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 exploring Dharma in the Workplace. This is the first time we've devoted an entire day to this theme, so from my perspective, the whole experience is quite experimental. We'll simply have to see how it unfolds. But I'm truly delighted to see you all here today.

I found myself filled with enthusiasm while preparing for this day, because it addresses a topic I care deeply about, yet I've never really had the opportunity to explore it with others. I believe this could serve as an interesting opening both for me and hopefully for all of you as well.

My name is Guy Armstrong, and I'm one of the teachers here at Spirit Rock. I've also worked in various other fields, many completely unconnected to Buddhism or Dharma practice, which I'll discuss shortly. What I particularly appreciate about today is how rarely these two domains—Dharma and our relationships at work—have the chance to come together. Sometimes I wonder if they're even meant to be integrated 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, and featured three prominent computer industry leaders: Bill Gates of Microsoft, Scott McNealy of Sun, and Jim Barksdale of Netscape—companies currently engaged in bitter rivalries.

Essentially, the entire hearing was designed to increase pressure on Microsoft, which was the real purpose behind the proceedings. There's a federal antitrust investigation occurring concurrently. This made me wonder whether concepts like right speech and truth-telling have any place at all in our public forums. The committee chairman, who is notably anti-Microsoft, declared with a perfectly straight face, "This proceeding today is not directed to be critical of any one company in particular." Right.

Then Bill Gates, called upon to defend Microsoft's business practices, replied with equal composure, "No, Microsoft does not have a monopoly in PC operating systems." Right.

There's often this sense in the world of work, and certainly in public discourse, of a constant parrying of words where truthfulness—and Dharma is fundamentally about truth—doesn't really have space to exist. This may make it challenging for us to bring these two worlds together.

I also recently read a Wall Street Journal story about entrepreneurs who had made hundreds of millions of dollars in various startup ventures, again in the computer industry, claiming that their interest in their

work wasn't about money. Not about money. Yet they quoted a venture capitalist connected to one of these firms who explained, "The idea is, first we do an IPO so that the stock options of all 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 purchase us and our stock rises further, giving us a double pop." Meanwhile, the company heads maintain, "This isn't about money." Excuse me.

In my work life, apart from the Dharma teaching I began in 1984, I've worked as a computer programmer. I served as a teacher overseas in the Peace Corps for two years in Malaysia. I helped run a small alternative school in Palo Alto during the mid-seventies when such ventures were quite popular. What worked best about our school, I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit, was its name: the Renaissance School for Creative Unfoldment. We didn't quite live up to that potential, but it was certainly an impressive name.

My most recent position outside the Dharma world was five years with Microsoft, which I began in technical support because I enjoyed introducing people to computers. I then moved naturally into sales and eventually into sales management. That represents 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 serves as my economical briefcase. I was reflecting that much like the company itself, it's actually held up remarkably well. It's ten years old now, but it's beginning to show some wear. That's happening to Microsoft as well, so it seems quite fitting.

What I'd like us to explore today represents just one of many possible approaches to this subject. This is not a corporate workshop on practicing mindfulness in the workplace, though we'll certainly touch on that important aspect. I'm not a management consultant, so I won't attempt to advise on employee relations or enlightened HR policies. I don't have any David Whyte poems to share, so some of you may be disappointed and wish to leave immediately.

I am primarily a Dharma teacher, and what I want to discuss today is the life of work viewed through the lens of Dharma practice—specifically for people committed to following the Buddha's teachings via the Eightfold Path. I believe this represents a very rich field for inquiry and investigation. I think all of us, having been practitioners for some time, have much to share from our own struggles and efforts to integrate these two worlds.

Today will combine some instruction from the front—I do have several points I'd like to address—but I also want to provide ample time for discussion, both in our large group where we can all listen to one another, and in various small group formats. This will allow you to speak more personally with each other, hear one another's challenges, and express your own. Since all of you have developed different approaches and understandings in this field, we can learn from one another.

This is a day where I intend to learn a great deal from you, while hopefully sharing some of my own reflections as well.

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, thanks.

How many of you are doing direct service work, like teachers, therapists? Thank you.

How many of you work with your hands? Good. Please enlighten me if there are more, but I'm thinking of people like builders, carpenters, fine artists, craftspeople, cooks. Gardeners, body workers. I don't quite put typists or clerical workers in that category.

You all are a lucky group because you actually get to use your work as mindfulness practice. That's a rather rare category. The so-called information workers find it very hard to combine work with practice directly. If you're sitting in front of a computer screen all day or your main task is intense interactions with other people, it's difficult to make that strictly a mindfulness practice, although we'll talk about ways to bring that in. But for people who actually work with your hands, it lends itself very well to that.

Developing Dharma in the workplace is no different than developing Dharma in all of our life. We shouldn't compartmentalize or separate these two, 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, our 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. So these are the standards and the 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. And I think as the day goes on and we talk about some of 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 Texas, I couldn't find anybody else who shared these interests. I felt very isolated, and I was miserable. That was the beginning of my work career.

Later, sort of midway in my career life, I was working at Hewlett Packard in California. There I felt a lot more connection with people. I felt a lot more openness from the company.

I was kind of in my hippie phase then, so I actually had very long hair and a beard. I'd come to work in jeans. That was fine with HP. One day on Halloween, we dressed up in costumes, so I wore a business suit. It was my Halloween costume that year. I felt like the bridges were starting to be made.

When I worked at Microsoft—oh, but one other thing I want to say about HP—I still felt overwhelmed and fearful in my work setting. I felt that the corporation was too large and too impersonal, and I was just lost within that. I felt very much exposed and at risk. I now look back and see that mostly as a function of my own psychology at the time.

In my latest job with Microsoft, I felt that I had grown up enough that I was actually able to play a constructive role in the office, helping other people who felt threatened or vulnerable or at risk. I could at least be a sympathetic ear, a sympathetic shoulder. So in my own personal trajectory, I can see my situation go from being isolated, from being fearful, from feeling overwhelmed, to feeling—I won't say in charge because it's too volatile a company—but feeling comfortable, feeling that I could provide some stability and provide an ear to other people in the organization.

This is just one way in which, as we mature as people, we have the opportunity to bring a different spirit to our work. And practice should aim at moving us along that 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 our Dharma understanding. You know, in our family, in our personal life, we have a lot of choice about who we're with, who we spend our time with. Not so much with our children, granted, but usually there's a lot of love there to begin with. Certainly with our choice of partners, with the friends that we spend our time with. In some ways we can tailor that situation to suit our likes and dislikes a little better.

In the workplace, those choices are taken away from us, and 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 hang out with for eight hours a day.

The workplace, I feel, for most of us today, is our primary community. It's a little bit scary that the way our society has been structured through the Industrial Revolution is that our community, for most of us, is not

where we live. When you think about the way humans have grown up on this earth for the last million years, our community has been the people near whom we live, who have worked together with us to survive, who become part of our extended family, and that we share our whole lives with, usually from birth to death.

With the Industrial Revolution, that has all changed. That kind of community has been killed away for most of us. But for most of us, the people that we spend more time with, the people that we hang out with, the people we interact with the most, are often the people at work.

So then the real test of our Dharma practice is, can we bring our understanding and our kindness and our compassion into those relationships? And it's difficult because we don't have the element of choice there.

The main thrust of our Dharma practice in our life or in our work is to take the self-centeredness out of our life. In brief summary, that's what Dharma practice is all about: taking out this self-centered attitude that thinks that my needs and wants should be the center of my universe. As we take that self-centeredness out in all of our life, we open up to more compassion and more kindness.

But the work setting is no different. It is entirely possible to approach our work without as much self-centered investment. And when we do that, we become a much cleaner vehicle for the Dharma. Those of you who are in direct service know this firsthand, that when we aren't present, something else can come through us that can really help people. But for anyone who's in a life of relationship, the opportunity for service is there by being more absent, by not being so self-oriented in our views.

This is a comment from Krishnamurti, which is talking about love, but I think it can also apply just as well to the relationships in work: "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 relationships at work. If we are not using our work situation to illuminate ourself—and another way to say that would be our clinging and grasping and identification—then work has little significance beyond survival.

It's very important to begin to inquire in the work setting: what is it revealing of the ways in which I'm holding, of the ways in which I'm bound?

The Buddha basically gave us the three main areas of the Eightfold Path in which to look at this question. So this is the way I'd like to structure the day today. The Buddha divided the Eightfold Path, this path to awakening, into the areas of ethical conduct, sometimes called virtue, of meditation, which involves the fields of effort, of concentration, and of mindfulness, and the third of the fields is wisdom or understanding.

So what I'd like to do is to really look at our relationship to work, look at our workplace environment in the light of ethical conduct, of meditation, formal meditation practice, and wisdom or understanding. I think that any approach to work that doesn't involve looking at all three of these areas is going to be incomplete. We really need to take a close look at all three of these as they impact our work.

So the way I've basically structured the day is that I want to give a short talk on each of these three topics—virtue, meditation, and wisdom—as it applies to our life of work. After the talk, I'd like there to be some time for discussion in the large group, but then I have specific questions or areas that I think it might be helpful to investigate through small groups. So typically after a talk, we'll break into smaller groups, maybe about five or six, seven, for you all to share your understandings in those areas. Then come back together and hear what's come out of the large group. Then we'll put some sitting time in throughout the day so that we can all come to a greater stillness, greater depth, and that will allow these issues to have a deeper resonance for us.

I wonder if there are any questions or comments about the day so far. We'll get into all these areas in more detail. So if it's a specific area on mindfulness, for example, I'd ask you to hold that.

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 and has 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.

I don't think there's a blanket answer to the question of how to integrate service into our livelihood. For myself, I found a service component 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—either a service job or a computing job. That was the way I brought it into my life, and that worked for me. But it's a question I think everybody needs to look at for themselves. I would recommend that people find a way to serve, even if it's not through their livelihood directly.

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

Well, I actually didn't know about the sexual component of that situation until months later. So 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 a lot of trouble for myself, and the outside situation wouldn't have changed at all.

My manager actually did sort of hurl himself at that wall and created a lot of enemies among the people who were supporting that decision. He ended up leaving the company under a cloud—and since I'm not mentioning any names, I'll tell you he left behind ten thousand options in Microsoft stock that today would be worth twenty-eight million dollars. I just did the calculation yesterday because I was curious. I'll tell him that next time I see him. Spirit Rock says don't worry about it.

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, so we don't intervene. Later, when things escalate or continue, we're so enraged that when we do intervene, we do it with blame and charge. That's hard to remember when you're faced with the fear though.

Yes, that's a very good point. Often when the thing first comes up, it may look like a smaller thing at that point, and we think we can let this go by. But we accumulate a charge around it, and then when it does get to be a bigger thing—which most problems do if they're not dealt with—our charge is bigger and the whole stakes are bigger. That's really insightful. Thank you.

You talk about service and making that choice—with respect to being engaged Buddhists, isn't that a choice? I mean, one of the choices is to sit in a monastery meditating. The other is engaging and 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. I think the work world, the business world particularly, needs more examples of spiritual business. So I think it does make a difference, and it can definitely be a service component of a business job. Finding that service component in a business job is an important thing for a practitioner to do.

Can't that be through the person's individual integrity and just having that quality, with people looking up to them knowing that they're doing that?

I definitely think it can. I also think that most businesses—certainly publicly owned businesses—have a bottom line commitment to making a profit for the shareholders. So you could say the overt or stated aim of the organization is not necessarily along service goals. As a person working within the organization and committed to it, one of our goals is certainly not an explicitly stated service goal—it's to help the company make more money. So I see there's a blend. I think it's important in that situation to respect the company's orientation, but also to find our own service meaning within that.

When I'm talking about the individual—the leader of the company being able to engage people day-to-day

in business—doesn't that provide a great service?

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

I think one has to be careful when you start talking about profit for shareholders or stakeholders, because that becomes kind of political economics rather than substance. There's nothing wrong with making a 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 don't feel opposed to the basic capitalistic direction of our society or companies making a profit. As you say, it provides many benefits to workers and their families and creates positive ripple effects. At one point, my division of Hewlett-Packard was moving up to Oregon.

I was invited to make the move up there. One of the statistics they shared at the time—I don't know if it's true—is that every job they brought to the town of Corvallis in Oregon would create five other jobs in that economy. So that's terrific.

One of the questions is that we tend to always look at service as being the externalization or the form of how we spend our time or what we actually do. At least for me, I found that in many years in business and attempting to find ways to have a spiritual practice in business, service actually comes from an internal process of how to address the conflicts and the paradoxes and how to come to some form of peace inside oneself and then transmute the patterns that are in the mass consciousness. That's actually where the service occurs, rather than looking like one is doing something that is of service, but maybe doing it in a relatively unconscious way.

It's certainly true. There are lots of people in so-called service jobs who may be doing more harm than good. I'm reminded of a book I just read called Angela's Ashes. I don't know if any of you have read that. I thought it was a fantastic book. This poor kid was growing up in a poor section of Ireland in the 1930s, and his teachers—teachers are supposed to be educating and bringing out the best in young people—were so harsh and so abusive and so dismissive that I'm surprised they didn't cripple his spirit entirely. So it's a very useful point.

"In practicing a number of these precepts, I find it very difficult to protect myself from the demands of the people around me that I just get on with it. If I'm in a place where I don't want to make a decision now because I need to sit with it or watch things evolve, there's a whole way of communicating that I need to do it in a certain way. Without yet coming across as—and this is practice—there's a whole world of people who just want you to go, do, decide, be, get it over with, and get on to the next thing. I think that's, for me, one of the largest challenges: to say, not yet."

It's difficult, and this kind of comes down to the question of how do we influence other people around us and what kind of influence can we have? I think we have to be realistic that we may not always be able to

change the outcome of the decision-making process—one of whose decisions is time frame of the decision. So we can certainly put in our voice of deliberation and call for more time for deliberation, and I think that's usually useful, while realizing that sometimes it's going to be a compromise and we may not be able to make that happen.

So not to think that we aren't having any influence if the decision doesn't always go our way, but just by putting out that request for more pace, a more leisurely deliberation, you may actually be influencing the process in ways that don't make it appear that there's an outright win, but it may be slowing it down somewhat. So it still seems like a good thing to keep doing. And in that way, you're kind of like a brake pad. The wheel's running like this. You're kind of like a brake pad. You might get worn down a little doing that over and over. But the brake pad is an important part of an organization.

"When you mentioned timidity, I was really quite struck by that. I work in a public library, and I'm a manager there, and it has nothing to do with the library, but the timidity factor is a very powerful and strong one, I think, because the risks are seen as so great. Because the risk area and the threat of risk is a significant problem, timidity just comes to play much too often. And courage doesn't blossom as you wish it could."

There's a lot of inertia also in the status quo. The one who begins to even pull interpersonal relationships into the light of awareness in a workplace is bringing in a threat for many people, because there's often an unspoken agreement not to talk about interpersonal dynamics in a business setting or a work setting. So that's a risky thing to do.

Thank you all for the comments. What I'd like to do right now is to take about a ten-minute break.

I'd like to talk now about the second part of the Eightfold Path, which is meditation. It consists of three components, which are right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I don't want to get so detailed on the three aspects, but what I'd like to talk about is the issues of formal practice in the workplace and informal practice in the workplace, because I think they can both be helpful.

How many times have you heard meditation teachers say something like this? "In the middle of your work day, take three minutes, stop what you're doing, sit there and breathe." How many people have heard an instruction like that? How many people have done it? Almost as many. How many people make it a regular part of your work life? Two. Thank you.

I'd like to come back a little later and ask you all to comment on that. I think it can be a really important part of work life. And when we're looking at the work setting, one of the qualities we need to bring in more than we currently do is the quality of right effort.

When you look at the difference between—I'm sure a lot of you have done day longs of meditation or you've done certainly forty-five minute periods of meditation. A lot of you I know have done intensive retreats, silent retreats of seven days or longer of meditation. The element in there that's unique when we

do the formal practice is the coming back to the present.

that we have the intention and we remember to do that 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 a couple of 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. And 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 is 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 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 that 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 useful? 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 changes—it can change the flavor of your participation in that meeting.

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

For a long time, I had a lengthy commute when I was working at Microsoft—about an hour and fifteen minutes 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 when I became a manager and had to be in the office more, reporting to the same place every day, it was a long drive.

For a long time, I tried doing mindfulness practice while driving. I wasn't very good at it. For some reason, 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 these 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 is that in any driving situation, I was the only person who wanted to go the right speed. Everybody else was too fast or too slow. The right speed for me was about ten miles over the posted speed limit, but I was the only person at that speed. So everybody else was basically an irritant to me—they were 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 have to walk—from your office down to the photocopier—you could take that as the one time a day you do walking meditation. Don't try to do walking meditation everywhere you go; you're not going to enjoy it enough to sustain that. But pick one path that you traverse over and over again and simply say to yourself, "When I do this path, I'm going to do walking meditation." That means you just experience the feeling in your feet and legs as you walk. That's going to be your project during that time.

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

But I feel by far the vaster field of practice at 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 it's a phone call, a meeting with a colleague, something a client says—triggers reactions in us. These reactions are often difficult for us to be with. It might be a sense of 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." You know your pay raise last period was six percent, and you're supposed to be happy for them. So desire might stimulate wanting a pay raise yourself.

These qualities are an equal part of our meditational work and probably the more profound part of our practice 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 ground, central ground, but you can get that from many other sources.

What I want to encourage you to do is to 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. They're forces that come again and again in a work setting and in our outside life.

So the question becomes: 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. And I want to encourage the development of what we might call courage—the willingness to feel them.

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

I'd like to read you something from Trungpa's book *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 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."

The meditation we learn on our cushion that lets us contact those feelings as we're sitting is the same mind we then want to take into the workplace—to feel the fear when it arises and 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 worked 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. Once I gained more stability of mind through meditation, I no longer felt overwhelmed in those settings. This was because one of the primary things meditation develops is the quality we call *samadhi*.

Samadhi is usually translated as concentration, which is a little misleading. In the West, when we say concentration, we mean focusing on one thing while ignoring everything else—there's an exclusive sense in how we use the word. But *samadhi* doesn't have that exclusive quality. *Samadhi*, as the Buddha spoke of it, means a mind that is whole. It means a mind that has become collected in its attention and energy. When the mind becomes collected, it has tremendous strength—firmness, steadiness, stability.

When you sit down and try to pay attention to your breath, sometimes you'll find you can connect with quite a few breaths in a row. Sometimes you'll find you're with one breath and then the mind wanders, then one breath and the mind wanders again. This quality of being able to keep 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 is that the mind feels very strong and stable.

It's that inner strength that lets us be in a difficult environment where our emotions are being stretched without feeling victimized or overwhelmed. In these three areas of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom, if the primary feeling in the workplace is vulnerability and fear of being overwhelmed, then the element that needs development is *samadhi*. That comes through the formal practice of meditation—that's what can give that kind of strength.

One aspect 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 from arising with any real strength. In classical terms, it's said that *samadhi* suppresses the hindrances. When that stability of mind is there, the upsets can't enter. Even if they do arise, they can't really take hold and dominate.

So that's one aspect—the formal practice. Through moments of mindfulness or *metta*, through the informal practice of being with the hindrances and difficult emotions in all their forms, we make the effort of coming back together.

There's another important area I want to discuss, which I heard about in several small groups—the whole question of simplicity. What is the balance in our life between work and practice? How much time do we give to one? How much to the other? Do we have the idea that we can enter into an eighty-hour or hundred-hour work week and come home well balanced? I question that.

For many, many years these teachings were preserved by monastics—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 the responsibility of heading a large corporation.

I think there's a reason for that.

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. 50-50. 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, you know, 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 50-50 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 that 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 50% work and 50% 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 a way. So I think all of that would come into it for him.

"But not some kind of incorporation practices?"

He doesn't mean that necessarily. I think it's fine to separate the work life over here and the practice life over here as formal practice. Study comes under that also, or hearing the teachings.

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

No. That's why—sometimes it is hard work, but that's why I added that on as a third one when I talked about establishing balance. "What about sleep?" That's an important one, too. But I think the balance, really, as we talk about it, comes between family life, work life, and practice. So there's even more. And that's why I say I don't think you should think of applying this as 50% of every day has to be practice.

"Yes, Nancy, I wanted to comment since you raised the issue of the daily stopping. It turns out Mary and I—because I started doing it during a period of great difficulty, and actually it was a dharma teacher who suggested I get a clock, you know, watch the sound of the hour, which you know is the bane of my existence, people who don't turn off their watches, their beeper watches. And what surprised me—you said that you find that you have to be with the uncomfortable feelings. But what I also found was often there weren't uncomfortable things. So I had this idea that my life was very..."

So I think what we're going to do is skip the small discussion groups on this topic of meditation, the 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 of the things that I wanted to say 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 body work, for instance, 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. So that's 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 in the group is to put together the first two things that we've covered—which is 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, and talk about a question that often comes up: How do we deal with a difficult person at work? Almost everybody that I talk to has got one somewhere, one of these difficult people.

For myself, I had a manager who I felt was being very restrictive with me. 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 that said, 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 mail. The decisions on computers were made at a district level, but out of corporate recommendations. My manager thought that I was being insulting to their specification and support. So she called me into the office, read me the riot act, 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 to her 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 I bit my tongue. But I said what I felt about it, which was that I thought that was unfair, that it was very important for us to communicate with other people and our peers, and she wouldn't have any of it.

So I left the meeting. I was very angry. I went to the basement in the parking garage, and I just stormed around up and down the aisles of the garage for a while, just really angry. When I calmed back 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. And looking back, I could see some earlier incidents. Now I understand. But for a long time, I just did not have a good relationship with the person.

We all probably have stories like that.

So I'm wondering if anyone would be willing to share stories about difficulties with coworkers, managers, or customers, and how you found skillful ways to navigate those situations?

One participant shared: "I work for a woman who is verbally abusive. She never really targeted me directly, but she would frequently attack our shared secretary—being sarcastic, critical, using that harsh tone of voice. When I first started working there, I thought, 'Oh my goodness, what am I going to do about this? I can't just ignore it. I have to do something.' But I was also new and wasn't sure how to give that kind of feedback to my boss.

"What I decided to do—and it took a long time to figure out the right approach—was to support our secretary in strengthening her own response. When she would complain to me about the boss, I would encourage her: 'Have you thought about just saying, "Don't speak to me that way"?' I also decided to model this behavior myself. Any time this woman would start using 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 change, but certainly everyone seems happier in that situation."

That's beautiful. You can imagine how the secretary would feel going home after a day of being verbally attacked—she could be devastated for days. That kind of skillful intervention really makes a difference in people's lives.

Another participant offered: "I was working for a man who was restrictive, punitive, dismissive, unresponsive, uncooperative, and unsupportive, among other things. It was incredibly difficult. I tried every skillful means I could think of, but nothing worked. I just wasn't at a level to deal with it, so I suffered.

"During this period, I was doing a lot of driving and listening to tapes by Caroline Myss. She had one tape where she discussed the function of Judas in Christianity. Her conclusion was that Judas was responsible, in a way, for creating the Savior, because Christ had to die to be resurrected. She said, 'If there's a really terrible person in your life, thank that person as your Savior.'

"That was the only thing I could think of doing. Every time he did something horrible, I didn't say it out loud, but I thanked him internally. It was incredibly transformative—it changed everything. That internal response helped me, and eventually it helped me find my way out of there. When I finally left, I felt complete. I had taken what I needed to take and gotten what I needed to get."

These two responses beautifully illustrate the two different avenues we can pursue when working with difficult people. One is direct outer communication; the other is inner transformation. Sometimes it may be helpful to do both. Sometimes only one avenue is available to us. There are some difficult people in work situations you simply cannot talk to directly.

That's been my experience. To try would only compound the problem. So when that avenue is closed, inner transformation becomes the only path available.

The kind of gratitude you're feeling is exactly how the Dalai Lama speaks of feeling toward the Chinese, who came in and killed hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns, tortured people, and reduced the Tibetan population from about seven million to six million during their occupation. The Dalai Lama says something like, "We need to be grateful to our enemy"—and he used that word, "enemy," which is 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 it as a way of practice, 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 helpful 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 I could go to. I was in very bad shape emotionally, a combination of my work situation and that person, and I had somebody 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 I had talked to, and he did research among all the people working for this person and found that my feelings were universal. What's 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.

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 human and could be better in some things—but as far as really being a support and strategic resource, she really is. It's amazing.

That's terrific. 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? Yes, 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 thought through my schedule and said, "I can stay here until he finishes." I listened. There had been a meeting I had heard about, and I had already heard the other side of the story. He had, in my mind, done his usual screw-up.

He started telling me about the meeting—the background of the meeting, the background of the background—and finally got to how hurt he was by all of this. Suddenly he was a human being. All these years I had kept him as a bad guy, and suddenly what I heard was different. I couldn't hold him at a distance anymore.

Then he did something I actually appreciated. I ran into him in the stairwell and without even thinking 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 was 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 find out what's lovable in the person and therefore why you can feel friendly toward them. Even in doing a difficult person, we're almost forced to see what's likable in that person. 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 keep in mind, where's their humanity? How would this person's mother see them? It can really change our relationship.

Any other difficult person stories? Well, those were all really terrific. They all illustrated something different, and the movement within each one was inspiring. How long did this take—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 cool.

I thought I would talk now about the third area of the Eightfold Path, which is wisdom in the work situation. Then we'll 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—the attitude underlying our actions. Why do we do the actions we do?

I think 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 this intention in us be understood clearly because it's 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 the action that comes from it is said to be 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. 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.

But before we answer that question, I want to step back once more and examine why we practice. This gives us a fundamental direction in our life of motivation.

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 form what I consider the basic aspiration or direction of Dharma practice.

When I think about right intention as it applies to work, I connect these three areas to it: not to harm, to help if we can, and to use work to purify our own hearts.

Some of the motivations that come to mind that fit within this wise intention: first, to provide the requisites for ourselves and our families. That's part of helping ourselves and our families. The requisites in the Buddhist sense are clearly defined as food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—the four things the community of monks and nuns was always said to need access to. These are wholesome motivations.

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

This is one of the real benefits I see in the work arena. I've known many people, including myself, who have tried to avoid the work arena at times in their lives. Sometimes I see people avoiding the arena of work for many, many years because the conflicts they feel around it are too severe. But I feel what people miss out on when they do that is the chance to develop confidence and self-esteem.

I think the workplace is actually excellent ground for developing this trust in ourselves. Confidence is sometimes talked about in Buddhist terms with the words confidence, trust, or faith. I think all these qualities come into play from developing ourselves through work. It can be an area where we honestly develop a deeper faith in life and a deeper faith in ourselves. And faith is what really allows for surrender.

These are healthy reasons for being involved in work.

What are some of the unhealthy ones? Basically, when the project of self or the project of ego gets involved in our work situation, motivation can go astray. The reason becomes not some of the wholesome motivations we mentioned, but work is used to aggrandize our sense of self or aggrandize the ego in some way.

I'm sure you've seen this in people who take jobs as a way of defining themselves. As they grow in status or power, their ego just gets grander and grander, and they become more and more of a pain to people around them. That's the kind of unhealthy motivation of work.

Because those kinds of approaches—using status or power or wealth to build up or inflate our sense of

ourselves—only create more separation. They don't let us see the interconnectedness; they build separateness.

Of course, Dharma practice can be used in the same way: "I'm a practitioner, or I'm a Buddhist, so therefore I'm better than the people who aren't practicing, or better than the non-Buddhists." But hopefully within our meditation practice are the tools to see through that kind of pride, to see through that kind of comparison. In the work world, usually those tools of questioning, of investigation, of paring away the unwholesome aren't built in. So we have to do that work ourselves.

The Buddha identified eight concerns that tend to move the mind in an unhealthy direction that he called the eight worldly concerns. These are distinguished from what you might call right intention or right motivation—these are ones that lead us astray.

The eight worldly concerns are in four pairs: concerns with pleasure and pain, with loss and gain, with praise and blame, and with fame and disrepute.

It's not that there's anything wrong with any of these items. We all experience the alternation of these qualities in our lives. It's not like you've got your life wrong if there's blame, if somebody's criticizing you, if there's pain in your life. These things fluctuate for all of us. But if we get attached to these as the primary direction of our life, our motivation goes astray.

These things come naturally in the process of living, in the process of developing a livelihood. Sometimes they manifest on a huge scale. Someone mentioned last week that Bill Gates was worth $45 billion at current Microsoft stock price levels—$45 billion! Yet he says it's not about the money.

So it's not that these worldly conditions are wrong in themselves, but rather our clinging to them, being driven by them, or becoming obsessed with these results that brings suffering. It's when we tie ourselves to these outcomes as proof of our worth or validation of ourselves that we suffer.

I find it helpful to keep the eight worldly concerns in mind and regularly check: How much am I being driven by praise or blame? Am I doing something because I want personal glory, or because I genuinely want the outcome? Am I investing in a job that lacks inner meaning but promises wealth? Or am I following what I honestly love, and if wealth comes, it comes?

If you set your life's direction as following the Buddha's teachings—not to harm, to help others, and to purify 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 bent, it's very difficult not to be consumed by them.

You can observe this dynamic in Silicon Valley. The enormous wealth generated by high-tech startups reveals telling patterns. One report I read noted that people who have gotten rich through entrepreneurship in our generation have contributed less to charity than most previous

generations—perhaps because they're still young, but there seems to be wealth pursued for its own sake, for enormous houses, multiple cars, and private jets that go far beyond what's needed.

Having a Dharma orientation while living in the world means—and this phrase may sound trite—being in the world but not of it. The societal mainstream is essentially fabricated from these eight concerns. So to work and play in the world without being dominated by these concerns requires a different strategy.

Letting go of the eight worldly concerns is essentially letting go of clinging to ego. If our work is truly to reduce the element of self and self-concern in our lives and livelihood, then these concerns are what repeatedly draw us back into the constellation of ego in the work world. They serve as useful pointers for keeping our motivation pure and direct.

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

There's another aspect of right view I wanted to mention—an attitude I tried to carry and heard expressed often today: in work settings, people are more important than organizational ends. People are the true means of an organization, and I believe they're more important than the ends.

When I was at Microsoft, I wasn't overtly Buddhist, but I tried to tune into everyone's well-being. I would go out of my way to visit people's desks and check in on their work lives, their concerns about managers, their home situations. I knew something about the home lives and relationships of those who worked for me. I felt this was an important part of being there—ensuring people felt there was always a sympathetic ear somewhere in that office.

Interestingly, while I was there, nobody showed much interest in meditation. I made good friendships at Microsoft, but at most got two people to attend one Monday night talk with Jack. However, I was deeply touched that after I left, three different couples, knowing what I was doing, asked me to perform their weddings. There was clearly a connection there.

Another wholesome intention you can bring to the workplace is what I call the bodhisattva spirit—being there to listen to people's difficulties, to draw out where they're struggling. This can become a powerful motivation for being present.

Great teachers are described as wish-fulfilling gems who bring to each person exactly what they need. Imagine the blessing of having such a presence in a workplace! When one person in an organization is truly loved by everyone, it exerts tremendous unifying force. This is one way to build genuine teams, why leaders can be so transformative. When everyone loves one person, it draws the whole group together—love has this unifying influence.

What qualities can we cultivate in our workplace relationships to bring out this loving presence? If it's

there, it can truly transform the workplace, even if we're not the leader or manager.

So can we be bodhisattvas in our work? Can we be there to love others and listen to their difficulties?

The only thing that limits our capacity to be a bodhisattva in the workplace is our own development. If we're not able to love and listen to our colleagues, it simply means we haven't learned to love enough ourselves. And so that becomes our practice—to grow enough that we can love the people we work with.

I want to talk about some specifics around the eight worldly concerns, beginning with money, which has come up several times this morning. It's such a charged issue, and while this isn't unique to our culture, it may be more pronounced here because we have more material abundance.

First, let me clarify the Buddhist attitude toward money. There's the possibility of getting very different messages about money from the Buddhist tradition because nuns and monks are often held up as ideals of Buddhist practice, and they take vows of poverty. They take vows of poverty and celibacy. So somehow this might influence people to think that it's better to be a poor Buddhist. God forbid you should be a Buddhist with resources. Best of all would be if you had absolutely nothing.

The Buddha designed monastic life as a way to allow total focus on dharma practice. For some people, that's a beautiful lifestyle. For most of us in the West, at this point, it's not unfolding that way. Most of us who are teaching and practicing are laypeople.

The Buddha talked about money very differently with laypeople. Basically, he said that wealth is the result of generosity. There's a karmic connection between the generous acts we've made in the past and the abundance we experience today in our lives. He taught that there is great value in having wealth if it is used to enrich the dharma. When wealth is directed toward positive ends, it becomes a very positive force—another opportunity to be generous for both the giver and those receiving its benefits.

The relationship between monastics and laypeople in Buddhism was designed so that monastics depend on lay support. As a monastic in the Theravadan tradition in countries like Thailand, you can't keep food overnight. When I was a monk, if I wanted to practice somewhere far from villages and working people, I couldn't do it because I'd starve. The Buddha arranged it so that monks and nuns had to live near villages where they could collect their morning meal by begging from those communities. Therefore, monastic survival depends on the wealth and generosity of the surrounding community.

Spirit Rock exists only through the generosity of many people—some with little money, some with moderate means, some with great wealth. Spirit Rock is here because we've been blessed with generous gifts from wealthy people as well as those who don't have much.

The Buddha felt what mattered was keeping proper perspective on money. This is a paraphrase, as I don't have the exact source with me: "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 spoken of as the wealth of a practitioner—the true wealth.

With money, so many questions arise in relation to work: How much is enough? How much do I need? Am I going to run out? Am I getting what I'm worth? Is someone else getting more than me? What do I do with the money I have? How much can I spend on myself and my own pleasures? How much should I direct to other causes, to helping people, to charitable uses? There are so many misconceptions and strong feelings around money that it's often hard to have clarity about it. But it is one of the eight worldly concerns that's important to monitor.

Another fascinating concern is around responsibility and fear of failure or blame. This comes up 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 are accountable. How does that feel? When you have responsibility for a major piece of work, how does that feel?

It can be a real burden, because if we mess up, many people will know about it. It's often quite obvious whether we succeed or not. Sometimes we don't want more responsibility simply because we don't want more visibility. I definitely felt this way at Microsoft. The road was open for me to go higher on the corporate ladder than I did, but I didn't want to. Because the higher up you go, the more visible you are.

And the more visible you are, the more praise and blame you receive. I was quite comfortable with my current level of praise and blame. I wasn't making a lifelong career out of it, and I essentially 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, to some extent, and also my fear. Perhaps I would have grown more in a more visible position—I don't know. But I think both qualities were present in me.

The way to be free in this area is something 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 profound spiritual teaching. This is another way of saying that the eight worldly concerns shouldn't drive us. In a sense, this is 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 trust that mindfulness leads to wholesome states, but we can't force that. In our work as well, we make our right effort, but we really can't control the results.

When I was a sales representative, I used to get nervous before certain presentations because there was potentially a lot of money on the table. If the customer bought from us, it could mean millions of dollars in income, and much 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. I felt that responsibility keenly.

But what I started to realize is that I couldn't control the outcome of the customer's decision. All I could do

was deliver the best presentation I could. I really learned this lesson from sports. I play tennis, and it's clear that some days I can go out playing really well and still get beaten because my opponent is simply too good. So I go into a match realizing I can't control whether I win or lose. The only thing 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 unfortunate, but I can't control that. What I can do is play my best game. And when I play 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—Deborah has just joined our staff as 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 on the hill at lunchtime. We have 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 she had to control the outcome of securing that money, she'd probably go crazy. So I want to say publicly, Deborah, you don't have that responsibility. Deborah's responsibility is simply to identify the best means for us to try and raise the rest of that money and then 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. My vow was 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, and 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 found myself wanting the highest percentage increase that would be based on that numerical rating each time and wanting awards at sales meetings. 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 when they have the big board showing who sold what this month? That's a horrible job not to have that involvement. I couldn't do it. 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 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 truly in the welfare of others too, that's when the potential for happiness really grows.

I mentioned the person 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, leaving behind what turned out to be $28 million.

Someone I know was married to a man who was very ambitious. 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, didn't like being the corporate wife, didn't like that he was away all the time, 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. Many 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 we could 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 we've touched on—money, ambition, self-esteem, and so forth. So, comments please.

*Question:** 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, are pretty much based on outcomes. Spirit Rock sounds like a wonderful employer, but other places aren't. I'm just wondering how you think one can realize that in the context of what the work world tends to be like.

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

For instance, people come on a meditation retreat thinking 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. After four or five days, it's dredging up the most terrible memories of anything we've ever done or said to someone. After six days, it's unfolding deeply held grief or sadness that we've carried since we were ten years old that we didn't even know was hiding there. It feels anything but peaceful.

So if we come into that meditation experience thinking 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 a great deep level of peace that's accessed and touched and 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. All we can do is our best job. 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 in a work setting as a way of doing their best job. 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 results, and I think that's entirely appropriate. But we also have to understand with wisdom the interdependence that means we can't control outcomes 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. He has the whole responsibility for the peace of Iraq riding on his shoulders, but he can't control the outcome. He just goes and does the best job he can. In

this case, fortunately, the outcome came.

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.

*Question:** I'm just curious—what happened to the manager that left Microsoft?

Well, it was actually a sad story because he went to a few different companies that didn't seem quite the right fit. He's still in the high tech industry and still in sales. He was vice president of sales for a well-known software company for a while, but that ended up in difficulty. So he bounced around a bit. I think it was very unsettling to his confidence the way that story happened.

*Question:** Could you comment briefly on the distinction between right effort and right action?

In terms of the Eightfold Path, right effort is really defined in psychological terms. It's 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 meditation practice and mindfulness practice and awareness.

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 what we do in the world in relation to others, and it's purified by clear seeing and then traveling through this vehicle of wise intention.

*Question:** How do you come to terms with the difference between how much money somebody makes and what they do in terms of its value to society? You've got athletes who try to kill their coaches and they're worth millions, then you have Mother Teresa on the other end. And then people that seem to be money magnets who really are mean or abusive people that don't have a whole lot going for them, yet they always seem to have plenty of money. Then you have bright, articulate, attractive people that have a lot seemingly going for them, but 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." And 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 teachings of the Buddha.

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.

"Isn't karma, doesn't that 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."

Yes, 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 has got 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... And 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. And the confidence in the whole workplace begins to get fuzzy.

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. I strongly endorse performance review systems, and I think numerical ratings are terrific.

The challenge in spiritual communities is that we often resist these kinds of clear evaluative structures, perhaps thinking they're somehow unspiritual or that they create hierarchy in unhelpful ways. But I've found that clarity about expectations and honest feedback about performance actually supports everyone's growth and the health of the community. When we avoid difficult conversations about unequal contribution, we often end up with the very erosion of confidence that you're describing.

In the end, whether we're talking about time management, setting boundaries, or creating fair systems of accountability, the dharma asks us to bring wisdom and compassion together. This means being kind but not being naive, being generous but also being realistic about our limitations and the limitations of others. The middle way applies here too—between being a doormat and being overly rigid, between endless accommodation and harsh judgment.

These are some of the most practical applications of our dharma practice, and they're often the most challenging because they require us to live our understanding in the messy complexity of human relationships and institutions.

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