

Z.B.A. ZEN OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

How Zen Practice Can Transform Your Work and Your Life

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In the fall of 1983 I left Tassajara, Zen Mountain Center, with my wife and infant son, and went to New York City to attend my last semester of Rutgers University in New Jersey to complete my undergraduate degree and to enter New York University's Graduate School of Business. At Tassajara I had been a Zen monk and a respected administrative leader. In New York City I was a thirty-one-year-old unemployed new father, without a college degree and with no experience that anyone could relate to. My résumé showed that I had been director of Tassajara and had spent the last ten years living at the San Francisco Zen Center and the last four years as a Zen monk. Shortly after arriving in New York I went into Manhattan to an employment agency to find temporary work. I put on my best (and probably my only) suit and tie and arrived on the fifty-second floor of a skyscraper on Madison Avenue in the office of an agency that someone suggested I visit. I gave my résumé to the receptionist and sat in the waiting area. After a few minutes I looked up and saw several people gathered around a desk looking at my résumé, smiling, laughing, and looking at me. I overheard someone say in amazement, "There's a Zen monk in our office looking for a job!" As you might imagine, I had a hard time finding work in New York City.

Despite my difficulties finding a job, a basic truth that I have come to learn, and a primary assumption of this book, is that we are all Zen students, and we are all businesspeople. We are all Zen students in that we all must contend with birth, old age, sickness, and death. We have no idea where we come from or where we will go. At the deepest level we all have the same aspirations — to love and be loved, to discover and express our unique gifts, and to find peace and equanimity in the midst of whatever life may bring us. Zen is a practice and set of values to help us be aware, to awaken,

to uncover our innate wisdom and authenticity. Though Zen is often perceived as enigmatic and difficult to understand, it is at its heart a system of simple practices that can be done anywhere — even in the middle of our busy work lives.

We all have to deal with difficulty and crisis — taking care of dying parents, troubled friends, or children; meeting the changes that come suddenly or gradually; confronting pain and difficulty for ourselves and for those we love. Meditation practice and Zen practice are much like creating a controlled crisis — we have nowhere to go and nothing to do; we're depending on our own bodies and minds, completely alone, and completely connected. Zen practice can help us reveal ourselves, our pain and suffering, our bare feelings, the immensity of our lives. By sitting still, just by being present, we learn that we can fully accept our imperfect selves, just as we are. This process can be cleansing and transforming; it can influence every part of our lives. Zen practice is ultimately about finding real freedom and helping others.

And we are all businesspeople. There is no avoiding having to deal with money, with the basic needs we all have for food and shelter and clothing. All professions, even those not primarily focused on business, are embedded in the world of business. Doctors and therapists call their customers patients. Teachers and social workers cannot escape budgets and management structures. Nonprofit organizations and religious institutions need to attract employees, pay salaries, and perform within financial frameworks.

At the heart of all businesses, whether they are overtly within the business community or not, is a focus on meeting the needs of people. Businesses make things or provide services that people need. We sometimes forget that the starting point of business is much more than making money or creating wealth. During the recent bursting of the dot-com bubble we learned firsthand what

happens when businesses are started without a thoughtful plan for meeting the needs of people: they often disappear rather quickly.

In 1973 I took a one-year leave of absence from Rutgers, where I had been majoring in psychology. A year later, when I first entered the San Francisco Zen Center building, I heard a clear, quiet voice saying that this place, this practice, was worth ten years of my life. I was drawn to the discipline of a daily meditation practice and the blending of a deep, mystical philosophy with a grounded, practical approach. I was impressed by the maturity, sincerity, and wisdom of the teachers and students. I was intrigued by the possibility of living within a community of like-minded people and by the concept of work as an expression of spiritual practice.

During my tenth year at the San Francisco Zen Center I was asked to be director of Tassajara, Zen Mountain Center, a monastery in a mountainous wilderness area in central California. I loved my work as director and was surprised when I first noticed that though I was living the life of a Zen monk, my daily work activities were primarily business related — managing people, overseeing budgets, solving problems, and devising strategic plans. I came to realize not only that there was no conflict between spiritual practice and business practice but also that these two activities were vital complements to each other. I was a more effective manager because of my Zen practice; and my Zen practice was more focused and vibrant through the disciplines and challenges of my management activities.

While at Tassajara I began thinking about what would come next for me, feeling it was time to move outside the sphere of the Zen Center community. Again I began to hear a clear and quiet voice saying that it was time to enter the business world. I thought for sure that this voice must be mistaken or that it was whispering to the wrong person. And yet, in some peculiar way, it made perfect sense.

I aspired to combine my Zen training and my intention to make a difference in the world with the belief that it might be possible to integrate spiritual practice and business practice within the business community. I reasoned that since this was what I was doing at the Zen Center, there must be some way to take this activity to the business world. I also observed that business now played a prominent and influential role in our world. After many years of training in spiritual practice, I felt that I needed some business training, so I decided to get an MBA. This was the opening paragraph of my business school application, written while I was director of Tassajara, after having been a resident of the San Francisco Zen Center for ten years:

I have always been a “manager.” At age six I was organizing the children on my block to protect themselves from the bully on the next block. In Little League baseball I led the Suburban Delicatessen team to win the “world series.” In high school I was the captain of the varsity wrestling team, and in college was vice president of Theta Chi fraternity. In 1978 I spent two months with my father as he was dying of cancer — managing his care by directing doctors, nurses, and family members and making intimate contact with him by stepping outside established medical and family systems. At Zen Center, Green Gulch Farm, I implemented the revival of the nineteenth-century practice of draft horse farming and demonstrated its potential for being cost effective. At Tassajara, Zen Mountain Center, I was the assistant cook and then the head cook, the head of the meditation hall, and the director of Tassajara. Managing, therefore, has been a vehicle for self-development for most of my life.

Journeying to New York City, to business school, to life outside the Zen Center community, as a husband and new father, was a painful, challenging, and tremendously rich time. In many ways I felt like a visitor from another planet. I had left my community,

which had become my family, my place, and in many ways my identity. Yes, this is ironic, since Zen practice is aimed at helping us not become too attached to things, particularly one's identity. It was a rude awakening to see that I had become quite comfortable with being a Zen student. Looking back, this was one of the most important transitions in my life.

I spent two years as a full-time student at New York University's Graduate School of Business located just off Wall Street in Lower Manhattan. My second job out of business school was as a manager for Conservatree Paper Company in San Francisco, where I was responsible for purchasing and selling large quantities of recycled paper. I learned the basic skills involved in commerce, or what I've come to think of as trade skills. One of my customers was a small mail-order business that offered greeting cards and wrapping paper made from recycled paper. I watched this company expand from being a two-person operation to becoming a major catalog company. They were the only company in the United States making paper goods from recycled paper. Yet I didn't find their designs particularly attractive. I suggested to the owner of Conservatree that we diversify into the catalog business, but this idea was met with little interest. So I began writing a business plan. I had become knowledgeable in the field of recycled paper, I had many friends from Zen Center who were artists, and I saw a market that was in its infancy and growing quickly. Thus the idea for Brush Dance was born.

Brush Dance began in my garage in 1989. We started as a mail-order catalog producing a few wrapping papers and greeting cards made from recycled paper. Today we are a multimillion dollar company that sells cards, journals, calendars, and gift items to stores throughout the United States and the world. The company's byline is Mindful Stationery Products, The Art of Meaningful Expression. Brush Dance products can be found at more than five thousand retail outlets. Our customers include Borders, Barnes &

Noble, Bed, Bath and Beyond, and Target, as well as small stores selling cards, gifts, and books. Our licenses include Renee Locks, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Poetry of Rumi.

During my years of growing a business I have continued my daily meditation practice as well as maintained a strong connection with the San Francisco Zen Center. Last fall I traveled to Japan to attend the thirty-third memorial service of Suzuki Roshi, the founding teacher of the San Francisco Zen Center and author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. I stayed for several days before the ceremony with Suzuki Roshi's son, Hoitsu (referred to as Hojo-san), who has become one of the leading Zen teachers in Japan today. Being with Hojo-san, his wife, and family in this five-hundred-year-old temple was life changing. Hojo-san loved to laugh and play and was extremely attentive. We sat together on the floor each evening for dinner. Whenever I took a sip of sake, Hojo-san was quick to refill my cup.

As I was leaving the temple, Hojo-san gave me a drawing that he had made of a frog and a Zen monk sitting in meditation, with the frog looking at the monk and the monk looking at the frog. He had written some beautiful Japanese characters above the figures. When I asked Hojo-san what the characters meant, he said, "Everywhere you go is your temple." These simple and profound words have stayed with me and became the foundation for this book and for my life.

I have been managing and growing Brush Dance for fifteen years. I feel fortunate to be running a company with a mission to disseminate spiritual messages to the world. The financial, operational, and personnel challenges continue to provide never-ending practical and spiritual challenges. At the same time Zen practice has become more and more a central focus in my life: I've been lecturing and teaching at the San Francisco Zen Center, I co-

lead retreats for businesspeople at Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm, and I was recently ordained as a Zen priest.

We are all Zen students, and we are all businesspeople. Our lives are messy, impossible, miraculous, mysterious, and beyond our usual explanations. There are no easy answers. It can be difficult to learn to appreciate the questions. What does it mean to be fully ourselves at work? How can we find true fulfillment and happiness? How can we find true fulfillment and happiness at our jobs? What is the impossible request our life makes of us? What outer or inner transformations are required before we can see our work life as a place to practice, as a sacred space? What does "Everywhere you go is your temple" really mean?

The temple referred to by Hojo-san may be very different from any notion we have about what a temple is supposed to look like. This temple might sometimes appear to be a bedroom, a mountain trail, a factory assembly line, or an office filled with desks and computers. It is a very large, inconceivably wide temple. I feel fortunate to be asking these questions and walking a path with so many sincere people. We are all Zen students, and we are all business- people, and we are all so much more.

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