

SOUNDS OF THE WORLD

Our Readers Respond

Practice and Right Livelihood

It's Not a Cosmic Issue

by Paul Bloom

Just to work, to work with clear mind, is very important. Also very difficult. Not to work at special work, but just to do whatever it is that each of us does.

I grew up being very aware that I was a working person. And also that I wanted to work for liberation. As a Buddhist, working is a central focus of my practice.

Buddha referred to right livelihood as part of the Eightfold Path, which means that work is part of Buddhist practice. However, it can be a big problem to think of right livelihood as Right Livelihood—it is not a cosmic issue at all but small, simple and close to home.

Each of us has probably spent some period of time obsessed with the question "what should I do with my life?" While searching for an answer, each of us has his or her own karma with which to contend—skills, family background, etc. Understanding an answer to the question "what should I do with my life?"—the question of right livelihood—is not cosmic and has more to do with the question "who am I?" and with starting to understand correct situation.

I am the Director of a small Drafting/Engineering Department for a custom furniture factory (millwork contractor) in Westchester, N.Y. Here's a poem that I wrote my staff last winter:

At Work 1-17-88

Pencil touches shop drawing,
universe in a line
as architect, millworker, sheetrocker,
electrician, client
all arise—
nothing
but graphite on vellum.

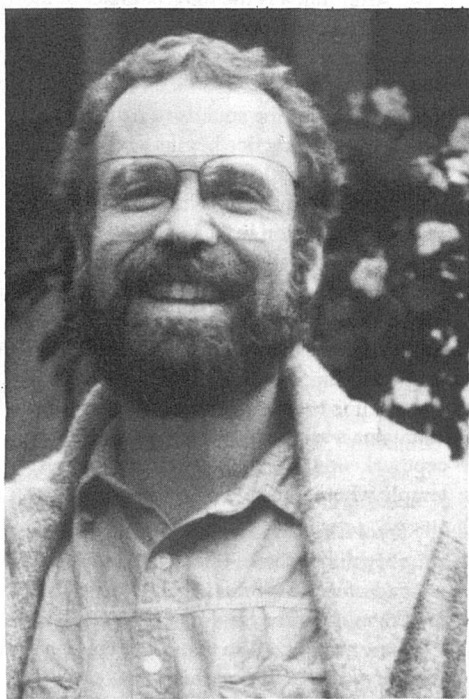
So this is my situation and my karma. Also, I have Judeo-Christian karma of "guilty for not doing enough good." So, how do we help the poor, stop the genocide in Central America and South Africa, avoid nuclear disaster, etc.—all while working and supporting a family, loving a husband/wife, avoiding insanity?

Just working is very important. Showing up for work without anger, with a little bit of clarity about what you're doing this moment; not holding the client's anxiety, the staff's anxiety, the boss's profit drive, your own insecurity—this is all very important. Focused and uncluttered work helps to shelter the homeless, stop the war in Central America, spark a little flicker of sanity. But maintaining this sanity is not always possible; just a form of practice. This is the Mahayana aspect of work. Beyond the particular task at hand, there is an environment which reflects the situation of the whole world. If I confront a client across a conference table while I am holding lies, manipulation and the absence of mutual self-interest, how can we put an end to nuclear proliferation? If I review performance and procedure with a staff member but am filled with fear and insecurity, how can we stop the war in Central America? If I come to work obsessed with mortgage payments and the absence of love, how can we shelter the homeless or feed the hungry?

Here's another poem for you (which was originally accompanied by a large shop drawing):

every day
in north america
we work to get ahead,
to save the world
from communism.
why?

this drawing
of the soul of
one particular cabinet
celebrates life
and sings an end to genocide
for nicaragua.



So, there is a Mahayana aspect to work which reflects the world, which has to do with relationships, compassion and oneness with all beings. (Pardon the dramatic language; I suppose there is a more everyday way to say this, but I don't know what it is.) There is also an aspect of work which is like sitting meditation, just absorption with the task at hand. There is an element of this in all work—for example, washing the dishes elegantly, or typing this article with focus and good form.

I am very fortunate to have work which has a strongly meditative aspect. My company builds custom furniture and cabinets designed by architects and interior designers. The designer makes a drawing, and my job is to make a more analytic drawing (or to supervise others in this) which the shop will actually use to build the piece. My job, then, is to understand each joint, each corner of the cabinet before it is built—a custom cabinet which has never been built before—and to put lines on paper which will communicate this to other people, to communicate exactly what is required. The draftsman must actually become the cabinet and the process of making the cabinet. In the best of circumstances, this process is very similar to kong-an practice.

This is wonderful. But there are also problems.

As with all work, if I view my work as practice it can be wonderful, but it also runs the risk of being at odds with the perceived goals of the company for whom I work. A very well made shop drawing which is created in an environment where staff is clear-minded and calm will tend to lead to cabinets that are well made, and to clients that are happy. But good drawings take longer to make, and

focused work generates little of the hustle-bustle confusion and posturing that usually accompany the "quick-quick get it done and move on" attitude of manufacturing organizations. The company tends to respond by thinking that here is something wrong, that the Drafting/Engineering Department isn't doing its job.

This is nothing really new, although the form takes me by surprise. In a world filled with pain, anger and confusion, centeredness is sometimes perceived with anger, confusion and mistrust.

The good news here is that centered/focused work is usually profitable—although I don't know how this crosses over to other fields. My experience has been that after a period of jousting and inter-personal pain within a particular organization, drawings that are well crafted and departments that are well run (read: with focus and compassion) usually gain applause, respect and appreciation. Not surprisingly, this rings in sympathy with Dae Soen Sa Nim's statement, "Strong center, strong; just do it. Believe in yourself 100% and others will follow."

If each of us works at a job to which he/she is well suited, this must not keep us from the impulse—or as a Zen Buddhist, from the vow to work for peace. But this peace work—right livelihood—has context, "correct situation," and is responsive to the question "who am I?" Leave the cosmic alone; each of us must not try to be Thich Nhat Hanh, Martin Luther King or Winnie Mandela.

Just to have a sense of who you are is very important. Just to work with a clear mind and without anger, is very important.

One last poem:

Working Drawings

at first,
and for many years,
i saw my drawings as jewels—
crystal outpourings that housed
the essence of cabinets,
glittering gems
whose structures arose
from necessities of communication.

lately
these drawings appear more a conduit,
a passage
from concept to finished object—

beautiful
in the simplest telling possible.

Paul Bloom was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., 1945. His parents were second generation Eastern European Jews, working class and upwardly mobile. After getting his B.A. at Brandeis University in 1966, Paul received his M. A. in Architecture, from Yale University ('70). He has work experience in a variety of fields all related to furniture design and manufacture. He has been employed since '80 as a custom furniture (millwork) draftsman/engineer, which is his clear career path of choice. He is a member of the New Haven Zen Center and happily living in New Haven with wife Mildred and 11/2-time with two delightful teenage sons from a former marriage—all in a recently renovated house with beautiful dharma room to which all are welcome.

Zen and the Turnpike

by Gary Snyderman

I am firmly convinced that Zen practice in everyday life is not very much different from Zen practice in monastic life. At our house wake-up begins at 4 A.M. However, we do not use a moktak. We usually awaken to the rhythmic sound of my son banging his crib against the wall screaming for juice or his teething sister crying. These are always done with complete 100% devotion and seriousness.

Before I head for my meditation mat I practice bowing, that is picking up 108 toys. The children help with the morning bell chant. They already know the meaning of this ritual. They help the adults in the house, as well as the neighborhood, to understand that "everything must wake up".

Sitting down to practice I am surrounded by children screaming, jumping on me and throwing things at my head. I am reminded of Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree. As the story goes, before reaching enlightenment many demons attacked him trying to swerve him from self realization.

After meditation I head down for breakfast. Apparently the kitchen master has decided this is a fasting day. My wife often presents me with kong-ans to consider at the breakfast table. Today, I reflect on "Does a cranky, tired woman have Buddha nature?" I quickly answer Mu.

Leaving for work, I frequently sit in traffic jams. This offers me an opportunity to practice chanting Kwan Seum Bosal. I look around and notice many members of other Buddhist sects are also chanting. They seem to prefer chants composed of strings of four letter words screamed out their car windows. I am always envious at their ability to do this with such 100% concentration.

Arriving at work, interviews begin immediately. Boss Sa Nim questions, "Why am I always late? What am I? Why did I hire you?" I simply answer by hitting my desk and reply "don't know." Throughout the day other Senior Dharma Teachers also offer me instructions. Apparently they are intent on me reaching a realization of "no self".

Interacting with my fellow workers I remember my vow to save all sentient beings. I make a note to look up the definition of sentient again. The temple rules are also very useful at work. I am told there will be salary cuts again and that one of the secretaries is wearing what appears to be "only" a short gray meditation robe. Soen Sa Nim's admonition concerning sex and money flashes through my mind.

By the end of the day I reaffirm the validity of Buddha's first noble truth. Life is certainly suffering. Before I leave, I received a memo concerning the second noble truth, that the source of suffering is impermanence. They will be laying off 200 people by the end of the week.

As I set out for home on the turnpike, a kindly state trooper stops my to instruct me in an "only like this" kong-an. 55 mph is 55 mph, 85 mph is 85 mph. He offers me the opportunity to decrease some of my bad karma by donating money to a worthwhile cause.

Arriving home for dinner my wife confronts me with the familiar question, "why do you eat everyday?" She also informs me that she will be leaving me with the children for the evening so she can visit one of our most holy Buddhist shrines, the shopping mall. She will be practicing "just shopping". As I crawl towards bed after a busy day of practice, I am again supported in maintaining celibacy by my wife who utters the traditional "I'm too tired."

Gary Snyderman and his family live in Bensalem, Pennsylvania.