

On Working Meditation

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Most of us spend a great deal of time doing the work of supporting ourselves and taking care of our surroundings and the people we live with. We spend much, if not most, our waking time working. For me, one of the attractive parts of Buddhist practice is that practice gives me a means to make this work an expression of my religious life: as Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett put it, practice gives us a means of sanctifying the mundane.

Training in the work-a-day world may seem to be a contradiction for those of us who yearn for a quiet and peaceful life, but in my experience bringing the Mind of training to the work that I do has, while taking a bit of effort, served to improve my experience of work and the relationships that arise as a result of work. Training has helped me to turn work that might have otherwise seemed to be a drudge into something not only bearable but enjoyable and edifying.

I first started training as a lay person about the same time I entered the working world in earnest, and, at the time, the monks that I was looking to for teaching advised me to look at work not merely as a means of making money and a living, but to look at as means of practicing the paramita of giving and generosity. They advised me to think of work as a means of doing Buddhist service. Most memorably, the monks advised me to try do work that I loved or, better still, to love the work that I did.

So, I entered the work world trying to orient myself towards this advice while still being mindful of the need to earn a living and take care of myself responsibly, which are important parts of the equation. We can, through good intention and mild misunderstanding, approach work from an overly idealistic point of view, expecting it to be always nice and perfectly enjoyable, but as most of us know, this does not turn out to be the case: work can be difficult, boring or frustrating and our every good intention and effort can seem to be thwarted by those with whom we are thrown together in the work place.

Most of the people reading this are not at the beginning of their working lives and, so, are not in a position to choose a new job, but the question remains, how can we bring our training to our work? How can we make our work an expression of practice? How can we come to love our work in spite of its various difficulties?

A place to begin is in the practice of mindfulness and the cultivation of a still attitude toward what we are doing. When I was a lay person I worked in some very busy kitchens. I had many responsibilities and there was a fair bit of pressure to get things done quickly. I was required, by the nature of the job, and the need to pay my rent, to learn how to multi-task and work with a number of people with as many or more orientations toward the work we were doing. (I could observe myself through a work day in various states of enthusiasm or its absence and I could imagine that others were similarly variable.) It is true that in the basic instruction for mindfulness we are encouraged to just do one thing at a time, which is great if you are in a situation where there isn't much going on, but in that work situation I wasn't going to have that luxury. Looking a little more deeply, I could see—through putting more energy into being still and aware—that a day is made up of a succession of individual events. When

you juggle you might have five balls going a once but you are actually only doing one thing at a time. Once you toss a ball into the air you are on to the next thing and the balls in the air are taking care of themselves until it is time to catch one and do something else with it.

In other words, if we have many responsibilities going on at once it is possible to practice mindfulness in the midst of them, and this practice actually helps the functional and practical aspects of our job. On another level, this stillness and awareness helped me to become more aware of how my own mental state influenced the harmony of my interactions with my co-workers. At one point in my working life, I worked as a line cook in a restaurant and had the position of wheel man. What this means is that I worked preparing individual meals for costumers and coordinating the meal preparation with the other cooks on the line and the serving staff. A server would give me a meal ticket and I would decide what needed to be cooked when and by whom and then, when all the plates were ready, let the server know when things were ready to be delivered to the table. This is reasonably straight forward if there are two cooks and two servers and three or four customers. But when the restaurant is full and there are five cooks, and six servers, then it becomes another matter. By applying mindfulness and awareness to the situation I was able to avoid acting on my own petty impulses and occasionally sooth the feelings of those around me and thus, get through a shift with reasonably little blood drawn. Looking back on it (perhaps through the gloss of years) I even enjoyed it at times and have certainly benefited from the experience.

Another practice that can be cultivated in the work place is the cultivation of the Mind of Service. An important part of the practice of Dana, or the paramita of giving and generosity, is simple service to the world and our fellow humans. In our culture (and I think it is useful to point out that we are both influenced by and create our culture) the constant overt and covert question is “what can I get from a situation, person or job?” We may not even have an expectation that we should get something for free, and be willing to work for what we get, but still we want to get *it* (whatever it is). To live from this attitude is to create suffering for yourself and those around you. Living from this attitude is to be motivated by and to act on greed and is based on the feeling that something is missing from our life. The Buddha taught that if we can diminish and eventually let this view cease to be a motivator for us, we can diminish our difficulty and increase our natural joy and satisfaction in life.

The practice of Dana is one of the best means of training ourselves to not be greedy and to not be stuck in the cycle of greed. In one sense, it is really the beginning of practice because it opens the heart to the possibility that there is a deeper and more satisfying place to live from then the pursuit of what we want. It opens the heart to this possibility because it is an expression of that deeper place. Dana, of course, benefits those who receive but really, the more important benefit is that, in giving of ourselves, we are taking active positive steps to putting ourselves in harmony with the deeper truths of wisdom and compassion—and we are relinquishing our suffering.

In terms of the working world, what we are doing for work can be Dana or it can be the pursuit of greed—depending on our attitude and not on the work itself. In other words, one could be a physician and be doing that work solely because one can make a lot of money at it, or take the attitude that it is a good means to help oneself *and* others and do ones best to do that work as an expression of training. One could do the work of a stockbroker and have exactly the same choice to make.

In a very important sense, it does not matter what the work is that you have chosen to do; what is of critical importance is the attitude that you take toward that work. There are some exceptions to this, e.g. doing work that is illegal or breaks the precepts, and hence the Buddha's teaching on Right Livelihood. Broadly speaking, though, what truly matters is the attitude of mind and heart that you bring to work, over and above what kind of work you do.

Each type of work—and I will not use the term profession because the variety of work goes beyond the limited sense of profession—and each type of person, will have their own best practical way of sanctifying the work into selfless service. In this article I can only encourage you to look carefully and honestly at your attitude toward work and see how you are influenced by the impulse to get as much as you can from it. We can all be willing to learn how to live with a little bit less. We can put into practice the possibility that we can actually be happy and not get all that we want. I am not advocating a simple minded approach to this where, for example, if you are in some kind of business situation, you should be content not to make a profit at it, but rather to reflect that you have many employees who are depending on your business to make a living. What can you do to insure that those people will be able to continue to have a job? Would it be good to profit yourself slightly less and them slightly more?

Also, it is worth pointing out that our greed is not limited to material wealth. I certainly see in my own mind that there is greed for positive affirmation, power and control, and the simple pleasure of doing a thing well. It is good to look carefully at these things. I know of someone who worked for some time as a social worker and he said that, in retrospect (he had moved on to other things), he realized that much of why he went into that line of work was so that he would not have to work under other people—he could be his own boss. When he started he was convinced that he was going into that work to “help others”. As I say, many of the people who read this will already be thickly involved in a career or line of work and it is still possible to, in the words of the *Lotus Ceremony*, “adroitly convert all covert work” into Buddhist service by changing our attitude toward it. Are you complacent? Do you look down on the work that you are doing? Are you attached to getting praise? Are you stuck on being in charge? On not taking responsibility? It is an act of giving to convert these things.

Talking about mindfulness and Dana lead naturally the topic of love. Recently, at a Dharma discussion at the temple, someone asked, with not a little surprise, whether it was possible to love selflessly? The answer given was that yes it is and that it starts with the practice of Dana. When we think of this in the context of our working lives we normally think of those rare people who have the good fortune to do work that they love, like the professional baseball player who loves to play and happens to earn a fortune at it, or the starving artist who loves his art and the vision of it and so is willing to starve in order to produce it. Buddhism is pointing to something a little different. In Shundo Aoyama's book [Zen Seeds](#) there is a story of a company in Japan who was having trouble with graffiti in the bathroom. After many warnings, admonitions and repaintings the graffiti did not stop until there appeared, in faltering script, a note that said “please do not dirty my good work place with graffiti”. The note was left by the old cleaning woman and it so impressed the people at the company that the graffiti stopped. This story, in its way, expresses what is possible to reveal in our own mind. The cleaning woman viewed the bathroom with respect and gratitude, pride and joy—it was her “good work place”. She did not look down on her work (nor, probably, over-inflated it) but clearly felt that it was important to do well.

By cultivating mindfulness and the mind of being present and still in what we are doing we begin to also see what we are doing with a realistic appreciation—work is a series of small steps in impermanence. When we motivate our selves to work selflessly and to work as service this leads to joy, gratitude and true appreciation. When we are willing to do what needs to be done without grumbling about whether it is high or low, or aggrandizement, this is activity in selfless love. It is by letting go of the desire for reward that love becomes selfless and we can bring this attitude to the work that we do, whether at home, in the working world or at the temple.

Also, the work that we engage in can be a great support and ground for our practice or it can become distracting from practice, again depending on our attitude. In a formal question and answer ceremony at Shasta Abbey, I said I really appreciated practice and that I intended to continue to do it. Reverend Master Eko's response was "That's good, you know what this means don't you? Now you have show up and be willing to be kicked around." (I'm sure he meant "be kicked around" in the nicest possible way.) In a way that is what work is like and how it benefits us in general. In showing up each day and going through what we must, in order to do the job we have taken responsibility for, there is a very beneficial grounding that goes on. In a down to earth way, we have the opportunity to see how we create views of life that are not in accord with how things actually are.

It is also a tremendous offering to be steady, consistent and reliable in the world of impermanence. This steadiness and willingness to show up regularly—to be kicked around—in addition to greatly benefiting beings, can really give us the opportunity to see clearly the deeper patterns of suffering and disharmony in our lives and thereby help us begin to convert them.

Alternatively, work can detract from practice. If we find that conflicts continually arise between what we are doing for work and having time to practice, we should look carefully at that and be willing to take refuge about it with the monks. Practice does not require that you stop leading a full or normal life (however you define it), but we all would do well to look and see if our busyness is keeping us from spending our precious time in doing the practice? If there is no time to simply sit and look at a wall, things have gotten out of balance.

In my youth when I was beginning to practice and trying to determine what I should do with my life, a lay minister of our order told me of an idea called "projective hindsight". He suggested that I imagine myself at the end of my life, looking back on my life reviewing how I had spent it. How would I feel if I devoted my life to drug use and crime? (He didn't ask me that and I didn't consider it as a viable option, just a bench-mark). How about making money and spending my time working on the things that I liked to do and was praised for doing? Maybe raising a family? Maybe spending my time enjoying nature? Maybe an advantageous mixture of all of the above? There were various possibilities for me, as there still are for all of us.

I decided way back then that, regardless of what I did outwardly, the thing I most wanted to be able look back and see was that I had chosen to make Buddhist training the important thing that I worked on in my life, and that I continued to do my best to train in all the many small, and occasionally large, choices that make up a life. I made this choice well before I decided to become a monk, and I have not regretted that decision. It is a decision that we all have the ability to make and reinforce on a daily basis; what will we decide?