

KARMA YOGA

BY MING ZHEN SHAKYA UNABRIDGED VERSION



FREE E-BOOK

The Zen Buddhist Order of Hsu Yun



KARMA YOGA: ZEN FOR THE DISCONTENTED WORKER

Part I: Preliminaries

by Ming Zhen Shakya, OHY

"Work," said C. Northcote Parkinson - that Newton of white-collar dynamics - "expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." This is The Law of Office Droning. Being a law, it admits to no exceptions.

For people who are unhappy in their jobs, Parkinson's famous law has a few corollaries, one of which is, "Time increases in inverse proportion to the worker's interest in the work." We can obey this law with our eyes closed and one hand tied behind us. And often do.

Ah, yes. The old 'dilation and contraction of time' problem. The more interesting our work, the faster does the clock tick. The more boring the task, the slower do the hands move. How does the clock know what we're experiencing; and, knowing, why does it behave so perversely towards us? A Nobel Prize awaits the person who can explain the spiteful actions of chronometers.

But we obfuscate or at least digress. This isn't really the problem we want to address. That problem is simply, "How do we find serenity in the workplace?" A spiritual solution to any problem is always akin to committing a crime: there must be Motive, Means, and Opportunity. We have to *want to* prevail. Without desire's determination, we'd have a supine reliance upon miracles, events which do not occur with sufficient regularity to warrant their consideration. But the motive must be a vectored one. Without direction, desire becomes a vagrant and chaotic craving; just as without force, desire atrophies to flabby whim, as anyone who has ever joined a health club can readily attest. Desire often proves to be apparitional, dissipating quickly until only its ghost appears with depressing regularity on a credit card statement. If our intention is not born of the union of resolution and plan, we wind up in worse shape than when we started.

We have also to possess the means, those weapons or tools necessary to accomplish the task. We can be obsessed with the need to bake a cake and can commit to memory a grand recipe, but without the ingredients, not to mention the pans and oven, we will produce no cake.

And we must have the occasion in which in which we can use the information and the tools - the necessary kitchen-time to effect the transformation of raw to cooked. We can bake nothing if we're otherwise occupied.

In the problem of work's criminal intent, the desire to be happy at the job motivates us, just as the mere fact of having a job gives us a surfeit of opportunities. This leaves Means, the "how" of success, in this case, Karma Yoga.

Karma Yoga is the discipline that will deliver the Discontented Worker (DW). But let's be clear about this at the outset: of all the Yogas, Karma Yoga is the most difficult to attain. To some of us, it comes as talent comes... we acquire the ability without any effort at all and without being sure of exactly how we came to do what we do. We are Zen's "idiot savants." (I happily include myself in this group). When people ask us how many hours a day we spend practicing Zen, we get a glazed look in our eyes and stand there wondering what the correct answer is. As we stare into dusky space waiting for a lightbulb to go on, the question may be clarified: "How many hours a day do you put on your cushion meditating?" Then we are relieved and joyfully answer, "None!" Who has time to sit on a cushion? And where did anybody get the idea that sitting on a cushion was a Zen prerequisite? Zen means meditation and meditation does not require a cushion. But let's leave this subject for another essay.

While it is obviously true that the meditative state can be attained while following certain sedentary methods, using these methods will likely cause a pink-slip to arrive with the Discontented Worker's final paycheck. Not even the most accomplished drone would attempt to sit at his desk like a stone, entranced with counting something as financially inconsequential as his breaths. Blanking his mind may clean out the dust in his cranium, but chances are he is not being paid to be mentally vacuumed. He has to engage his mind kinetically. Karma comes from the root "kri" which means to act. The word Creation is a cognate.

The Orient has given us eleven unique methods for apprehending the divine. These eleven yogas may be divided into two groups: those which emphasize using the mind and those which emphasize using the body. Naturally, there is always a degree of technique-blending and so the operative word here is emphasis.

With dangerous brevity, I'll get ready to duck and list these eleven schools: The six "body" schools are: The Islamic Persian Sufi (dance); The Hatha Yoga (asanas); The Bhakti School of Devotional Practice (ritualized worship); The Laya School of Kundalini Yoga (chakra

control); The Mantra School (chanting); The Mahayana Daoist/Buddhist Northern Zen School (rigid posture zazen). The five "mind" schools are Raja Yoga (ethics/meditation); Jnana Yoga (scripture study); Karma Yoga (non-attachment); the Theravadin Buddhist School (renunciation); and the Mahayana Daoist/Buddhist Southern School Zen (engaged meditation).

All of these schools have common elements, such as breath control and certain control exercises for mind and body. All of these schools require knowledge of at least a few scriptures and commentaries. None of these yogas is superior to any other, and each has its own perils. Considering how much time we spend working, it becomes proportionately valuable to possess the great contentment that Karma Yoga provides; but we must be careful not to make a less than comprehensive attempt. Not only is Karma Yoga the most difficult to attain, but the penalty for back-sliding is, of all the yogas, the most painful to bear.

If we back-slide in our Sufi practice, we risk getting dizzy when we resume whirling. If we neglect our Hatha Yoga routine, we may be a little stiff when we start stretching again. But if we interrupt our Karma Yoga practice, we may find that even in a brief space of neglect, we can create conflicts that will follow us into the Bardo. Resuming a Karma Yoga practice after a single day's interruption is usually not so easy as resuming a chanting practice after years of silence.

Karma yoga is, in fact, so difficult that it is necessary for the Discontented Worker first to submit his situation to some ruthless analysis. He needs to ask himself to what extent his problems are caused by superficial or stylistic problems which can be eliminated or corrected. (The most trivial breach of decorum can serve as an unbridgeable gap in terms of mass contempt.) It is difficult for anyone to be happy working in a place where some or all of his co-workers despise him (unless he be a sadist and enjoy inflicting himself upon the innocent). It is also virtually impossible for anyone to be happy doing a job if he is psychologically unsuited to it or, for that matter, if he has organic or physical difficulties that contribute to his distress. He needs to examine his relation to the work and to the work environment.

Therefore, he should first ask himself "Am I, by character and personality, suited for this kind of work?" A person who is shy ought not to be a salesman. A person who is gregarious ought not to be stuck in a cubicle crunching numbers. Especially to a young person who has recently entered the workplace, unsuitability to the nature of the work can prove fatal to his career choice. Too late he will come to appreciate the happy balance between social and

academic activity that life on campus afforded. There, he spent time alone in study, in the mental isolation of books and computers; and he spent time with others in the classroom or lab or in any of the watering-holes on or near the campus. With relief always in sight, he never had to notice any lop-sided stress. But given the commercial world's task-specialization, he will likely find himself either completely isolated from or completely involved with people; and it is then, with the force of revelation, that his dominant personality disposition will reveal itself.

Premedical students, for example, often suppose that the practice of medicine will bear some resemblance to the study of it. It doesn't. Medical School Deans of Admission often marvel at the ease with which an applicant who seems to desire to become a physician will confide that if he fails to gain admittance to medical school he'll pursue a doctorate in chemistry. Two completely different personality types are involved here. It isn't a simple matter of "theory" versus "application". A physician puts his hands on people and involves himself in their problems. He's empathetic and sympathetic. But these qualities are not desirable in a research scientist who must maintain an attitude of dispassionate observation and may not become emotionally involved with the objects of his study. The same man is not likely to be suitable for both professions - and one should not even consider being the other.

Likewise, when a gregarious person who has an aptitude for mathematics and science finds himself in a claustrophobic work environment, he gets cubicle fever. He's drawn to the water cooler, thirsting for human contact, or he becomes an interrupter, a visitor of other cubicles, a gossip or asker of unnecessary questions, or he frequently makes personal phone calls or email messages .. anything to get the fix of human interaction.

The French used to have an expression for "going to work". They'd say they were going 'a la boite" (to the box.) In today's scientific work environments, the box may be a laboratory bench or a computer niche. Only the person who enjoys isolation and problems posed by inanimate objects can thrive in such an environment. To a person who is "people-oriented" this box is hell.

When work becomes painful drudgery, either because the worker cannot tolerate the presence of people or because he cannot tolerate being isolated from them, the worker needs to consult a career guidance professional.

Sometimes the Discontented Worker's own behavioral quirks or work habits will be so resented by co-workers that, to whatever extent their dissatisfaction manifests itself in hostility, he will have created much of his own misery.

It may happen that a DW incurs the Wrath of the Punctual by being constantly late. In his mind he will more than compensate the company for the morning time lost by staying late or by working at home. But this arrangement is not designed to endear him to co-workers who resent his getting away with breaking a rule they discomfit themselves to keep, or who need him physically present so that they can obtain information from him that is vital to their own jobs. Absenteeism always wrecks the smooth progression of a project and destroys team-spirit; and the people who are harmed resent the person who inflicts the damage. He is in their debt and when he least expects it they will call in the markers.

Also, a Discontented Worker may resort to purposeful procrastination. In such a case he will need to inject an element of danger into what he regards as a deadly boring task in order to vivify it. He administers "deadline" therapy by allowing an assignment to succumb to neglect, starved for attention from him but not, of course, from others whose work depends upon the results of his.

Then, when his co-workers fear that the project is moribund and quite beyond triage considerations, he switches on the tesla coils of emergency action. *Zzzzz! Zzzzz!* He is driven like an obsessed B-movie scientist. The excitement of fear energizes him and gives him childish satisfaction.

Co-workers or team members are uncomfortable with someone who doesn't keep the work's cadence. To them a project is rather like a marathon, a long distance covered in the kind of steady pace that enables them to detect and correct errors in timely fashion. A sprinter or a stroller, regardless of the quality of his work, disturbs the project's flow.

"Age and experience" is often presented in opposition to "youth and ambition". A successful business needs both - to conserve and to innovate. But most power positions in an organization have accrued to older workers and a young worker has got to appreciate that he unnecessarily prejudices opinion against himself and his own innovative ideas by presenting them in what, to more conservative administrators, is an offensive package, say, in the form of an extreme haircut, a pierced nose, a bold tattoo, or attire so casual as to seem derelict. An older worker is more comfortable when, by sartorial differences, he can distinguish between a youth who says, "Got any spare change?" from one who says, "Got an update on the Balance Sheet?" The DW may be disliked for a variety of reasons and may find himself a pariah in his office. Groups have an immune-system response; and when someone is regarded as a kind of germ, the

group will seek to eliminate him. This problem is not so rare as we would all like it to be. I'll take a minute to relate a sad little instance of intolerance and a worker's failure to see himself objectively.

I recently sat in a waiting area while tires were being put on my car. I was talking to another customer, a lady, when a stock boy began to walk back and forth nearby, moving boxes of merchandise. He had on tennis shoes that squeaked annoyingly on the vinyl floor. The sound was like Velcro being separated with the accompaniment of a whistle. "God," I said, "that's irritating!" The woman agreed, explaining, "Those sneakers have *little suction cups on the soles.*" Then she told me that she worked in an office in which a liberal dress code had been instituted, which meant, she said, that everyone was free to come to work as a slob and nobody could complain about it. A nice and efficient college boy who had a part time job distributing documents to various clerks in the office bought a pair of these unmercifully noisy shoes. She said that at first it was a novelty and the co-workers joked about the squeaking; but once the novelty wore off (evidently in a matter of minutes) the squeaks were torturous. The clerks would stop what they were doing and grit their teeth until he passed beyond earshot. "We complained to him, but he liked his shoes and didn't take us seriously," she said, "and then we complained to management, but we were told that we weren't allowed to complain about attire. We got the message." She laughed confidentially. "We were allowed to complain about his job performance, so we'd switch files and complain about the mistakes he was making and got him fired." Ordinarily, I'd have judged this as a lousy thing to do. On one side there was a young man, working his way through college, doing a good job, then being sabotaged and getting fired with an unjust "termination for incompetence" on his employment record. But on the other side was that awful squeaking. "Well," I said gently, "I'm sure he got another job."

Obviously, if a worker enters the workplace smelly, sloppy, dirty or glaze-eyed from alcohol or marijuana or motor-mouthed from mood elevating substances he is not likely to win the support of fragrant, neat, clean, sober, alert, and quietly serious people. The DW shouldn't delude himself into thinking that his brain or his contribution to the commonweal is of such quality as will offset the assault upon his colleagues' senses. They all think they're smarter and more valuable than he is, anyway.

There are, however, a few more insidious causes for workplace misery. Daily life cannot be easily divided into segments. In a perfect world, we would be able to compartmentalize our

lives. We would have x hours of sleep, x hours of food consumption, x hours of recreation, x hours of travel, and x hours of work which, presumably, would be sufficiently remunerative to pay for all those other x's.

Employers, however, will often exploit a worker's pride or desire for advancement in order to lure him into greater, uncompensated productivity by providing him with cheap perquisites. The time he had allocated for his family is now compromised by his having accepted various gadgets... a company car, a computer, a cell-phone, a beeper, whatever it takes. Now, the tentacles of work slide into his sleep time, his travel time, his breakfast, lunch and supper. If he lives alone he may welcome the interruptions; but if he has a family, he has just facilitated the destruction of his domestic life. In his prideful delusion he will suppose that he tolerates these intrusions for the benefit his family; but in fact his vanity has caused him to be manipulated into slavery and he cannot reasonably expect his wife or children to admire him for the debasement. A further complication occurs when, to compensate themselves for this abuse, the worker and his family feel justified in using the equipment for their personal needs. An upright man who is trying to set an example of honesty for his family finds himself acquiescing in "stolen" cell-phone calls... or trips in the company car... or personal use of company supplies and equipment. Now he will pay twice, in time and in integrity, for allowing himself to be so subtly enslaved. The divorce lawyer will submit another bill later.

The concept and the symbol of a spiral needs always to be kept in mind. There is an old adage: Success has many fathers but failure is an orphan. This means more than simply having to share the credit for one's accomplishments with one's co-workers while having to stand alone and accept all of the blame when the result is less than successful. There is an additional and unwarranted sense of terminal isolation suggested by the adage, as if failure has died fruitless, the end of a line. But failure, in its lack of familial constraint, becomes a rogue and randy creature that is far from sterile. The orphan of failure begets many offspring - progeny the failed parent doesn't even know he's begotten until the woeful day he recognizes the unmistakable genetic resemblance.

How does the worker go from straightforward inertia into the plunge of a destructive spiral? Let's take freeway stress as a paternal accelerant.

First, we need to remind ourselves of why we slowly extend our hand to a strange dog that enters our environment. We want the dog to smell our hand and allow him to sense that we

are not giving off the pheromones of fear and aggression, that is to say, that we mean him no harm. The dog relies upon his sense of smell.

The dog is a mammal, as are we; and we, too, have the ability to smell fear and aggression. We, however, receive these olfactory data subliminally (unconsciously) because in accordance with our evolutionary dictates, we place greater emphasis upon verbal assurances or facial expressions. Nevertheless, we still process the data.

Road-rage will cause the worker to secrete the pheromones of aggression and these chemicals cling to him as he enters his office. The atmosphere tenses immediately and people unwittingly respond. They are suddenly edgy, defensive, irritated. Nobody knows why the change has occurred, but everyone will invent a reason. (The human mind likes to fill in blanks and will regard as probable any reason that seems plausible. The office was pleasant before the DW arrived; therefore, the DW is a disruptive, alienating force.) In the reactions of his co-workers, the orphan of road rage gives rise to many offspring. The work place will not likely conduce to placid, constructive problem-solving.

As lingering road-rage creates dissension in the workplace; on the drive home, lingering road-rage will create identical problems at home. The worker will enter his house loaded for bear. There will be fights. Perhaps he will drink to calm himself. Conflict. Oblivion. Soporifics. New Day. Hangover. Estrangement. Stimulants. Road rage, and so on and on. He cultivates the charm of barbed wire, the poise of an Uzi. The downward spiral continues, one problem creating many others.

Finally, there is the consideration of health. An unhappy worker ought to see a physician to determine whether his problems owe their origins to hypertension, hypoglycemia, anemia, sick-building-syndrome, insomnia or any one of a thousand maladies that can impact his attitude towards his work and affect his performance.

Even after making all necessary corrections to his own life, the Discontented Worker may still be miserable because *he is forced to endure the presence of other discontented workers*. In either case or in both, he may want or need to institute a Karma Yoga regimen. And we are now back to the "how" of it all. The motive and the opportunity are not enough. He needs the means.

KARMA YOGA: ZEN FOR THE DISCONTENTED WORKER

Part II: The Regimen

by Ming Zhen Shakya, OHY

One day Majnun, whose love for Laila inspired many a Persian poet, was playing in a little sand heap, when a friend came to him and said: "Why are you wasting your time in an occupation so childish?" 'I am seeking Laila in these sands,' replied Majnun.

His friend in amazement cried: 'Why? Laila is an angel, so what is the use of seeking her in the common earth?' 'I seek her everywhere,' said Majnun, bowing his head, 'that I may find her somewhere.'

- CXXXVIII, *The Wisdom of the Sufis*, compiled by Kenneth Cragg

Karma Yoga is unlike any other yoga because it is not done separately from any other activity; and it is not done, as is japa, as a background for any other activity. It is the activity, itself.

In Karma Yoga, we do some bit of work... draw a floor plan... type a page... fill in forms... with an ulterior motive. We are seeking something that has nothing to do with what we are doing, yet is the reason for everything we do. Majnun was not playing with sand to amuse himself or handling it in order to build something. He was seeking Laila. He was trying to find the divine in the material.

Our Zen program is not separate from our work. We do not have to postpone or forfeit an activity to go and sit on a cushion or whirl in dance or pore over scriptures in order to practice Zen.

In the Karma Yoga view, a problem arises when we think that we can categorize our activities as being sacred or profane, that we can then, after separating them, apply different standards to our performance, that we can say, "This is what we are working for, the end result" and "This is the means by which we can attain that end." It is as if someone says that he believes

that God is omnipresent and omniscient yet is slovenly and greedy in his workplace but attends his church spotlessly attired and purposefully generous. In fact, he has no creed at all. When we believe in the One, the Indivisible, we cannot conveniently cut out sections, exempting these parts from consideration of the Whole.

Our Buddha Self is omniscient because, being inside us it is privy to our every thought and deed; and it is omnipresent, because where we are *it is*.

Zen is a religion. It has a supreme being, a whole spiritual matrix from which methodologies merely arise or associate themselves. Zen may seem to be only a 'way of life' because, as in any religious system, it prescribes an ethical regimen which is designed to help us get along in the world. But beneath the ethics is a belief-system. A very natural superstructure of deportment rises from the supernatural substructure, the foundation of Divinity. When we speak of our Holy Bodhisattvas, our Lordly Buddhas, our splendid, young Maitreya we speak of such divinity, and we see all our activity as service to those who reveal themselves in the mystical adventure, the divine drama that is enacted in Zen's Trinitarian Ground.

Karma Zen is difficult to begin because we not only have to unlearn old, ingrained or automatic ways of doing the most ordinary things, but we require a fundamental and immediate change in attitude, one that is predicated on faith. Any kind of yoga can cause a change in attitude, a revalorization of the people, places and things of our environment, the period of change slowly proceeding from isolated Zen exercises to the gradual infiltration of Zen's 'way of life' into our personality. We *become* Zen men. But Karma Zen begins with its finished product in evidence. It has to be practiced without any reassuring progression of trial and proof.

In the beginning, it is as if we are two people, a drowning man and an observer who wants to save him. If the helper is not a strong swimmer possessed with life-saving skills, they will both likely drown. This is no yoga for the weak-willed or emotional soul.

Before attempting to secure union with the divine, we need to believe in the existence of the divine. Then, we conform practice to belief. There are not many rules, but the few are hard to follow.

It should go without saying that anyone who attempts Karma Yoga is already familiar with the Eightfold Path and the Seven Deadly Sins. Saint Gregory outlined the Seven Sins back in A.D. 600, and they are still a valuable checklist for gauging our daily activities. Every form of yoga requires that we adhere to a code of behavior that avoids pride, anger, lust, sloth, gluttony, jealousy, and greed.

What, then, is the method for attaining union? Union is Samadhi; but the progression is Concentration, Meditation and then Samadhi. So we begin with concentration. First there is focus: attention. Yes, it's the old mondo. The novice asks, "How can I achieve Zen?" "Attention," says the master. "What do you mean, 'Attention'?" replies the novice. "Attention! Attention!," shouts the master, "Attention means attention!"

Before we can attain the concentrated state, we need to be constantly aware, that is to say, *on guard*, against anything that might interfere with our ability to concentrate.

Emotion is the greatest obstacle to concentration. When we are excited or angry, i.e., when we are projecting archetypes, our responses are "gut-level" - not rational, and this translates as distraction. It is for this reason that surgeons don't operate on their own children: their emotional involvement might compromise their scientific judgment. Since the best way to deal with a problem is to avoid it, we don't fall into emotional traps.

Right Speech is the step on the Path in which we most easily falter. (For more details about Right Speech violations, consult Chapter 13 of *The Seventh World of Chan Buddhism* on this website.)

To the beginner of a Karma Yoga regimen, no opinions (except for those that are directly job-related) may be requested or given.

In keeping with our 'Crime' analogy, opinions ought to be considered the stuff of expert testimony - perjury, payment, challenge and reputation are on the line.

What is the real reason we offer opinions or seek them?

When we initiate the subject, it's easy to trace our motives. Perhaps we are on a little egotistical foray, introducing a topic in which we feel particularly competent so as to demonstrate our superiority; or we're filling air-space with static drivel; or, less nobly, we're trying to expose someone else's ignorance. Especially when we're in Karma Yoga training, the moment we feel the impulse to state or to ask for an opinion, we quash it.

When we're asked for our opinion, a bit more in the way of discipline is required.

People often act as if each of us is obliged to have an opinion on every subject known to man. We are so pressured to produce an opinion that if we don't already have one in our philosophical storehouse, we immediately manufacture one. In Karma Yoga 'to opine' is to invite disaster.

Yes, as we would invite a krait into our sleeping bag, we should welcome opinions into our realm of consciousness. Since none of us wants to share a bed with a venomous snake - present company excepted, all of us should avoid giving or asking for opinions.

Often, the request for an opinion masquerades as a request for information. But seldom does the quest for knowledge occasion the request. An example may help to clarify this. Recently I was asked if I thought that my state should enact legislation that would permit Gay and Lesbian marriages. The woman who asked me had cloaked her question in the innocuousness of inquiry, as if she were seeking information, but it was hardly a secret that she had already taken a stand on the issue. What she was really trying to determine was whether my views (assuming I had any) agreed with hers. If they were consonant, she would put her imprimatur on me and my ministry; and if they were dissonant, she'd make me regret the day I learned to talk. Such was the value she placed upon the power of opinion, hers in particular.

What she was interested in, then, was not my view about Gay and Lesbian marriages as such, but rather whether she could identify me as an ally or an enemy. But I was not obliged to enter the conflict, and I declined to comment. Immediately she attacked my competence as a minister, asking, "How can you be an effective religious leader if you don't offer guidance to your flock?" I said that I did not consider myself a religious leader and that the people who

belonged to our Sangha had not yet expressed a fear of being stampeded over the cliff-edge of the Gay and Lesbian Marriage issue. They did not require a shepherd.

This assertion did not endear me to her and she immediately accused me of not caring what *people* thought about me. I overlooked the instantaneous multiplication that this single woman had become society, itself, and tried to explain to her that my religious service requires that I not care what people think about me. I do not do what I do in order to gain love or fame or anything else. My duty is to serve the Dharma, to write about it and to teach it in the way I understand it. Period.

She persisted. Knowing that I performed marriage ceremonies, she vehemently insisted upon knowing whether I would marry a homosexual couple. I reminded her of her original question which explicitly acknowledged that it was not legal for homosexuals to marry in our state. In her emotionalism she saw herself as an irresistible force. It remained for me to remain an immovable object. I don't know how she spent the rest of her day, but I returned to my duty.

Am I qualified to give expert testimony on the subject? No. Am I obliged to abandon my other areas of service to study this issue and to oppose or support someone to whom the question is important? No.

Sometimes the request for an opinion appears to be casual and convivial, but in actuality is not. One person will ask another for his opinion about a movie, a book, or a restaurant and, particularly if the opinion is favorable, will then see the movie, read the book, or eat in the restaurant *and be unconsciously prepared to dislike it*. All he wants is a recommendation that he can oppose, definitively, as evidence of someone's incompetence or inferior taste. Some people are so contrary that a certain way to ensure that they will dislike something is to recommend it to them.. or vice versa.

After abstaining from offering opinions, the Karma Yogi In Training (KYIT) should give some thought to the deeper question of the validity of any samsaric judgment.

It is not enough merely for us to keep our mouth shut and withhold opinions. We have to consider the Karmic aspect of Karma Yoga. Any event is always the result of many factors. An

infinity of causes form the karmic net of any moment's circumstance; and we cannot remove a single knot from that net without affecting the lines that lead to it and from it.

Upon what criteria are opinions based? If we eat at a restaurant and are later asked our opinion of the food, what subjective criteria are involved here? In terms of karmic consideration, not only does the food change from moment to moment, or day to day, but the consumer changes, too. Ultimately, the consumer is describing how he thinks he felt at the time he ate one meal as it was presented at that one, specific time. Perhaps when he entered the restaurant he was not really hungry or perhaps he already had indigestion. Perhaps he was starved and would have eaten tripe and gizzards with gusto. What mood was the reader in when he read the book? What previous books contributed to his appreciation or dislike of it? And movies? A critic may deride a film as being "derivative" - but to someone who is unfamiliar with those productions from which it is derived, it will surely seem original. What value is his opinion? Even restaurant, book and movie critics, whose business it is to render judgments, who *may* testify in a courtroom as experts, do not always agree on the quality of the object they are reviewing.

It is the ego that sets itself up as the arbiter of taste. As KYIT we cannot allow ourselves to give such free rein to our ego. If we trust the judgment of a certain professional critic, we should consult that expert if we desire advice. We should then see the movie, read the book, taste the food. If it is agreeable, we ought to be grateful. But in any event we ought to try to "accentuate the positive," to focus on those parts that were enjoyable. Deriding or denigrating anything is usually an exercise in egotism. When someone says, "I don't know anything about art, I only know what I like," the subject is then "I" not art.

Another Right Speech danger that exists particularly in the competitive workplace is the deliberate manipulation of a person's comments in order to discredit him. We all know that there are but two ways to win a race: either we run faster than our opponent, or we fix him so that he runs slower than we.

Worker A smiles and says to Worker B, "Isn't the boss's daughter ugly?" Worker B shrugs and grunts, in seeming affirmation. Worker A then finds a way to inform the boss that Worker B said his daughter was hideous. To doubt this is to doubt the First Noble Truth: Life is

bitter and painful. This duplicity is precisely why the First Noble Truth is true. Worker B, by his *apparent* acquiescence (which he cannot deny) has unwittingly made himself a target for his boss's ire. If he had steadfastly refused to comment or even to have given the appearance of comment, he'd have a lot more job security. (Like Caesar's wife, we must not only *be* virtuous, we must *appear to be* virtuous.)

There is no way to calibrate the sense of freedom that adherence to this Right Speech/No Opinion rule provides. It is exhilarating. Zero opinion means zero misunderstanding and manipulation. Without having to defend ourselves against those very charges that we helped to create, we avoid anger, resentment and embarrassment - all those emotional states that impair our ability to concentrate.

If as a Karma-Yogis-In-Training we are asked to give an opinion, we say, "I'm sorry, but I have none to give." If necessary we explain that we're involved in a spiritual regimen which prohibits us from rendering opinions. We are nice about it, but we are immovable.

At work, when opinions are part of the job, we need to respond responsibly. If asked, for example, "Which story board best conveys the concept?" we formulate a criticism based soundly on knowledge, insight and experience and purge our comments of emotional, personal elements. "This sucks," is not a critical analysis of a work. "You're incompetent," is not an appraisal of a product. We are firm but respectful and confine our opinion to the specific criteria that apply to a work, foregoing the pleasure of psychoanalyzing the worker or antagonizing him until he is forced to plot revenge against us.

We are so often tempted to assert ourselves, to rise to the occasion of leadership. We want to emulate our heroes and in this desire we make ourselves vulnerable to the brainless whims of emotion. Catchy pronouncements grab us and toss us into precipitous action. We consider Plato's sage pronouncement, "The penalty that the wise must pay for failing to lead is that they must be led by inferiors," and without asking, "Who is wise and who is inferior?" we decide that our course is clear. We see ourselves as leaders, as a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, and step forward into the limn light. But Gandhi and King were not spiritual trainees. They were not wise *because* they took a stand; because they were wise they took a stand. Despite the

seeming rectitude of a cause, we need to amass some wisdom, not to mention self-discipline, before we consider ourselves wise enough to lead others.

The Karma Yogi In Training also needs to rid himself of the notion that work can be evaluated according to some scale of importance. In Karma Yoga we cannot assign value to work, appreciating it because we consider it significant or noble and disparaging it because we consider it beneath our station, disgraceful, or foolish. If a worker is seeking Laila, it does not matter what he appears to be doing. A sales clerk is a sales clerk and it does not matter whether the clerk sells Cadillacs or Yugos.. Well... maybe not Yugos. Kias, then. Further, the person who sells cars is no more nor less noble than the person who sells bicycles. The sales clerk (and this is the attitudinal discipline of Karma Yoga) is no more nor less noble than the customer. It takes a firm mind to appreciate that the CEO of a major corporation is no more nor less noble than a janitor in the building over which the CEO presides. Both men are human beings and as such they each have a head-full of archetypes that assault their ego. They both are quite likely to have troublesome in-laws and ungrateful children and acquisitive wives and jealous neighbors. Possessing money and power does not proportionately remove an individual's social and emotional problems. If anything, it intensifies them.

It does not matter how others regard us. They are not involved in a Karma Yoga regimen. What matters is that we discipline ourselves to regard with equal respect all others, that we make no distinctions whatsoever between people. There is a practical aspect to this occupational egalitarianism. By offending no one we eliminate resentment against ourselves; and without having to respond to resentment, we are free to concentrate on our work.

We turn away from worldly pursuits - none of which can deliver spiritual satisfaction, and concentrate on spiritual improvement, spiritual renovation. All of the Seven Deadly Sins need to be reviewed each day for signs of stress fatigue; all of the steps on the Eightfold Path need to be swept free of debris. But the step that needs most of our labor is the one that is most befouled in the workplace: Right Speech.

Good work is noticed by those whose business it is to notice it. As long as profit drives the market, the productive person is secure. A talented person who wastes half his day fretting

about the jealousy and resentment of others, has lost much of his productivity, a financial fact which though lost to him is recoverable to his critics.

In Karma Yoga, then, with one effort we accomplish two tasks: the less important one is that we do more and better work and relieve some of the angst that made us discontented workers. The more important one is that we find the peace, joy, truth and freedom attainable in union with our Buddha Self.

KARMA YOGA: ZEN FOR THE DISCONTENTED WORKER

Part III: The Work of the Work

by Ming Zhen Shakya, OHY

"The true beginning of the spiritual life is the desire to know Sophia.
A desire to know Her brings one to love her;
Loving Her enables one to follow Her will;
Following Her will is the sure path to immortality;
And immortality is oneness with God."

-- Solomon, from *Two Suns Rising*, edited by Jonathan Star

It's impossible to read an account of any religion's Karma or action yoga without encountering the most sober and profound tributes to a wisdom goddess. Especially when we consider traditionally masculine religions such as Buddhism, we're always astonished by the depth of devotion we find in tributes to deified feminine wisdom. We expect scriptures written by men in celebration of manly gods to be virile expressions - strong, aggressive, and self-reliant. But curiously we find that when poetic lines are dedicated to male divinities they are often fluffy stuff, grandiosely written in praise of creation, or maudlin in complaint of affliction, or petulant in a foot-stamping insistence that God should smite some poor souls that the male poets couldn't quite handle on their own.

But if the literature dedicated to paternal gods seems always to remind the gods of what they could and should do for mankind, the literature dedicated to maternal divinities is quite different. The goddess is seldom asked to act except to impart wisdom or to enable the individual *to do for himself* those actions which "could and should" be done. Tributes to goddesses are offerings of self.

Always we find that strange and intimate connection between the goddess, the worker, and the work, a sacred collaboration. Homer, preparing to recite the demanding lines of the *Iliad*,

begins his labor, "Sing, Goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, Peleus's son." And then he lets the Goddess sing through him during the course of his long and arduous recitation.

Goethe, in the terminal lines of *Faust*, cries out, "Virgin, Mother, Queen! Goddess on thy throne! ...the Eternal Feminine lures to perfection." Goethe's perfection.

What is it then that these men see and grasp that so eludes the average man?

ParamaShiva - Great Shiva who is the totality, the One...divides himself into Shiva, pure consciousness, and into Shakti, universal energy; and Shakti is the Great Mother. It is her head's curly 'strings' that radiate through time, itself. She is the power and he, the law that power obeys.

"The man through whom the Dao flows freely.." says the scripture and we instinctively know that this is the *complete* man, one whose pure yang consciousness has been infused by the radiant Yin. And this complete man is, indeed, an extraordinary individual. Lao Tzu reiterates in verse XX of the Dao de Jing (The Way and its Power), "The multitude all have a purpose... I alone am different from the others and value being fed by the Mother." (D.C. Lau's translation/Penguin Classics.)

Something or someone needs to inspire us, to urge us to take control of our lives, to believe in us and to support us as we struggle to believe in ourselves. We must tap into that latent power if we are to reverse the spiral of our deepening discontent.

"Ah," says the Buddha, "One man may conquer ten thousand men in battle; and another man conquer only himself... but this man is the greater victor." True, we say. So very true. But how do we accomplish this singular victory?

The Eightfold Path's way is well known to us. We understand the rules. But from where does the power come to effect the change?

The answer lies in a shift from a passive obedience to external dictates to an active reliance upon this interior force.

Shadrack, cast into the fiery furnace, relies upon God's saving power to deliver him ... or not. An earthly king commands Shadrack to come out of the fire, and he obeys. But from the Lotus Sutra we find a different solution: an acknowledgment of an inherent feminine or androgynous power:

"Were you with murderous intent thrust into a fiery furnace, One thought of Guan Yin's saving power would turn those flames to water!"

Jonah, caught in the belly of the whale, cries out for help; and an exterior Paternal God considers the appeal and renders a decision: "And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land." (Jonah 2:10) But, again, from the Lotus, we find a different approach:

"Were you adrift upon the sea with dragon-fish and fiends around you, One thought of Guan Yin's saving power would spare you from the hungry waves."

Perhaps we relate so readily to a feminine divinity because the model of mercy has been fashioned by our own mothers. We so often see our mother as the intermediary between us and an intransigent father; or perhaps we feel that if we try and fail, no awful Paternal Wrath will come down upon our heads. Men are inclined to fear being judged as harshly as they have judged. A female overseer is bound to be more forgiving.

The word. The name. The visual identification of the archetype. The concentration that invokes the image and the transcendental power. This is what is necessary.

And so we find that Mahayana followers, not content with the mere lines of the Prajna Paramita Canon, that body of scriptures that virtually defines the Mahayana, flesh out those literary bones with the beautiful form of the goddess herself. Buddhists do not merely recite the lines in dusty libraries. They go to Prajnaparamita's altar, put flowers there, and kneel. As Athena sprang full grown from the brow of Zeus, so Prajnaparamita and the Bodhisattva of Compassion, too, spring into existence as the utterance of sound from the Godhead, Amitabha/Amitayus - Infinite Light, Infinite Time. The divine word has taken on divine and lovely form.

It all seems so very strange. And yet it is there....the artwork that is not merely decorative but *functional*, those temple sculptures that bear witness to the presence of that divinity which

exists within ourselves. Piously we say, "When we bow, we bow to the Buddha within." Yes, and to the Bodhisattva, too.

What do we do when we're in a job we detest but are compelled by circumstance to continue in it? *Providing we can accept the fact of this interior divinity*, we apply the techniques of Karma yoga. Naturally, the changes in our attitude and deportment are always beneficial, but if they are only mechanically enacted, cosmetic, they will not be sufficient. They need to be organic. We have to be able to concentrate so thoroughly that we can hold an inner dialog with this personified force, and we have to possess enough faith and trust to obey the wisdom that is imparted to us. This is no place for superficial Zen men. This is a place for believers, for devotees.

Majnun sought Laila as a devotee of Laila. His labor was of no particular consequence except as it provided him with the means to realize her. This realization and the indescribable peace, joy, truth and freedom it brings, this transcendental experience of sheer bliss and liberation was what he sought. For this, he sacrificed his labor.

Karma or action union requires the adoration of the Eternal or Mysterious Feminine: as Shakti, or the Holy Mother, or the merciful Guan Yin; as Tara, Sophia, or Prajnaparamita. The devotee dedicates his labor to the divinity of Mater, the uterine material. The Shakti within Shiva.

First we have to accept responsibility for our problems and start with what we have and where we are. We may not cast blame upon others, for this prolongs the distress by focussing our attention outwards. Just as the source of correction lies within ourselves, so the responsibility for that which requires correction must be seen to lie within ourselves. Pride and Anger guard the gates of heaven against us; and for so long as we suppose that others are to blame for our troubles, and not we or our reactions to the problems caused by others, we will get nowhere.

It is not always boredom or job discontent that moves us to action. Often it is disgust, creeping or sudden, that impels us to change:

After years of working, a man achieves success in his career and an enviable domestic life: wife, kids, house, cars, dog. Success confers a lordly status upon his ego and lets him believe that

he has earned the right to be free of conventional restraints. "...where there are no bonds, where there is the madness of license, the soul ceases to be free," says Tagore. "There is its hurt; there is its separation from the infinite, its agony of sin."

And so the man, indulging himself in worthless pleasures or in the illusions of his own importance, neglects what he should have guarded. He loses his family and cries, "Another man now sleeps with my woman, plays with my kids, mows my lawn, and tosses a Frisbee to my dog. My lifetime of sweat has given this man the good life while I have nothing to show but a leased car, an efficiency apartment, and a bunch of canceled support checks." Sniff. Sniff. He no longer sees the point of working at all.

An educated young career woman stifles future growth by an obsession with gross materiality - the wardrobe, the hairdo, the vehicle, the residence. She works to pay the expenses of working, competing with associates for such spurious sigils of achievement. The process of decadence sets in: more and more is required to achieve less and less. And as that "more" consumes her energy, that "less" is evident in her failure to keep informed, qualified and competitive in her career. She, too, is trapped by her own self-indulgent priorities.

But if there comes to these two people a moment of clarity, a single moment in which they see their error and decide to revalorize the people, places and things of their lives, they are in an ascendant mode and have begun to reverse the spiral.

The first rule requires us to simplify our lives and to understand that our material existence is always of secondary consideration.

Laila, for example, as did Layman Pang and his daughter and so many other saints and holy persons, showed complete humility, a poverty of material goods. Laila would have told the young career woman to remove the warpaint and fashionable dress and to array herself in less ostentatious attire, using the time and energy thus saved to pursue things of real value. (Laila, in fact, used the metaphor of nakedness. "I cover myself with only one long plain shawl which goes up the left side of me, around my neck, and down the right side, equally;" she said, "and every day when someone complains about my dress, I put a knot in the right panel, and when someone

compliments me about my dress, I put a knot in the left panel. Then, at the end of the day, I weigh both sides. They always weigh the same.")

It might be helpful to appreciate that often the changes we seek to effect in the workplace are so drastic that we inhibit our ability to perform them because we fail to identify ourselves as trainees. People, baffled by our new attitude, tend to react negatively towards us until they become aware that we're seeking spiritual goals. We encourage their acceptance of our unaccustomed behavior by wearing quasi-clerical garb: subdued garments and a bracelet of wooden beads usually suffice.

As to the necessary internal image of divinity, curiously, once a sincere commitment is made to follow the Karma Yoga path, an initial dream or vision of a wisdom goddess is often experienced. This peculiar initial dream often occurs when people begin psychoanalysis or other emotional therapy. In the absence of a visionary encounter, we can browse the shops for statues or medallions, remaining passive in our gaze and never... never letting our ego tell us that something is too cheap or too gaudy or anything else. No judgment may be rendered as regards the effect the item will have on those around us. This must be a purely personal selection, one that cannot be accomplished if we even begin to consider public appreciation of it.

Once we have an image, and again it does not matter whether the image is of Guan Yin, Parvati, Mary, Sophia, the White Buffalo Spirit, or even of ancient Egyptian and Grecian goddesses, we concentrate fiercely on the image. This can be done in bed or during a lunch break or even sitting on a meditation cushion. The important aspect of this is the *decision* to concentrate on this interior image and not to let our attention indulge itself in frivolous, 'time-filling' distractions. (The depth of concentration required is such, however, that we should not attempt it while driving.)

We scan our mind, probing this inner resource of strength until we touch the font, the stream, the current of force. It is a strange but compelling feeling, one that will seem uncomfortable at first; but when the novelty wears off, it becomes delightful. In fact, we run a danger of enjoying it so much that we become smugly independent and hold ourselves aloof from ordinary men. A few days worth of euphoria is quite enough.

The desired result is to relax and let the Dao flow freely; and if the morning freeway traffic does not flow so well, we will not much care about cars or clocks. And there, clasping the wheel, we might chant the Bodhisattva's name, recite her Dharani, and greet the day joyfully while others around us snarl into their cell-phones and suck on their cigarettes, breathing so much sound and fury.

But if we arrive at our workplace placid and self-assured, in disposition gentle, how do we respond to the aggression we encounter by others in the workplace: the unreasonable client's threats; the contemptuous remark; the venomous sneer; the hurtful snub; the unjust accusation; the theft of our ideas or parking space?

We freeze our reaction. This does not say that we count to ten and stall our anger. Such an insignificant pause is too often a prelude to submission, a planting of contempt down into our psyche's earth, that Muladhrara chakra, the bowels of earthly reaction. The anger will grow there and if we don't know that by now, we're beyond those numerical "count to ten" nostrums.

Neither do we allow ourselves to vent our anger and denounce the person who has troubled us. Instead we hold our anger "in our throat," in accordance with the dictates of our interior Bodhisattva. Her voice will speak to us in firm but gentle tone, reasoning, and urging us to reason: "The more importance you give an insult, the greater must your response be. Weigh this insult, and consider its source, its cause and its effect, and then consider the source, the cause and the effects of your own response." Uh, oh. Now we have to *think*.

Always, we are confronted with this choice: Swallow our venomous anger; spit it out; or hold it in our throat. If we engage our mind and consider the various aspects of action and reaction to the anger, the anger will simply descend to the throat. This kind of holding confers immunity to the venom; and every religion accounts for this harmless consequence. In Eastern religions it is either Shiva or Avalokitesvara who is addressed as "Nilakantha" (the Blue Necked One), blue-necked because in loving defense of us, he or she takes the poisons of the world into himself and holds them there harmlessly in the Vishuddha region, the *region of speech*. It is for this reason that the Vishuddha chakra is violet in color.

Likewise every Mahayana Buddhist sings the great Dharani to Guan Yin .. the more famous Japanese version, Dai Hi Shin Dharani, begins "Namu kara tan no tora ya ya:" the original Sanskrit of which is, "Namo Ratna Trayaya" (Hail to the Triple Treasure.) The third sentence in that Dharani says, "Having adored him, may I enter into the heart of the blue-necked one known as the noble, adorable Avalokitesvara!" - who is more famous in his androgynous, feminine form, Guan Yin.

Says the Lotus Sutra, "Had you imbibed some fatal draught and lay now at the point of death, One thought of Guan Yin's saving power would nullify its poison."

We decide then to postpone making a decision, to set a statute of limitations on the process, to check our watch and note the time and then to give ourselves, depending on the severity of the insult or injury, twenty-four or forty-eight hours to let the yin and yang forces rebalance themselves, and to allow ourselves the time to give the miscreant back his humanity. And then, when we are in full command of our resources... calm, and cool, and with our brain in gear, we move to address the injustice or the action that inspired it. (Cold blood is ever so much more efficient than the hot variety. When inflated and heated by indignation, brainless, air-headed anger, vented verbally or in some precipitously written letter, has a way of making us step off our own self-constructed cliffs without benefit of parachute.)

We elevate and channel the indignation until it is tempered by thought. Lower energy centers (the Svadhithana and Muladhara) are unconscious centers. Assuming we don't bark angrily - the usually disastrous fire response, whenever we allow our responses to environmental situations to *remain* down in these areas, we unconsciously resort to schadenfreude or passive-aggressive tactics - secret feelings of satisfaction at the distress of others or subtle sabotage and "unintentional" errors. The emotion must be raised. In the rear of the brain is the moon center, the light which tempers yin feelings. In the front of the brain is the sun center, the light which tempers yang determinations. Physical kriyas, chakra or Microcosmic Orbit meditations, help to accomplish the raising of these gut-level responses to the light of conscious consideration. (A complete regimen will soon be offered by Yin Zhao Shakya on our ZBOHY website.)

We remember Hsu Yun's favorite expression, "Let it be..." and like the woman who attained the Holy Fruit by keeping this thought firmly in her mind, we hold the venom in our throat - neither swallowing it nor spitting it out - but storing it temporarily, giving ourselves the time to react constructively and to convert the venom to medicinal purpose. We say only, "Let it be. Let it be..." The effect is stunning.

The voice inside us steadies us. "Don't go down that road again. You know every stone in it. You've stumbled over them all. Stay here with me. Hold your ground. Neither advance nor retreat. Wait. Be patient. Let it be."

As we become more entrained to the goddess' voice, establishing a dialogue, it is as if we automatically hear her cautioning us to remain humble and not to let our piety carry us into haughty realms. The advice may sometimes sound a bit cynical, but it is usually ennobling and always practical. If we are singled out for praise, the voice says, "Refuse to accept the credit for yourself for in doing so you cause anger and resentment to rise in the hearts of your co-workers. Do not be the occasion of such injury to them." (We might as well be magnanimous at the outset, since our co-workers, collectively or individually, consciously or unconsciously, will act to make us pay dearly for that portion of the praise that each feels was his due.)

Then the voice continues, "Be the occasion of good feelings. Demonstrate that in my name you have cultivated a generous spirit." Immediately we insist that credit be given to those whose contributions were far more important than ours, everybody who was associated with the project, including the mail boy. Again, this is not entirely spiritual largesse. This is often just plain smart. Only a fool willingly gains the approbation of the few at the contempt of the many.

And so, as reluctant as we are to accept praise, that quickly do we advance to accept responsibility for anything that goes wrong. That little voice inside us will tell us to apologize immediately for error, and when we do, we're often astonished to see how quickly we ennoble others. No sooner do we step forward to accept the blame, but others step forward to protest our hogging of the guilt. When others *freely* share the responsibility for a problem, a sense of teamwork is generated, and in this enlightened atmosphere, nobody wastes time with rancorous fretting, and necessary corrections can be efficiently made.

The idea of conducting a dialogue with an interior, archetypal presence is fundamental to the spiritual experience. We tend not to take this possibility seriously, however, because we so often hear accounts of conversations with deities in which the mortal speaker is instructed to make money or board a comet trailing spaceship. At other times we regard it as a fictional device, as Virgil to Dante. But Carl Jung, who in his fruitful correspondence with D.T.Suzuki helped to formulate the structure and dynamics of Zen psychology, writes eloquently of his own interior dialogues with an archetype he named Philemon. "Psychologically," writes Jung in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, "Philemon represented superior insight. He was a mysterious figure to me. At times he seemed to me quite real, as if he were a living personality. I went walking up and down the garden with him, and to me he was what the Indians call a guru." Jung relates a conversation he had with a "highly cultivated" friend of Gandhi's who spoke reverently of his own guru with whom he had a gratifying teacher/student relationship. The guru was revealed to be none other than Shankaracharya, the 9th Century commentator of the Vedas who is credited with founding the Vedanta movement. Jung, remembering his own dialogues with his own wise, interior guru found the information both illuminating and, especially since Shankara had been dead for centuries, quite "reassuring."

We should not doubt the possibility of generating an abiding relationship with a wisdom Goddess; but we should also not suppose that this is something that is easy to accomplish. It requires a clear, unemotional mind and an intense ability to concentrate and, of course, an intense desire to achieve it.

Karma Yoga does not encourage positional stagnation. We *should* be ambitious and desire to advance in our work. Ambition is not the problem, it is how we implement desire, the ethical or unethical, the selfless or selfish means by which we strive to advance.

Finally, if we consult with our interior Guide, we'll hear the sobering words, "Do not desire money and power in order to make yourself desirable, for then, to your horror, you will discover that you are desired only for your money and power. Succeed, but retain your humility by surrendering the fruits of your labor to me while regarding the success of your labor as praise of the Lord."

This, of course, is the essence of Karma Yoga: striving for excellence but detaching ourselves from the results. It is as if we work as anonymous volunteers. If the project succeeds, we're glad to have helped. If it fails, we know we've done our best. If we eliminate ourselves from consideration of the results, from gain or loss, we then eliminate our ego, and no value attaches to praise or blame. We are free and need not grovel for compliments or cower from criticism. And when we speak to the divinity within ourselves, saying, "This is all that I have to give, it is not much, but I will do it as best I can and I will do it for you," we are set free from the bitterness and pain of Samsara and get at least a foot in Nirvana's door.

In Karma Yoga, work is a form of prayer. As such it is important that we understand the kind of attention that is required. Just as prayer said by rote - the mind absent because the thought is elsewhere - is meaningless recitation and not prayer at all, so work done while the attention is focused on music or in daydreams or in some hypnotic blur is not Karma Yoga.

Attention means complete awareness, absorption in the task, but not becoming entranced by it. (Years ago I had a neighbor who was a foreman at a factory. One of the employees he supervised, a young woman, operated a metal punching machine. She'd insert a piece of metal and with her foot would activate the powerful punch which slammed down and stamped a number into the metal. Hour after hour the young woman repeated the procedure. One day this foreman came up behind her and jokingly whispered, "I wonder what would happen if you put your hand in there." Immediately, in her trance state, she did just that and permanently lost the use of her crushed hand.)

Non-hypnotic absorption, full and alert concentration, elevates consciousness into exalted spiritual realms. There is intense, total focus upon the work, the sustained elation of worthy purpose; and, as if we fully intended anonymously to donate the work to some charitable enterprise, i.e., to detach ourselves from the results of it, we proceed, immersed in the work. When the task is finished, we release it. No longer part of us, it is gone; and no pride or shame attaches us to it. We have put it into a Goddess' hands, and we pray only that it is worthy to be there.

Baba Ram Dass who in his secular life was Richard Alpert, a former Harvard professor, used to tell the story about a lecture on spiritual transcendence he once gave to an audience of mostly academic types - learned men and women from such disciplines as psychology, theology, and philosophy. Encouraged by this array of intellectuals, Ram Dass, in clear but sophisticated language, began his exposition.


Sitting conspicuously in the front row was a grandmotherly lady; and whenever Ram Dass made a point that should have provoked an affirmative response from his audience, this lady and only this lady immediately nodded. When he resorted to sly, "insider's" wit, this lady and only this lady laughed. Clearly, she was the only one in the audience who understood what he was talking about. At the end of the lecture he came down from the podium and questioned her.


"Are you a teacher?" he asked.

"No. No," she replied.

"How is that you understand this subject so thoroughly," he asked. "What do you do?"

"Oh," she said simply, "I knit."

And on that Karma pearl we'll quit. 

The Zen Buddhist Order of Hsu Yun 

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