personally with one another, hear each other's challenges, and express your own. Since all of you have made different tracks and developed various understandings and pathways in this field, we can learn from one another.

So this is a day where I intend to learn a great deal from you, as well as hopefully sharing some of my own

thoughts.

I'd like to just get a feel for the group to begin with. I'm curious, because people can come into these questions from many different angles. How many of you are currently involved in the world of business? How many earn your livelihoods there? Great. So it looks like somewhere between a third and a half of the group.

How many of you are in some form of administration that involves service or nonprofit? Good. How many of you are doing direct service work, like teachers or therapists? And how many of you are people who, in your work, work with your hands? Good. I'm thinking of people like builders, carpenters, fine artists, craftspeople, cooks, gardeners, body workers. You are a lucky group because you actually get to use your work as mindfulness practice. That's a rare category.

The so-called information workers find it much harder to combine work directly with practice. If you're sitting in front of a computer screen all day or your main task is intense interactions with other people, it's challenging to make that strictly a mindfulness practice, although we'll talk about ways to bring the Dharma into that work as well. But for people who actually work with your hands, it lends itself very well to practice.

Developing Dharma in the workplace is no different than developing Dharma in all of our life. We shouldn't compartmentalize or separate these two realms, and we shouldn't imagine that there's a magic bullet for bringing Dharma alive in work any more than there's a magic bullet for bringing Dharma alive in all of our lives. The Dharma practice of our life is a lifelong project. If you believe the teachings of the Buddha on rebirth, it may be a project of many lifetimes. At any rate, it's not a small-scale endeavor. And bringing Dharma alive in the workplace is no different.

I actually believe that our aspirations and goals in the workplace should be no different than our goals in our whole life—which is that we would like to embody in our work our deepest human potential for awakening, for living with true wisdom and compassion. These are the standards and goals that I think we should be aiming to bring into our work as well. I really don't see any difference between the two. As the day goes on and we talk about these issues in more detail, hopefully we can get a flavor of why that is.

Just as practice transforms our daily life, our everyday life, so practice also ought to transform our work. And if it doesn't, then it may not be working—the practice may not be working.

In my own life, I've experienced a tremendous change in my relationship to work. The first job I had when I got out of college was in 1969. The Vietnam War was going on, and I took a job with Shell Oil in Houston, Texas, as a computer programmer. I was doing Fortran programming on a large mainframe. I absolutely hated it. I hated the work. I was stuck in a small office—a private office that didn't have any windows. Even the door didn't have a window. I was basically cooped up in that office for eight hours a day reading manuals and writing programs.

I didn't have a heart connection with anyone else who worked there. I was starting to get interested in Buddhism and the whole field of psychology, and at Shell Oil in 1969 in Texas, I couldn't find anybody else who shared these interests. I felt very isolated and was miserable. That was the beginning of my work career.

Later in my career, I was working at Hewlett Packard in California. There I felt much more connection with people and much more openness from the company.

During my hippie phase, I had very long hair and a beard, and I'd come to work at HP in jeans. That was perfectly fine with the company. One Halloween, when everyone dressed up in costumes, I wore a business suit—that was my costume that year. I felt like bridges were beginning to be built.

However, even at HP, I still felt overwhelmed and fearful in my work setting. The corporation seemed too large and impersonal, and I felt lost within it, very exposed and at risk. Looking back now, I see that this was mostly a function of my own psychology at the time.

In my latest position at Microsoft, I felt I had matured enough to play a constructive role in the office. I was able to help other people who felt threatened, vulnerable, or at risk by being a sympathetic ear, a supportive presence. In my personal trajectory, I can see my situation evolving from isolation and fear, from feeling overwhelmed, to feeling—not in charge, because it's too volatile a company—but comfortable. I could provide stability and lend an ear to others in the organization.

This illustrates how, as we mature as people, we have the opportunity to bring a different spirit to our work. Practice should aim at moving us along this kind of continuum.

I'd also suggest that the workplace may be the richest area in which we can test our dharma understanding and apply it. In our families and personal lives, we have considerable choice about who we're with and how we spend our time. While we don't choose our children, there's usually love there to begin with. With partners and friends, we can tailor situations to suit our preferences better.

In the workplace, those choices are taken away from us. We can end up spending quite a lot of time with people we might never have wanted to walk through the same door with, much less spend eight hours a day alongside. The workplace, for most of us today, is our primary community.

It's rather unsettling that our society, through the Industrial Revolution, has structured itself so that our community is not where we live. Throughout human history for the last million years, our community has been the people near whom we live, who work together with us to survive, who become part of our extended family, and with whom we share our whole lives from birth to death. The Industrial Revolution has changed all that. That kind of community has been largely destroyed for most of us.

For most of us now, the people we spend the most time with, whom we interact with most frequently, are often the people at work. The real test of our dharma practice becomes: Can we bring our understanding,

kindness, and compassion into those relationships? It's challenging precisely because we don't have the element of choice.

The main thrust of dharma practice in our life and work is to take the self-centeredness out of our existence. In brief summary, that's what dharma practice is all about—removing this self-centered attitude that believes my needs and wants should be the center of my universe. As we release this self-centeredness throughout our lives, we open to greater compassion and kindness.

The work setting is no different. It is entirely possible to approach our work with less self-centered investment. When we do this, we become a much cleaner vehicle for the dharma. Those in direct service know this firsthand—when we aren't so present as a "self," something else can come through us that can genuinely help people. But for anyone in a life of relationship, the opportunity for service exists by being less self-oriented in our views.

Krishnamurti offers this comment about love, which I think applies equally well to work relationships: "Love in relationship is a purifying process as it reveals the ways of the self. Without this revelation, relationship has little significance." I feel this is very true of our work relationships. If we're not using our work situation to illuminate ourselves—to reveal our clinging, grasping, and identification—then work has little significance beyond survival.

It's essential to begin inquiring in the work setting: What is this revealing about the ways I'm holding on, the ways I'm bound?

The Buddha gave us three main areas of the Eightfold Path through which to examine this question, and this is how I'd like to structure our exploration today. The Buddha divided the Eightfold Path—this path to awakening—into ethical conduct (sometimes called virtue), meditation (which involves effort, concentration, and mindfulness), and wisdom or understanding.

I'd like to examine our relationship to work and our workplace environment through the lens of these three areas: ethical conduct, meditation practice, and wisdom. Any approach to work that doesn't involve all three areas will be incomplete. We need to look closely at how each impacts our work.

I've structured today around giving a short talk on each topic—virtue, meditation, and wisdom—as it applies to our working life. After each talk, we'll have time for large group discussion, followed by specific questions for small group investigation. We'll break into groups of five to seven to share our understanding, then reconvene to hear what emerges. Throughout the day, we'll include sitting periods to allow us to come to greater stillness and depth, so these issues can resonate more deeply within us.

Are there any questions or comments about the day so far? We'll explore each area in much greater detail, so if you have specific questions about mindfulness, for example, I'd ask you to hold them for now.

But any questions about the basic themes?

"I have more of a comment. I haven't attended one of your sittings before, and I'm delighted to have an experience with someone that doesn't start from a psychology background and has come to the dharma, having started from the technical world."

"Okay. So it's very interesting."

"Okay, thanks. Yeah, I feel a deep relationship between my love of science and my love of the dharma, because I basically feel that what the Buddha put out was the science of happiness. He just laid out very clearly: if you want to be happy in a wise way, here are the steps to take to do it. It's empirically verifiable, and each of us is our own laboratory for doing that."

"Thanks."

"Any other comments, questions? Okay, then I'd like to begin the day actually with a period of sitting, hopefully to allow us all to settle in a bit. And this will be about a 30-minute period of sitting meditation. I'll give some brief instructions because the day is open to those who haven't had meditation background. Let me just ask, are there people here who haven't had meditation instruction at Spirit Rock before? Okay? That's great. So I will give meditation instruction through this period."

Another aspect of ethical conduct is right livelihood. This is another way that the Buddha framed it. Unfortunately, the teachings of the Buddha aren't a great amount of help in this area. The Buddha was largely teaching monks and nuns. They have a very different form of livelihood. It's called begging. Now, if any of you want to learn how to be good beggars, the Buddhist texts provide great instruction. But the Buddha didn't envisage job titles like multimedia graphics engineer or substance abuse counselor. So he didn't have many discourses on those kinds of livelihood.

Here's what he said about right livelihood, just to give you an idea: "And what, friends, is right livelihood? Here a disciple, having abandoned wrong livelihood, earns his living by right livelihood. This is called right livelihood."

Okay? Have you got that?

Now, there are certain things that the Buddha defined as wrong livelihood, specifically trading in weapons, trading in living beings, trading in meat or fish, slaughtered animals—because the spirit of that goes against the first precept, which is not killing—trading in drugs and intoxicants—not pharmaceutical drugs, not medically alleviating drugs, but intoxicating drugs—and trading in poisons. Those are considered to be wrong forms of livelihood, or any livelihood that transgresses the precepts.

So I think for ourselves in the modern world, there are other issues about right livelihood. I think one of the big ones is: is this the right work for me? Is this the job that lets me flower as a dharma practitioner and as a person? Is it a job that contributes to my unfolding? It's a big question. Does it contribute to the well-being of myself and others? Or is it taking away? Is it a job that's injuring my well-being and injuring

the well-being of others?

A question that comes in often for practitioners who are committed to the path of dharma is: do I need to be involved in service work? Because a lot of jobs aren't directly in service work. When I was selling Microsoft software, I mean, for God's sake, what difference does it make if the customer ends up running Microsoft Word or WordPerfect, right? I'm not making anybody's life better. I'm carrying out the aims of a business whose aim is to make money.

So, is it important for a dharma practitioner to be involved in a job that's directly service-oriented? And I think that's a big question. I think it's a question each person has to answer personally. So I don't think there's a blanket answer.

For myself, I found a service component in my life through going through different jobs. At one part of my life, I was doing part-time work as a computer consultant and part-time work as a dharma teacher. Other times, I've been full-time in one or another, a service job or a computing job. And that was the way that I brought it into my life, and that was okay for me. But it's a question I think everybody needs to look at for themselves. And I would recommend that people find a way to serve, even if it's not through their livelihood.

But those are some of the things I thought we could discuss when we come back.

That's basically all I wanted to say about ethical conduct. Any questions or comments?

[A participant shares a story about witnessing unethical decisions at work]

Well, I actually didn't know about the sexual component until months later. Mostly what I saw was a bad decision taking place. I also realized that if I had tried to do anything about that bad decision, nothing would have come of it. I would have created tremendous trouble for myself, and the outside situation wouldn't have changed at all.

My manager actually did hurl himself at that wall and created many enemies among those supporting that decision. He ended up leaving the company under a cloud—and since I'm not mentioning names, I'll tell you he left behind 10,000 options in Microsoft stock that today would be worth $28 million. I calculated that yesterday out of curiosity. I'll tell him that next time I see him—Spirit Rock says don't worry about it.

[Another participant comments]

When you were talking about how sometimes we don't intervene out of our own timidity, what I've noticed is that we have that anxiety, we don't intervene, and later when things escalate or continue, we're so enraged when we do intervene that we do it with blame and charge. That's hard to remember when you're faced with the fear.

Yes, that's an excellent point. Often when the issue first arises, it may appear smaller, and we think we can

let it pass. But we accumulate a charge around it, and when it becomes a bigger problem—which most problems do if they're not addressed—both our charge and the stakes are much higher. Thank you for that insight.

[A participant asks about engaged Buddhism vs. monastic practice]

You talk about service and making that choice. With respect to being engaged Buddhists, isn't that a choice? One option is sitting in a monastery meditating. The other is engaging, getting out in the streets, practicing business, participating, really showing that Buddhism and the Eightfold Path can be practiced in an environment of greed and everything else.

I definitely believe that. The business world particularly needs more examples of spiritual business. It can make a real difference, and finding that service component in a business job is important for practitioners.

But can't that happen through the person's individual integrity—just having that quality, with people looking up to them knowing they're practicing that way?

Yes, it definitely can. I also think that most businesses, certainly publicly owned ones, have a bottom-line commitment to making profit for shareholders. The overt, stated aim isn't necessarily aligned with service goals. As someone working within that organization, one of our goals isn't explicitly service-oriented—it's to help the company make money. So I see a blend there. It's important to respect the company's orientation while also finding our own service meaning within that framework.

When I'm talking about the individual—the leader of the company being able to engage people in day-to-day business—doesn't that provide great service?

Yes, I think it does. An individual at any level, whether CEO or someone at the bottom of the hierarchy, can manifest that integrity and commitment to ethics in ways that make a very strong statement in the world—and that's an important statement.

[Another participant interjects]

I think one has to be careful when talking about profit for shareholders or stakeholders, because that becomes political economics rather than substance. There's nothing wrong with making profit for shareholders, especially if it provides hundreds and thousands of people with right livelihood.

I don't feel bad about that at all. I'm not opposed to the basic capitalistic direction of our society or companies making profit. As you say, it provides many benefits to workers, their families, and creates positive ripple effects. At one point, my division of Hewlett-Packard was moving to Oregon...

At Hewlett Packard, I was invited to relocate when my division moved to Oregon. One statistic they shared—though I can't verify its accuracy—was that every job they brought to Corvallis would create five

additional jobs in the local economy. That's truly beneficial.

This raises an important question about service. We tend to view service as external—the forms our time takes or what we actually do. Through my years in business while attempting to maintain spiritual practice, I discovered that service actually emerges from an internal process: how we address conflicts and paradoxes, how we find peace within ourselves, then transform the patterns present in mass consciousness. This is where true service occurs, rather than appearing to do something serviceable while acting relatively unconsciously.

Certainly, many people in so-called service jobs may do more harm than good. I'm reminded of Angela's Ashes, a remarkable book I recently read. A poor child growing up in impoverished Ireland during the 1930s encountered teachers—who were supposed to educate and nurture young people—who were so harsh, abusive, and dismissive that it's surprising they didn't completely crush his spirit.

A participant shared: "Practicing these precepts, I find it very difficult to protect myself from the demands of people around me who just want me to 'get on with it.' When I need to sit with a decision or watch things evolve, there's a whole way of communicating required. The challenge is dealing with a world of people who want you to go, do, decide, be, get it over with, and move to the next thing. For me, one of the largest challenges is learning to say 'not yet.'"

This touches on how we influence those around us and what kind of influence we can realistically have. We must be realistic that we may not always change the outcome of decision-making processes, including their timeframes. We can certainly voice our call for deliberation and request more time for reflection—this is usually beneficial—while recognizing that sometimes compromise is necessary and we may not always succeed.

Don't think you're having no influence if decisions don't go your way. Simply requesting a more deliberate pace may influence the process in ways that don't appear as outright wins but may slow things down somewhat. It's still worth continuing. In this way, you're like a brake pad on a spinning wheel. You might get worn down through repetition, but the brake pad is an essential part of any organization.

Another participant observed: "When you mentioned timidity, I was struck by that. I work in a public library as a manager, and while this has nothing to do with libraries specifically, timidity is very powerful because risks are perceived as so great. The threat of risk becomes a significant problem, and timidity plays too large a role. Courage doesn't blossom as you wish it could."

There's tremendous inertia in the status quo. Anyone who begins bringing interpersonal relationships into the light of awareness in a workplace introduces a threat for many people, because there's often an unspoken agreement not to discuss interpersonal dynamics in business or work settings. It's inherently risky.

After our break, I'd like to explore the second part of the Eightfold Path: meditation. This consists of three

components—right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Rather than detailing each aspect extensively, I want to focus on formal and informal practice in the workplace, as both can be tremendously helpful.

How often have you heard meditation teachers offer instructions like this: "In the middle of your workday, take three minutes. Stop what you're doing, sit there, and breathe." Many have heard such guidance, and nearly as many have tried it. But how many make this a regular part of work life? Only a few hands.

I believe this can be genuinely important in work life. When examining work settings, we need to cultivate the quality of right effort more than we currently do. Consider the difference between forty-five minute meditation periods you've experienced, or day-long retreats, or intensive seven-day silent retreats. The unique element in formal practice is this continual return to the present moment.

That we have the intention and we remember to do that again and again and again. It's that coming back that does the work. That's what starts the process of change.

What happens when we get involved in a work day is we forget to do that. So our work day is not meditation because we're not bringing in that moment after moment effort of coming back into the present moment. The best way to make your work day more of a meditation day is to do that more often—just to remind yourself in more moments to come back to the present and feel what's happening.

A real support for that can be just taking a three-minute break in the middle of a busy day: putting the phone down, not looking at the computer screen, closing your eyes, and just being with your breath for three minutes.

Now why, among all these smart people who have heard this instruction so many times, are there only two people in this room who do that? I'd like to suggest it's because of two reasons. One, we forget. Number two, when we stop in the middle of a busy work day, the experience isn't always so pleasant. Because what we find when we stop is we run into that mind that has been cranked up. We feel the thoughts going through so rapidly. We feel the agitation in the body. It's not a place we're comfortable hanging out.

That's been my experience. We don't like to sit in that place of suffering, which is self-created. We have generated that suffering through our own rapid-fire thinking and acting and behavior.

So a couple of things to say. One is, how's that thinking ever going to unravel? How's that pressure ever going to release unless we stop and give it time to vent? If you take the time and actually sit through it, whether it's three minutes at your desk or half an hour when you come home from work—you may come home from work and that same thing's still going on and you think, "Geez, I've wasted this whole sitting period. I've done nothing but think for the whole thirty minutes."

It's not a waste. The nice thing is that's the mind releasing its pressure. That's what it needs to do sometimes—just release. So the beautiful thing about taking that time when you come home from work is then you can go into the evening and some of the steam has been let out. Similarly in the workplace. If you just take a few minutes and realize you're just going to be letting some of the steam off, you're not going to have that profound samadhi experience that you had on the sixth day of your last ten-day retreat at Yucca Valley, where the body dissolved and there was just light throughout your field of vision. That's probably not going to happen. But in stopping, you let some of the steam out, and that's useful.

The other thing that's important about that stopping is we actually feel what we're doing to ourselves with the pace of our work. The Buddha said on a number of occasions, "There is one thing, my friends, that keeps you bound. That is the not seeing of suffering." When we don't see the extent to which we induce our own suffering in the workplace, we don't have any motivation to change it. If we're going to be serious about taking a more balanced approach, being kinder to ourselves, being a little bit slower in our pace, we have to see the suffering that comes from the push. And the best way to do that is to be right there in the middle of it.

So when you take that three-minute break—and now I know everybody's going to go incorporate it—when you take that three-minute break, don't have the idea that you're going to have three minutes of calm, but be willing to experience whatever is there. That's what's in the moment. If you have the idea you're going to go into three minutes of calm, forget it. You're just going to be really frustrated. But that's not what mindfulness is about. Mindfulness is not about having my three minutes of calm. Mindfulness is about feeling what's real.

And what's real in this moment is this agitation that's a leftover of the pace. That's what we want to connect with. That's what connects us to the present moment. That is the truth of that moment. So just go ahead and experience that. That's okay. It's going on subconsciously anyway. So I would encourage you to take those moments both as a break and as formal mindfulness practice.

The other thing you can do in the workplace is start to bring formal practice into periods that are not particularly productive. How much time do you spend in meetings just sort of wishing that that person would finish up their rambling harangue and get on with something needed? During that time, you could be doing something actually useful, which is you could be doing a metta practice. The practice of loving-kindness, of directing thoughts of well-wishing to yourself and those around you, is terrific meeting practice. And believe me, you can do plenty of it and still hear every word that's going by. We've got that much bandwidth. And it really can change the flavor of your participation in that meeting.

Otherwise, it might just be totally dead time. You can do a practice when you're waiting in a queue. You dash out at lunch to do errands and find yourself waiting at the ATM, at the dry cleaners, or in the supermarket. You can practice there—perhaps standing meditation where you feel your feet on the ground and connect with your breath, or metta in those spaces.

For a long time, I had a lengthy commute when I was working at Microsoft—about an hour and a quarter each way. When I was a sales rep, it wasn't such a bad deal because I'd be out with clients during the day. But as a manager who had to be in the office more, going to the same place every day, it was a long drive.

For a while, I tried doing mindfulness practice while driving. I wasn't very good at it. I couldn't really keep my attention on my arms or stay with my breath. But what I found I could do much better was metta practice—the loving-kindness practice of sending wishes to people around me. In the Bay Area, there were always people around me, no matter where I went.

Ordinarily I'd be bugged by the guy in front of me going too slow, or the guy behind me wanting to go too fast. One thing I noticed: in any driving situation, I was the only person who wanted to go the right speed. Everyone else was too fast or too slow. The right speed for me is about ten miles over the posted speed limit, and I was apparently the only person at that speed. So everyone else was basically an irritant—either in my way or trying to get me out of theirs.

Doing the metta practice really changed my attitude. I highly recommend that practice to you.

When you walk from your office to the photocopier, you could take that as your one time each day for walking meditation. Don't try to do walking meditation everywhere you go—you won't enjoy it enough to sustain it. But pick one path you traverse repeatedly and say to yourself: "When I walk this path, I'm going to do walking meditation." That means simply experiencing the feeling in your feet and legs as you walk. That becomes your project during that time.

Finding little ways to bring practice into the work situation brings more reminders of the life of Dharma and adds that much more calm and attention to our experience.

But I feel by far the vaster field of practice in work—and probably the more important area—is in the realm of relationships: relationships to others and relationships within ourselves.

What normally happens in the workplace is that some communication—whether a phone call, meeting with a colleague, something a client says, or whatever—triggers reactions in us. These reactions are often difficult to be with. It might be fear, feeling belittled or embarrassed, anger, or desire. You walk down the hallway and somebody says, "God, I can't wait to tell you! The boss just came in and gave me a ten percent pay raise." And you know your pay raise was six percent. You're supposed to be happy for them. So desire might arise—wanting a pay raise yourself.

These qualities are an equal part of the meditational work, and probably the more profound part of our meditational work in the work setting.

There are many teachings from all the different Vipassana teachers about how to relate with anger, desire, and fear. I'm not going to cover that basic ground today—it's very important, central ground, but you can get that from many other places. What I want to encourage you to do is take that as part of your

meditation practice. Really learn how to work with the experiences of these difficult emotions, which in the classical tradition we call the hindrances—the forces that oppose clarity. These forces arise again and again in work settings and in our outside life.

The question is: do we have the courage to be with these states of mind? It's difficult to be with the agitation of the fast pace, perhaps the restlessness of that. It's also difficult to be with these emotional states. I want to encourage the development of what we might call courage—the willingness to feel them.

That's all it starts with, is just the willingness to feel them. Or what Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan teacher, called fearlessness.

So I'd like to read you a little bit from Trungpa. This is from a book called Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior, on relating with fear and fearlessness.

"Fear has to be acknowledged. We have to realize our fear and reconcile ourselves with fear. We should look at how we move, how we talk, how we conduct ourselves, how we chew our nails, how we sometimes put our hands in our pockets uselessly. Then we will find something out about how fear is expressed in the form of restlessness. We must face the fact that fear is lurking in our lives, always, in everything we do.

"On the other hand, acknowledging fear is not a cause for depression or discouragement. Because we possess such fear, we also are potentially entitled to experience fearlessness. True fearlessness is not the reduction of fear but going beyond fear. Unfortunately, in the English language, we don't have one word that means that. Fearlessness is the closest term, but by fearless we don't mean less fear, but beyond fear.

"Going beyond fear begins when we examine our fear, our anxiety, our nervousness, concern, and restlessness. We must look into our fear and look beneath its veneer. Meditation is the tool for doing that."

And the meditation that we learn on our cushion—that lets us contact those feelings as we're just sitting—is the same mind that we then want to take into the workplace. We want to feel the fear when it arises and to know it as fear, to feel the anger when it arises and know it as anger, and to let ourselves feel that as part of ourselves, not to disown it or say it shouldn't be happening.

Let me back up for a moment. When I first was working in the corporate world, I didn't have the support of meditation. I felt often overwhelmed. Of course, what I felt overwhelmed by were my own feelings. That's all that can really overwhelm us. It's not what the external situation is, but our response to it.

As I gained more stability of mind through meditation, I no longer felt overwhelmed in those settings. And it was because one of the primary things that meditation develops is the quality that we call samadhi. Samadhi is usually translated as concentration. This is a little bit misleading. In the West, when we say concentration, we mean, "I'm going to focus on this and I want to ignore everything else." There's an exclusive sense in the way we use the word concentration.

But samadhi doesn't have that exclusive sense. Samadhi, as the Buddha talked about it, means a mind that is whole. It means a mind that has become collected in its attention and in its energy. And when the mind becomes collected, then it has tremendous strength. It has firmness, it has steadiness, it has stability.

So when, for instance, you sit down and try to pay attention to your breath, sometimes you'll find you're able to connect with quite a few breaths in a row. Sometimes you'll find you're just with one breath and then the mind is away. With one breath and the mind is away. This quality of being able to keep the attention where you want it is a sign of increasing samadhi. That's how you can tell when it's there. But the felt experience of it is that the mind feels very strong and stable.

And it's that inner strength that lets us be in a difficult environment where our emotions are being stretched and not feel like we're victimized, not feel like we're being overwhelmed by it. So in these three areas of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, if in the workplace the primary feeling is one of vulnerability and fear of being overwhelmed, then the element that needs development is samadhi. And that's through the formal practice of meditation. That's what can give that kind of strength.

One of the aspects of samadhi, when it's well established and the mind becomes strong, is that this factor actually prevents difficult states of mind from arising or arising with any real strength. It's said in the classical tradition that samadhi suppresses the hindrances. So when that stability of mind is there, the upsets can't enter. If they do arise even, they can't really grab hold and dominate.

So that's one aspect—the formal practice. And then there's the informal practice: through moments of mindfulness or metta, being with the hindrances, being with the difficult emotions in all their forms, the effort of coming back together.

The other thing I think it's important to talk about—and I heard this topic in a couple of the small groups—is the whole area of simplicity. What is the balance in our life between work and practice? How much time do we give to one? How much time do we give to the other? Do we have the idea that we can enter into an eighty-hour work week or a hundred-hour work week and come home and be well balanced? Because I question that.

I think that for many, many years these teachings were preserved by monastics, by nuns and monks who led very, very simple lives, and that was for a reason. I think there's a reason that perhaps the Dalai Lama doesn't have a wife, three kids, two cars, a big home in the suburbs, and act as the head of a large corporation.

That's not to say that as laypeople we can't work with these practices, but I think as laypeople it's really important that we take a look at the balance in our lives between work and practice.

In our terms, I would talk about this as simplicity, and it doesn't have anything to do with being poor. It has to do with having enough leisure time that your mind can actually settle. Whether it's settling through formal practice or whether it's settling through doing things that you enjoy, not so important. But finding

some leisure time so the mind can settle a bit.

In the classical terms, this quality is talked about as renunciation. And the purpose of renunciation is not some moralistic ideal that being poor is better or having no relationships is better. It's a way of keeping the mind less cluttered. Because when the mind is less cluttered, it can penetrate more deeply into life, and it can grow wisdom more easily. So it's a question that every person needs to look at and discover for themselves. Different people have really different tolerances for complexity than other people.

This is some advice from the Dalai Lama. It's from a book called *Awakening the Mind, Enlightening the Heart*:

"Practicing the Dharma does not mean you have to give up your profession or do away with your possessions. There are various levels of practice according to individual ability and mental disposition. Everyone cannot renounce the world and meditate in the mountains. This is not practical. How long could we survive? We would soon starve. We need farmers to grow food, and we need as well the support of the business community. People in all trades and professions can work honestly and conscientiously without contradicting the Dharma. In this way, they serve the community and help the overall economy. I usually advise people to devote half their time to the affairs of life and half their time to the practice of the teachings. This, I think, is a balanced approach for most people."

Wow. I usually don't advise people like that because I'd probably be laughed off the podium, but this is advice from the Dalai Lama. It's not to say that each of us has to do that, but it just might be an encouragement to look at where we've drawn that balance line in our life and think about other ways to approach it. Fifty-fifty. What would that look like in your life? Could you even imagine that? That's a challenge.

So there's something of a question about how do you make the trade-offs in your life between practice, your spiritual life, and your work commitments. And then also, of course, in that same level of importance come the family commitments. How do you balance those three? It's a difficult question.

When I was working at Microsoft, I got two weeks of vacation a year. And the first time I got my first week of vacation, I went on an intensive retreat. I signed up for the old students' retreat at Santa Sabina. I was going to do a week and then come back all charged up. I got about three days into it, and I realized that after that pressured life I'd been living for about the past year, I didn't want a bunch of bells telling me what I had to do that day either. And just going through this very demanding schedule with all these people around and queuing up for food, that was not what I wanted.

I put my retreat practice aside for five years. And I'm a retreat junkie. I'm a big-time retreat junkie. I love life in retreat. I've spent probably three years of my life in retreat over different times. I put it aside for five years because it wasn't what I wanted in my two weeks of vacation a year.

So one of the ways we can make this balance is by doing work for a while really full on, and then doing

Dharma for a while more full on, or moving into a less work, more Dharma kind of balance. So it's not that we have to establish this fifty-fifty balance today, but to give some thought to how in our life we can find ways to bring in the Dharma practice more, ways to bring that balance about.

I think that's all I want to say right now about meditation as it relates to the work environment. Again, the important pieces are balance between spiritual life and work life, formal practice in the work setting and finding ways to do that, and the informal practice of relating to our own inner life, our own emotional life.

Questions or comments?

"I have a question. When the Dalai Lama is saying fifty percent work and fifty percent practice, by practice does he mean formal meditation?"

Well, the way he understands it, I think he said practicing the teachings. So I think for him, study is also a way of practicing the teachings. Meditation practice is another way.

Hearing the teachings is another way to practice. So I think all of that would come into it for him.

"But not some kind of incorporation practices?" someone asked.

He doesn't mean that necessarily. No, I think it's fine to separate the work life over here and the practice life over here. It's a formal practice. Well, study comes under that also, or hearing the teachings.

"In the work life, is that where we include family?"

No. That's why—sometimes family is hard work, but that's why I added that on as a third category. When I talked about establishing balance, I think the balance really comes between family life, work life, and practice. So there's even more complexity. And that's why I say I don't think you should think of applying this as if 50% of every day has to be practice.

Nancy wanted to comment since the issue of daily stopping had been raised. "It turns out Mary and I both started doing it during a period of great difficulty," she said. "Actually, it was a dharma teacher who suggested I get a watch—you know, the sound on the hour. Which is usually the bane of my existence, people who don't turn off their beeper watches! But what surprised me was that you said you find you have to be with uncomfortable feelings. What I also found was often there weren't uncomfortable things. I had this idea that my life was very stressful, but when I actually stopped and checked..."

I think what we're going to do is skip the small discussion groups on formal meditation. I don't know how much there is to say about that anyway, and spend just a few more minutes on that topic in the large group.

One thing I wanted to mention is for people who work with your hands—you can actually use virtually all of your work time as formal meditation practice. The way to do that is just keep your attention in touch with the sensations in your body as you're working. Stay in touch with your arms and the sensations in

your hands, and let that be your primary focus of attention.

So if you're doing bodywork on a client, if you're doing carpentry, if you're doing gardening, you need to give a little bit of attention, obviously, to the task, but there's quite a bit of free attention that you can put in a formal meditation direction. This is highly encouraged, and it's something you can also use in meetings—just keep the attention focused in the body.

What I thought might be interesting to talk about now is putting together the first two things we've covered—right speech and right action and ethics in general—with these difficult emotions that come up in the workplace, which is the field of meditation. Let's talk about a question that often comes up: How do we deal with a difficult person at work?

Almost everybody I talk to has one somewhere—one of these difficult people. For myself, I had a manager who I felt was being very restrictive. I had gotten an email from a friend at corporate asking about what kind of computers I thought the technical support people in the field sales offices needed. So I wrote back a long email saying, "Well, I don't think our current specs are entirely adequate, and this is what I think the spec should be for our computer systems." I sent that back to this person, and they sent it around to a few other people.

Somehow my manager got copied on that email. The decisions on computers were made at a district level, but based on corporate recommendations. My manager thought that I was being insulting to her specifications and support. So she called me into the office, read me the riot act, and said, "Don't you ever send email to that person again. I don't want your comments on this office going out across this whole corporation."

I tried to explain that I was simply answering a mail that someone had sent me, but she didn't see it that way at all. I got so angry. I held my temper and bit my tongue, but I said what I felt about it—that I thought it was unfair, that it was very important for us to communicate with our peers. She wouldn't have any of it.

So I left the meeting very angry. I went to the basement parking garage and just stormed around up and down the aisles for a while, really angry. When I calmed down enough to come back in, I just picked up working again. But I had a very rocky relationship with that person for quite a long time from my side, mainly around this incident.

Looking back now, I think there was a trust issue there that I just didn't see at the time. I didn't see, "Oh, she doesn't trust me." Looking back, I could see some earlier incidents and now I understand. But for a long time, I just did not have a good relationship with this person.

We all probably have stories like that.

So I'm wondering—I'd be interested in hearing from people who have had difficulties with coworkers,

with managers, perhaps with customers, about how you found skillful ways to deal with those situations. Any stories to share?

A participant shared: "I was thinking about this earlier, so I might as well tell this story. I work for a woman who is verbally abusive. She never really took off after me, but she would target our secretary quite a bit—we share a secretary. She would be sarcastic, critical, just use that cutting tone of voice.

When I first started working there, I thought, 'Oh my gosh, what am I going to do about this? I can't just ignore this. I have to do something.' But I was also new in my job and wasn't sure how to go about giving that kind of feedback to my boss.

What I decided to do—and it took a long time for me to decide—was to support our secretary in strengthening her own response. When she would complain to me about the boss, I would say, 'Well, have you thought about just saying, "Don't speak to me that way"?' I also decided to be a model, so any time this woman would start that tone with me, I would stop it right there.

It's been five years now, and it almost never happens anymore. I don't know whether I had anything to do with that, but certainly I think everybody's a little happier in that situation."

That's beautiful. It makes such a difference. You can just imagine how the secretary would feel going home after a day like that—she could be devastated for days. That kind of intervention sounds really skillful and seems to have made a real difference in people's lives. Thank you.

Another participant offered: "I was just writing down descriptions of a man I worked for for a couple of years. He was restrictive, punitive, dismissive, unresponsive, uncooperative, and unsupportive, among other things. It was really, really difficult for me. I tried every skillful means I could think of, and nothing worked. I just wasn't at a level to deal with it at all, so I suffered.

During this period, I was doing a lot of driving and had some tapes from Carolyn Myss. She had this one tape where she discussed the function of Judas in Christianity. Her conclusion was that Judas was responsible in a way for the Savior, because he had to die to be resurrected. She said that if there's a really, really terrible person in your life, thank that person as your savior.

That was the only thing I could think of doing, so I did it. It was incredibly transformative—it just changed everything. Every time he did something horrible, I didn't say it out loud, but I thanked him internally. It was always an internal response that helped me, and eventually it helped me right out of there. When I got out of there, I was done. I had taken what I needed to take and gotten what I needed to get."

That's beautiful. These two different responses really show the two avenues we can take in working with difficult people. One is direct outer communication; the other is inner transformation. Sometimes it may be helpful to do both. Sometimes there may only be one avenue open to us. I think there are some difficult people in work situations you simply can't talk to.

That's been my experience. And to try to would only compound the problem. So then if that avenue is closed, then the inner transformation is the only one.

The kind of gratitude that you're feeling is exactly the way the Dalai Lama talked about feeling toward the Chinese who came in, killed hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns, tortured people, reduced the Tibetan population from about seven million to six million in the years of their occupation. And the Dalai Lama says something like, "We need to be grateful to our enemy." He used that word—it's a strong word—because they teach us patience. He said, "How else would I have learned patience if it hadn't been for the presence of my enemy?" That's a very difficult kind of appreciation to come to, but if you can find that or develop that as a way of practice, I think it can be really powerful.

Thank you.

There's another situation where you don't necessarily have to deal with it alone. I had a new manager at a time when I was very depleted, and she was the opposite of help because she didn't know anything. She was also extremely anxious, so instead of being supportive at least emotionally, she was adding to the burden by micromanaging and saying things that were so ignorant they felt insulting. Luckily I had one other person that I could go to.

I was in very bad shape emotionally—kind of a combination of my work situation and that person—and I had somebody that I could tell the truth to. I really felt psychologically that this was character stuff with this person, and I saw absolutely no chance for help. But the good news is we had a healthy person that I had talked to, and he did research among all the people that were working for this person and found that my feelings were universal.

What is amazing is that I was dead wrong about this person's ability to change. She was tasked with talking with all of us about what our needs were, and I was pleased that I could tell her the truth compassionately. And this woman meets all my needs now. It's like a miracle to me. That doesn't mean I think she's perfect—she's a human, and she could be better in some things. But as far as really being a support and being a strategic resource at times, she really is. It's amazing.

That's terrific. Well, it sounds like a healthy organization in some ways. So looking for allies, especially people with influence and willingness to use it. That's a beautiful story. Thank you.

Others? Yeah, Nancy?

I have worked with someone for years, and he and I have had a pattern of conflict for years. For a long time he could do nothing right in my mind, and probably I the same. At one point I was doing an explicit practice of generosity every day—doing something generous.

One of the things about him that bothered me is that he speaks at length. It takes him half an hour to say good morning. So he started this one day, and I said, as my practice of generosity—I kind of thought

through my schedule, and I said, "I can stay here until he finishes." And I listened.

There had been a meeting that I had heard about, and I had already heard the other side of the story, and he had, in my mind, done his usual screw-up. He started telling me about the story, about the meeting. He told me about the meeting. He told me the background of the meeting. He told me the background of the background, and he finally got to how hurt he was at all of this. Suddenly he was a human being. All of these years I had kept him as a bad guy, and suddenly what I heard was different. So I couldn't hold him at a distance anymore.

Then he did something that I actually did appreciate. I ran into him in the stairwell and without even thinking of it I said, "I really appreciate what you did."

Well, we now talk. And he doesn't talk at great length. He was disrespectful of everyone, including me, or so I thought. He is now much more respectful. I think it was this mutual disrespect that was feeding one another.

One of the things that irritated me is that he would do things—I thought he had very bad judgment—and then I would have to kind of backpedal and resolve the problems he had created. The other day he called me and said, "I'm thinking about doing this. What do you think?" That's fantastic.

It brings up a few different thoughts. For me, there's this lovely saying by Lao Tzu in the Tao Te Ching where he says, "If you want to shrink something, you must first let it expand." That really seems true with people who have a compulsive need to talk. As you say, what I've noticed is a lot of those people feel very isolated. It's a way of making some kind of connection or putting their story out. If you do give it the space, it takes away some of the need for that to happen. That's beautiful.

The other thing that I really appreciate in your story is the connection to the humanity. A lot of you probably know that when we do the loving-kindness practice, we start with the people that we feel close to—ourselves, friends, loved ones—and then we move to people we don't know, and then we move to people that we have a difficult time with. We call them, classically, the enemy or the difficult person.

One of the things that the metta practice does as you develop it is help you see—you can't do the metta practice without seeing what's lovable in each person. That's basically the focus of the metta practice. You just find out what's lovable in the person and therefore why you can feel friendly toward them. So even in doing a difficult person, we're almost forced to see, oh, what's likable in that person in doing the metta practice? How would this person's mother see them, for instance? I think that's a very skillful thing to do with someone who's a difficult person at work. Just to keep in mind: where's their humanity? How would this person's mother see them? It can really change our relationship.

Thank you. Any other difficult person stories?

Those were all really terrific. They all illustrated something different, and the movement within each one

was actually inspiring. Thank you.

"How long did this take? The conflict? Or the whole episode, the whole situation, until it started to change?"

"It was over a period of months from when that first conversation where I really listened."

That's wonderful.

So I thought I would talk now a bit about the third area of the Eightfold Path, which is wisdom in the work situation. Then we will move into some group discussion and small discussion groups.

There are two aspects of wisdom in the Buddha's teachings. The first is right view, or sometimes called right understanding. The second is right intention, or motivation, or aspiration. It's like the attitude underlying our actions. Why do we do the actions we do?

I think that first it would be appropriate to talk about right intention in relation to our work. It poses the basic question: why do we work? I think it's really important that that intention in us be understood clearly because it's really the background for everything we do at work.

In the teachings of the Buddha, this quality of intention or motivation is so important because it is the seed of karma. When the intention is wholesome, then it's said the action that comes from it is wholesome, and the results of a wholesome action are wholesome in our lives. If we can set our intention straight in the beginning with an action, then it unfolds in a wholesome way, and the fruits of that action come back to us in a wholesome way. So this really is the nub of it.

Tibetans have a saying that everything rests on the tip of motivation. This is true in work as well.

Before we answer that question, I just want to step back once more and examine why we practice—to find a fundamental direction for motivation in our lives.

There's a beautiful saying of the Buddha that you've probably all heard: "Not to harm others, to help others if you can, and to purify the mind—this is the teaching of all the Buddhas." These three aspects—not harming, helping when possible, and purifying our own minds—form what I consider the basic aspiration and direction of dharma practice.

When I think about right intention as it applies to work, I connect it to these three areas: not causing harm, helping when we can, and using work to purify our own hearts.

Some motivations that come to mind fitting this wise intention include providing the requisites for ourselves and our families. The requisites in the Buddhist sense are clearly defined as food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—the four things the monastic community was always meant to have access to. These are wholesome motivations.

Our motivation might simply be that we enjoy the work—it allows us to use our talents and brings us joy. That's wholesome. It might be directly because we believe we can benefit others or the world through our work, embodying this attitude of non-harming and helping.

This points to one of the real benefits I see in the work arena. I've known many people, including myself, who have tried to avoid work at various points in their lives. Sometimes people avoid the work arena for many years because the conflicts they feel around it are too intense. But what people miss when they do this is the opportunity to develop confidence and self-esteem. The workplace can actually be excellent ground for developing trust in ourselves.

Confidence is sometimes discussed in Buddhist terms as trust, sometimes as faith, and I believe all these qualities come into play when we develop ourselves through work. It can be an arena where we genuinely develop deeper faith in life and in ourselves. And faith is what truly allows for surrender.

These are healthy reasons for engaging in work. What are some unhealthy ones?

Basically, when the project of self or the project of ego becomes involved in our work situation, motivation can go astray. The reason becomes not the wholesome ones we've mentioned, but rather using work to aggrandize our sense of self or inflate the ego in some way. You've surely seen this in people who take jobs as a way of defining themselves—as they grow in status or power, their ego becomes grander and grander, and they become increasingly difficult for those around them.

This represents the kind of unhealthy work motivation. When we use status, power, or wealth to build up or inflate our sense of self, it only creates more separation. It prevents us from seeing interconnectedness and builds separateness instead.

Of course, dharma practice can be used in the same way. "I'm a practitioner" or "I'm a Buddhist, therefore I'm better than non-practitioners, or better than non-Buddhists." But hopefully, within our meditation practice are the tools to see through that kind of pride, to see through such comparisons. In the work world, however, those tools of questioning, investigation, and paring away the unwholesome aren't usually built in. We have to do that work ourselves.

The Buddha identified eight concerns that tend to move the mind in an unhealthy direction, which he called the eight worldly concerns. These are distinguished from right intention or right motivation—they're the ones that lead us astray. The eight worldly concerns come in four pairs: pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, and fame and disrepute.

There's nothing inherently wrong with any of these experiences. We all experience the alternation of these qualities in our lives. It's not that we've gotten life wrong if there's blame, if someone criticizes us, if there's pain in our experience. These things naturally rise and fall for all of us. But when we become attached to these as the primary direction of our lives, our motivation veers off course.

These things come in the process of living, arising naturally through the development of our livelihood. Sometimes they manifest on a tremendous scale. Someone mentioned recently that Bill Gates is now worth $45 billion given Microsoft's current stock prices—$45 billion! Yet he maintains it's not about the money.

These material circumstances are not inherently wrong, but clinging to them, being driven by them, or becoming obsessed with these results brings suffering. When we become tied to these outcomes as proof of our life's worth or validation of ourselves, we suffer as a result.

I find it helpful to keep the eight worldly concerns in mind, regularly checking how much I'm being driven by praise or blame. Am I pursuing something because I want personal glory, or because I genuinely want the outcome itself? Am I investing in work that lacks inner meaning but promises wealth? Or am I following what I honestly love, remaining open to whatever material results may come?

In this way, if you set your direction in life as following the Buddha's teachings—not harming others, helping when possible, and purifying the mind—this orientation itself becomes a safeguard against being consumed by the eight worldly concerns. But frankly, without this kind of spiritual or at least humanistic foundation, it becomes very difficult not to be consumed by these concerns.

You can observe this dynamic in Silicon Valley. The enormous wealth generated by high-tech startups reveals an interesting pattern. One report I read noted that people who have become wealthy through entrepreneurship in our generation have contributed less to charity than most previous generations. Perhaps this is because they're still young and haven't reached that stage of giving yet. Still, there appears to be much wealth pursued for its own sake—for enormous houses, multiple cars, and private jets that go far beyond what is needed.

Having a Dharma orientation while living in the world means, though it's become a somewhat trite phrase, being in the world but not of it. The societal mainstream is essentially fabricated out of these worldly concerns. To work and play in the world without being dominated by these concerns requires a different strategy altogether.

Letting go of the eight worldly concerns is essentially releasing our clinging to ego. If our work truly involves reducing the element of self and self-concern in our lives and livelihood, then these eight concerns are precisely what draw us back into the constellation of self within the work environment. They serve as invaluable pointers for keeping our motivation pure and direct.

This is a lifetime practice, not something accomplished overnight. Our motivation purifies just as all other aspects of the Eightfold Path purify through practice. Just as mindfulness purifies, wisdom purifies, and ethics purify, so too our motivation and intention become refined as our Dharma practice develops.

There's another aspect of wisdom—right view—that I wanted to mention. I try to carry an attitude, one I've heard expressed often today, that in work settings, people are more important than organizational

goals. While people serve as the means of an organization, I believe they are more valuable than the ends themselves.

When I worked at Microsoft, I wasn't particularly overt about being Buddhist. Instead, I tried to tune into everyone's well-being. I would go out of my way to visit people at their desks, checking in on how they were doing with their work, listening if they had complaints about their manager or difficulties in their home life. I knew something about the personal lives and relationships of those who worked for me, considering this an important part of being present there. I wanted everyone to feel there was a sympathetic ear somewhere in that office.

Interestingly, during my time there, virtually no one showed much interest in meditation. I developed good friendships at Microsoft, but at most, I managed to bring two people to hear Jack speak on a Monday evening, and that was about it. Yet I was deeply touched because after I left, once three different couples learned what I was doing five years later, they asked me to perform their weddings. This felt like a sweet acknowledgment of the connection we had formed.

Another wholesome intention you can bring to the workplace is what I call the bodhisattva spirit—being present to listen to people's difficulties, to discover where people are struggling. This can become a profound motivation and intention for being there.

Great teachers are described as wish-fulfilling gems who bring to each person exactly what they need. Imagine what a blessing it would be if such a wish-fulfilling presence existed in a workplace. When there's one person in an organization whom everyone genuinely appreciates, this creates a tremendous unifying force. This is one way to build authentic teams—the reason leaders can be so vital to organizations. When everyone loves one person, it draws the entire group together. Love possesses this naturally unifying influence.

What can we cultivate in our workplace relationships to bring forth this quality of love? When this presence exists, it can genuinely transform the workplace, even if we're not the designated leader or manager. Can we embody the bodhisattva spirit in our place of work? Can we be there to love other people and listen compassionately to their difficulties?

The only thing that limits our capacity to be bodhisattvas in the workplace is our own development. If we're unable to love our colleagues fully, it simply means we haven't yet learned to love enough ourselves. This becomes our practice then—to grow sufficiently so that we can genuinely love the people we work with.

Let me now address some specifics around the eight worldly concerns, beginning with money, which has surfaced several times this morning. Money is such a charged issue, perhaps even more so in our culture because we have such abundance.

First, I want to clarify the Buddhist attitude toward money. There's potential for confusion here because

Buddhist monastics—nuns and monks who are often held up as ideals of practice—take vows of poverty and celibacy. This might lead people to think that being a poor Buddhist is somehow better, that having resources is spiritually suspect, and that having absolutely nothing would be ideal.

The Buddha established monastic life as a way to allow total focus on Dharma practice. For some, this is a beautiful lifestyle. But for most of us in the West, that path isn't unfolding naturally. Most teachers and practitioners today are laypeople.

The Buddha spoke very differently about money with laypeople. He taught that wealth is the result of generosity—there's a karmic connection between generous acts we've made in the past and the abundance we experience today. He said there is great value in having wealth if it's used to enrich the Dharma. When wealth serves positive ends, it becomes a very positive force, creating opportunities for generosity that benefit both giver and receiver.

The relationship between monastics and laypeople was deliberately structured so that monastics depend on lay support. In our Theravadan tradition in countries like Thailand, monastics cannot keep food overnight. When I was a monk, if I wanted to practice in remote places away from villages and working people, I couldn't do it because I would starve. The Buddha designed this system so that monks and nuns must live near villages to collect their morning meal through begging. Thus, monastic survival depends entirely on the wealth and generosity of surrounding communities.

Spirit Rock exists only through the generosity of many people—some without much money, some with moderate means, and some who are wealthy. This center stands here because we've been blessed with generous gifts from people across the economic spectrum.

The Buddha emphasized maintaining proper perspective on money. As he taught—and I'm paraphrasing since I don't have the exact source—"Of small concern for a practitioner is an increase in wealth. Of great concern is an increase in wisdom. Of small concern is a decrease in wealth. Of great concern is a decrease in wisdom." In the Buddhist tradition, wisdom is often called the true wealth of a practitioner.

Money raises countless questions in relation to work. How much is enough? How much do I need? Will I run out? Am I getting what I'm worth? Is someone else earning more than me? What should I do with the money I have? How much can I spend on personal pleasures? How much should go to other causes, to helping people, to charitable purposes? There are so many misconceptions and intense feelings around money that clarity becomes difficult. Yet as one of the eight worldly concerns, it requires careful monitoring.

Another particularly interesting concern involves responsibility and fear of failure or blame. This surfaces frequently in work because we're essentially paid to take responsibility. You don't hire someone unless you're giving them a chunk of work for which they become accountable.

How does that feel? When you're responsible for a major piece of work, what arises? It can feel like a real

burden because if we fail, many people will know. Success or failure often becomes quite visible. Sometimes we avoid additional responsibility simply to avoid increased visibility.

I definitely felt this way at Microsoft. The path was open for me to advance higher on the corporate ladder, but I chose not to pursue it. The higher you climb, the more visible you become.

And the more visible you are, the more praise and blame you get. I was quite comfortable with my current level of praise and blame. I wasn't making a lifelong career out of it. To a certain extent, I actually hid in the organization for a while because I didn't want to deal with any more praise and blame.

This was probably a reflection of both my wisdom and my fear. Maybe I would have grown more if I'd been in a more visible position—I don't know. But I think it was both those qualities operating in me.

The bottom line, the way to be free in this area, is something that Krishna told his charioteer Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita: "The way to freedom in this world is to act without attachment to the fruits of your action." This is a deep spiritual teaching. The way to freedom is to act without attachment to the fruits of your actions. This is really difficult to carry out, but this is another way of saying that the eight worldly concerns shouldn't drive us.

This is, in many ways, the essence of right effort. In our work and in our dharma practice, in our meditation practice, we want to pay attention, but then we don't know what will result. We have to pay attention and just trust that mindfulness leads to wholesome states. But we can't force that. In our work also, we make our right effort, but we really can't control the results.

When I was a sales rep, I used to get nervous before some presentations because there was potentially a lot of money on the table. If the customer bought from us, it could mean millions of dollars of income, and a lot of it might be influenced by one or two presentations. If we lost it, it would be clear—I was the account rep, I lost the account. So I felt that responsibility.

But what I started to realize is I couldn't control the outcome of the customer's decision. All I could do was do the best presentation that I could. The way I really got that lesson was from sports. I play tennis, and it's really clear—some days I can go out and be playing really well and still get beaten because the other guy is just too good. So I go into a match realizing I can't control whether I win or lose. The only thing that's under my control is whether I play my best game.

This has been a really helpful reshaping of right effort for me—just to play my best game. If I win, that's great. If I lose, that's too bad. I can't control that. But what I can do is play my best game. And if I play it without fearing the result, it goes better. I play better. I present better.

I think about this a lot at Spirit Rock. Deborah Urban is with us today—she's just joined staff as our development director, and she has the lofty assignment of trying to fundraise the rest of the money we need to finish the meditation hall, which you probably saw up there on the hill at lunchtime. We've got

about another $1.3 million to go, hopefully by the end of this year.

Organizationally, Deborah has some responsibility for that. But if Deborah felt that she had to control the outcome of making sure we got that money, she'd probably go crazy. So I want to say publicly, Deborah, you don't have that responsibility. Deborah's responsibility is just to identify the best means for us to try and raise the rest of that money and then to implement a plan. But we can't control what happens with that plan. Maybe we'll get the money, maybe we won't. If we don't, we'll borrow it. It's okay. It just means people will pay a little more for retreats than they would have. But it really is okay.

If we can just have that attitude that we do our best and we can't control the outcome, it's a way to be more comfortable with responsibility.

Another area where a lot of ego gets tied up is ambition in work, which is basically the ego investment in recognition and being rewarded with money and title and so forth.

When I went to work for Microsoft, I made a vow to myself that I wasn't going to get my ego involved in my work. I was just going to go in and do the job, and I wasn't going to get caught up in the office politics, or whether I got a promotion, or whether I was getting paid enough. I knew it was enough money to keep me alive. I wasn't going to get involved in praise, recognition, rewards, awards, and so forth.

I succeeded for about six months. And then my ego got totally involved. I could see myself really wanting to be recognized and wanting a good review. We had performance reviews every six months and they were numerical, so I knew exactly where I stood. I wanted the highest percentage increase that would be based on that numerical rating each time, and I wanted awards at sales meetings and things like that. So it snuck in even though I was trying to be aware of it and didn't want it to happen—that level of ambition.

All I could do then was watch it with perspective. And that's okay too. If we can watch that stuff with perspective, we don't have to be ashamed of having an ego. In case you haven't noticed, the whole world does, except for maybe the Dalai Lama and a few other people. So it's not shameful to have an ego.

How can you be in sales in that type of environment and not get caught up in that thing when they have the big board showing who sold what this month? That's a horrible job not to have that. I couldn't. That's the simple answer. I couldn't. I'm sure the Buddha could have, but he probably wouldn't have bothered.

The more we understand that those things don't ultimately matter, the more freely we can play in that world. I knew people who were freer than I was about that stuff, and they hadn't even done meditation practice or even psychotherapy. I respected that a lot.

This ambition is really always focused on my pursuits and interests and self-concern. And ultimately, that's suffering. That's why clinging is suffering. Shantideva, who was an eighth century Indian teacher, said, "All happiness in this world comes from desiring others to be happy. All unhappiness in this world comes from wanting only myself to be happy." So this ambition stuff is usually only about myself. But

when our interest is in really the welfare of others too, that's when the potential for happiness really grows.

I mentioned the person that I knew, my friend and manager who left Microsoft basically out of ambition. He had had ambition for promotion to the next level, and when it was thwarted, he got so upset he left, and left behind what turns out to have been $28 million.

Someone I know was married to a short man. He actually was a very ambitious person. He graduated from the Naval Academy and became a commercial airline pilot, then went to work as an executive for GE and started up General Electric China back in the late seventies. They moved to Hong Kong for a few years while he was heading up that operation. His wife didn't like traveling. She didn't like being the corporate wife. She didn't like that he was away all the time. She didn't like having to move every few years so he could get another promotion.

At one time she said, "God, if he'd only been a couple inches taller, he wouldn't have had to go through all this." It was just a quick quip, but it's a pointer to the fact that this kind of ambition often comes from personal insecurity. It's often a lack of real fulfillment that makes us invest in things like title and status and power over other people, as though because we have the ability to tell other people what to do in the workspace or to allot them their percentage raise, it makes us a better or more important person. It's a fundamental illusion.

I think I'll stop there. I had a little topic on competitiveness, but we'll maybe let that come out in the discussion.

I'd just like to close by reading a quotation from Chuang Tzu, who was a Taoist master of 500 B.C. A lot of you have probably heard this before. It's called "The Empty Boat," and in many ways it's a beautiful model for living in the world.

"If a person is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his boat, even though he is a bad-tempered man, he will not become very angry. But if he sees someone in the other boat, he will shout at him to steer clear. If the shout is not heard, he will shout again, and yet again, and begin cursing, and all because there is somebody in the boat."

Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting, and he would not be angry. If you can empty your own boat crossing the river of this world, no one will oppose you and no one will seek to harm you.

So I thought what we could do is just open up to some discussion in the large group first. Then we'll probably take one more break and come back. And I think some small groups might be interesting to discuss some of the issues that we've touched on, like money, ambition, self-esteem, and so forth.

So comments, please.

"Your comment about not controlling the outcome, I find that a wonderful thought, but it seems like in the

workplace it's really difficult, because basically all evaluations, and even if you're in charge and other people are looking at you to see what you're doing, it's pretty much based on action. And Spirit Rock sounds like a wonderful employer, but other places aren't. But I'm just wondering how you realize that, how you think one can realize that in the context of what the work world tends to be like."

I think that the outcome goes best when we're not attached to the result of it. It's the same in meditation practice. Meditation practice is such a deep teaching on this very topic, because if you approach your meditation practice with a specific goal in mind, you're going to be frustrated again and again, because meditation practice unfolds according to the ripening of the individual process.

So, for instance, people come on a meditation retreat, they think that they're supposed to come to greater peace, and after three days they find their mind is going crazy. And that's the good part. And then after four or five days it's dredging up the most terrible memories of anything we've ever done or said to someone in our life. And after six days it's unfolding this deeply held grief or some sadness that we've carried with us since we were ten years old that we didn't even know was hiding there. And it feels anything but peaceful.

So if we come into that meditation experience thinking that the outcome should be peace, we're going to be frustrated. If we surrender to the process and stay with it, with that good intention, then eventually there's this huge clearing out and there's a great deep level of peace that's accessed and that's touched and that becomes really available to us. But we have no control over when that happens.

In the workplace, obviously we have much closer control and more immediate results, but we really can't strictly determine what somebody around us is going to do in response to what we do. And so all we can do is do our best job. But if we do our best job and the goals have been set reasonably, then the best results will come. So I think that element of surrender is really important for anyone who's in a work setting as a way of doing their best job. And when you do your best job, you have the best chance of getting the best results.

We do take responsibility in our workplace for not having gotten the results, and I think that's entirely appropriate. But we also have to understand with wisdom the interdependence that means that we can't control it entirely. For example, Kofi Annan goes to negotiate a truce with Saddam Hussein, and he does his best effort, but he can't control the outcome of that. He has the whole responsibility for the peace of Iraq riding on his shoulders, but he can't control the outcome. But he just goes and does the best job he can. And in this case, fortunately, the outcome came.

So I don't know if that helps. There has to be the sense of responsibility, but underneath it, we have to know with wisdom that we're not totally in control of anything, not even our own health.

"I'm just curious, what happened to the manager that left Microsoft?"

Well, he actually, it was a sad story actually because he went to a few different companies that didn't seem

quite the right fit and is still in the high tech industry and still in sales. He was a vice president at a fairly well known software company for a while, but that ended up in difficulty. And so he bounced around a bit. I think it was very unsettling to his confidence the way that that story happened.

"Could you comment briefly on the distinction between right effort and right action?"

Right effort and right action. In terms of the Eightfold Path, right effort is really defined in psychological terms. It's defined as what we do to bring about more wholesome states within our own hearts and minds and what we do to decrease the unwholesome states within our hearts and minds. Right Effort is directly connected with the meditation practice and the mindfulness practice and awareness.

I'd say the link is that when we have purified the heart more and we can see more clearly, then our intention becomes purified, and it's through the link of right intention that our actions become pure. So right action is kind of what we do in the world in relation to others, and it's purified by a clear seeing and then traveling through this vehicle of wise intention.

"How do you, or how does one come to terms with, say, the difference between how much money somebody makes and what they do in terms of its value to society? You've got that athlete who tries to kill his coach and he's worth millions, and then you've got Mother Teresa. And then the people that seem to be money magnets who really are mean or abusive people that really don't have a whole lot going on for them, yet they always seem to have plenty of money. And then you have bright, articulate, attractive people that have a lot of stuff seemingly going for them. They have trouble getting jobs or getting really well-paying jobs or seem to always be underpaid."

I mean, if money's energy, why is it not flowing toward what's righteous almost?

I wish I knew. I share your dilemma. There seems to be a lot of injustice in the world around this issue of money. I'll tell you basically the answer that one of my Tibetan teachers gave to me. When a similar question like that was asked, he basically said, "This is samsara, and we don't expect things to work right in samsara."

It's not a cynical answer, but in the teachings of the Buddha, the world is deeply troubled. The world is not in good shape in the eyes of the Buddha's teachings. There is a tremendous amount of blindness going on in the world. As you can tell from the wars and the corruption and the fighting and the greed and so forth, there's a tremendous amount of blindness going on. That blindness expresses itself in human suffering. So there's also blindness in the consumer society.

As long as the larger mainstream society is not driven by a deeper underlying motivation for the liberation of heart and mind and the welfare of all sentient beings, there are going to be huge injustices. I think that the road to smoothing them out is twofold. I think it's interaction through people who are interested in transforming their own consciousness, and I think it's through outer action of social activists pointing out the failings of the society at large to do what's needed in areas that need to be attended to. But

there's clearly no quick solution, and I think there's a lot of injustice in the world today.

"Doesn't karma play a large role?"

Say some more.

"I believe that people come in with a particular dharma that's based on whatever karma they've had in previous lives. And some people are not here to make money right now. I mean, that's just not their dharma. They have other things they have to learn. Other people make enormous amounts of money, and they have things to learn from that. There's a balancing of the scales. I think we tend to look at things over such a short period of time. I mean, a lifetime is no time in the scheme of things."

This is definitely within the teachings of the Buddha. It's very clearly stated that people carry with them into each life the mental tendencies that have built up through their actions, based on their intention, in past lives. And so people come into this life with different propensities.

The Buddha said, I think I mentioned earlier, that one of the prerequisites for abundance was generosity. He said that people who are kind in their relationships to living beings are blessed with long life. And he made a number of comments around karma like that. So that's certainly one explanation. That's one possible explanation for all the discrepancies of talent, of welfare, of wealth, of health that you see around the world.

"And yet also we hear the stories so often of those good Samaritans who risk their life to help someone, and their life gets cut short. And we also hear the term, why did he or she have to go? He was such a good human being. It's a hard one to... We never know. People like Martin Luther King being killed so young, John Kennedy, Princess Diana. We never know why. And it's one of those mysteries that we know we're exposed to also."

Nancy?

"Could you say something about being the bodhisattva of the workplace and balance? When we're already trying to balance work and not work and various aspects of work, and then in most workplaces there is so much need and so few people filling that role that if you step in, then it becomes a bottomless pit."

Good question. I think you have to bring a sense of balance to that as well. And it's clear that if you want to devote some time in your workday to listening to other people, there's going to be a price to pay either in the quality of your own work or spending more time on your own work. So I think it's just another of the things you have to balance.

I think you have to learn in the work setting when to say no to people. If somebody drops by for a chat, being able to set time limits on it. Being able to tell people that you'd love to talk to them but you can't today. Getting sort of time management rules, you might say, within your bodhisattva relationships. But I think you just have to manage that like all the other tasks. You know, I just kind of saw it as one other task

on my to-do list and I had to prioritize it and give it time within my other tasks.

Yes?

"That makes me think about a workplace where there are a variety of competencies, a variety of energies, and a variety of willingnesses, so that some are there a whole lot more than others, and they're all expecting, or they're all perceived as the same or equal. And so that really does have a... I mean, something really does begin to erode..."

for those people who are contributing more while others contribute less. The confidence in the whole workplace begins to deteriorate.

Well, in the places I've worked—which have been both for-profit and non-profit operations—I actually found that the for-profit organizations had much better performance review systems than the non-profit places where I've worked. I strongly endorse performance review systems, and I think numerical ratings are excellent tools.

When we're clear about expectations and honest about performance, it serves everyone. It protects those who are giving their all from burnout and resentment, and it offers those who aren't fully engaged a chance to either step up or find a better fit elsewhere. This kind of clarity isn't harsh—it's actually compassionate, because it prevents the slow erosion of trust and effectiveness that happens when standards become unclear.

The bodhisattva path requires us to be skillful in how we work together. This means being both generous with our energy and wise about sustainability. It means creating systems that support genuine contribution rather than just good intentions. When we bring this level of discernment to our spiritual communities and workplaces, we create environments where the dharma can truly flourish—not despite our human limitations, but through our honest acknowledgment of them.

This is how we practice the middle way in our everyday working life: neither burning ourselves out in misguided service nor withdrawing from our responsibilities, but finding that skillful balance where our efforts can be both sustainable and genuinely beneficial.

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