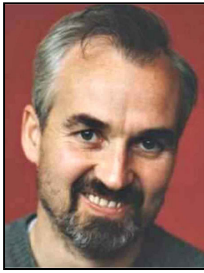# Spiritual practice, efficiency and productivity in the work place
a talk by Ratnaghosha

This talk was recently given by Ratnaghosa to the warehouse workers at Windhorse:Evolution, the FWBO's largest and most successful business, based in Cambridge UK. It is reproduced here to give readers of FWBO News some insight into Windhorse's ongoing exploration of the principles of Right Livelihood and the ways they seek to combine business success with spiritual development.

As you know we are conducting an ongoing review of warehouse management. There are a wide variety of responses to this - some people feel there is not enough change being promoted, some think it is about right and some think it is too much change. At least one person was reported as saying that we were obviously becoming less Buddhist, and there has been some disquiet about whether we can really achieve greater efficiency and at the same time be a place where people can grow and practice spiritually. Some people feel that a focus on efficiency and a focus on spiritual development are not really compatible.

There is some concern that either circumstances or the senior management (that's me and Keturaja, in this case) will force us into a situation that is not much different from any other business where the prime concern is profit, productivity and efficiency and the spiritual needs and aspirations of the workers are pushed into the background.

The relationship between efficiency, productivity, and spiritual practice
I would like to address these concerns by taking a fresh look at the relationship between efficiency and productivity on the one hand and spiritual practice or the spiritual development of the individual, on the other hand.

I want to define these terms in a way that is appropriate to our situation and show how they inter-relate in practice.

What is spiritual practice?
What do we mean when we use the word 'spiritual', as in the spiritual life, spiritual practice or spiritual development?

The word 'spiritual' indicates anything that pertains to higher states of consciousness. A spiritual life is a life that aims to develop higher states of consciousness. Spiritual practices are practices that are conducive to higher states of consciousness and spiritual growth is the growth in higher states of consciousness.

So the question that arises is – what are higher states of consciousness? What are the characteristics of higher states of

consciousness? According to Buddhist teaching the three main characteristics are wisdom, compassion and energy (prajna, mahakaruna and virya) and these qualities are associated with the archetypal Bodhisattvas, Manjughosha, Avolokitesvara and Vajrapani.

Wisdom, compassion and energy together are another way of talking about Enlightenment or Nirvana – the ultimate higher state of consciousness.

The higher states of consciousness we are talking about when we use the word spiritual will be, must be, somehow related to wisdom, compassion and energy.
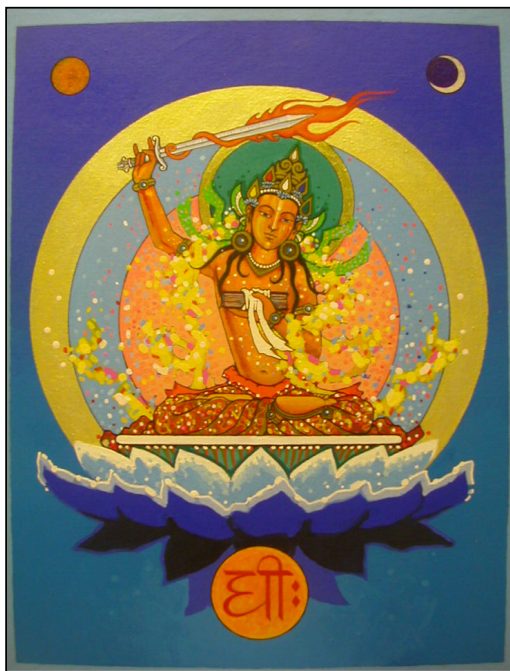
For instance, awareness, mindfulness and the practice of reflection are all related to Wisdom, which is associated with the archetypal Bodhisattva Manjughosha. Compassion, which is the spiritual quality most associated with Avolokitsvara, is related to metta, loving kindness, and to friendliness, co-operation and generosity. Energy is associated with Vajrapani and is related to stamina, determination, engagement and spontaneity.

When we talk about the spiritual life in the work place, we are talking about developing and maintaining these qualities. When we talk about work as a spiritual practice we are talking about using work and the work situation to develop these qualities.

The next question that arises is - how do we use work and the work situation to develop all these qualities?

As part of the answer to that question I would like to go into what we mean by efficiency and productivity.

Efficiency: two kinds and three levels
I would like to break down efficiency into two kinds and three levels. The two kinds of efficiency are team efficiency and task efficiency. The three levels are effectiveness, efficiency and elegance (see inside back cover of the Windhorse magazine for diagram). These categories are taken from the work of John McWhirter.

To be effective means to produce a result. To be efficient is to produce a result with the least amount of wasted effort. To be elegant is to produce a result with the least amount of wasted effort and the maximum creativity and an aesthetic dimension.

The example usually given to illustrate this is cracking the shell of a nut. You can take a large hammer or a rock and hit the nut. This will break the shell. It is effective. It produces the result you want. A more efficient way to crack the shell would be to use a nutcracker. This produces the result with the least amount of wasted energy. An elegant solution to the problem of the nut and shell is to have a nutcracker that also has a receptacle for the broken shell so that no more energy is required for cleaning up. Elegance would also include the idea of a solution to a problem being beautiful, aesthetically pleasing. For instance the way the quantities in boxes are indicated by a square, circle and triangle – arranged to look like a stupa – is aesthetic as well as efficient. Perhaps all of the shelf labelling in the warehouse could be neater, and therefore more effective and more beautiful.

So it is easy to see what is meant by task efficiency. It is getting the task done with the least amount of wasted effort. Let's say the task of the ADK team is to get the goods off the container and into back-up and pick locations in the quickest possible time. So if you wanted to improve efficiency you would ask yourself are we wasting effort or energy at any point in this process. A wasted effort might be simply someone walking ten paces with a box when they could achieve the same result in five paces, or a wasted effort might be people needing to have several conversations to arrange something that could just as easily be done by one person without the need for any conversation. And of course the overall task can be broken down into several smaller tasks and each one of these can be looked at in the same way. When efficiency is achieved, then you can ask yourself can this be improved on, is there an even more creative solution to the task. If you find even better ways to do things you are moving into elegance. This can be applied to all the areas of the warehouse. Do the pickers waste energy? Do they spend more time walking than picking? If so how could that be remedied? Do the packers waste effort? Could things be done better in the Evolution Supply Team (EST)?

This is all about what we call systems – ways of doing a task that maximise the result for the minimum of effort.

If you have inefficiency in your systems, in how you do a job, you will create frustration, because people are not seeing enough results for their efforts. Also if the system is inefficient people can become irritated with each other because they may think the problems are because of the other people. So the point I am making here is that inefficiency is not really conducive to positive mental states and positive mental states are the basis for even higher states of consciousness.

On the other hand, if there is efficiency in how you do the task, then there is less wasted effort, more gets done, there is greater satisfaction and people are happier. This leads to better teamwork too.

Team efficiency is about the team achieving a result without wasting effort. How do teams waste energy? Well there could be duplication of work – two or more people doing the same thing without realising it. If I sweep the floor and then someone else comes along an hour later and sweeps the floor and a third person comes along two hours later and does the same thing, you will not only have a very clean floor but also a lot of wasted effort and wasted effort means wasted money too. Or if people insist on doing things in their own special way and ignore whatever system has been established, that wastes effort, or if there is no clear idea of who is in charge of what, that wastes effort, or if a lot of people have to be involved in relatively small decisions that wastes energy, or if people are not competent to do the task, that wastes effort.

Group Flow
So team efficiency is about co-operation, effective communication, clear lines of decision making and training. If a team is not efficient in the sense of having a good level of co-operation and communication and clarity of decision making then there will be conflict and unhappiness in the team. Shakyakumara has been studying something called Group Flow recently. It is all about how a group of people, a team, can achieve a high level of co-operation and creativity. The idea is that when things are flowing well then everybody is having a more enjoyable experience and is happier. I think Shakyakumara will be going into this more in some of his training workshops.

This Group Flow is similar to what is described in the story of the Anniruddha's from the Buddhist scriptures. In the Culagosingha Sutta (MN no. 31) there is the story of three men, monks, who live together in a forest – they meditate and eat together and occasionally have discussions and they describe themselves as living together in great harmony. They are monks but they have some tasks to do and this is how one of them describes how they work together: *"whichever of us returns first from the village with almsfood prepares the seats, sets out water for drinking and for washing, and puts the refuse bucket in its place. Whichever of us returns last eats any food left over, if he wishes, otherwise he throws it away where there is no greenery or drops it into water where there is no life. He puts away the seats and the water for drinking and for washing. He puts away the refuse bucket after washing it and he sweeps out the refectory. Whoever notices that the pots of water for drinking, washing or the latrine are low or empty takes care of them. If they are too heavy for him, he calls someone else by a signal of the hand and they move it by joining hands, but because of this we do not break out into speech."*
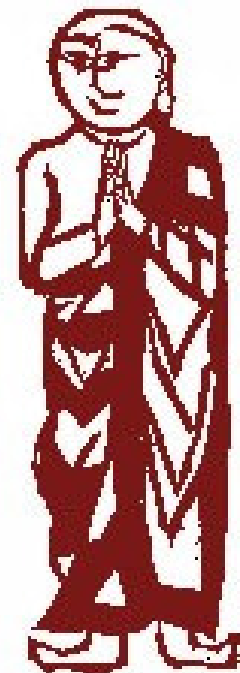
This is a description of an ideal team, just working together in harmony and without the need for a lot of discussion. Just happily getting on with what needs to be done. It turns out later in the Sutta that they have all attained to very high states of consciousness. So this is something to aim for.

It is probably fairly obvious that if you have efficiency in the task and efficiency in how the team functions then that will be conducive to better mental states than if you have inefficiency and a lot of wasted effort.

A lack of efficiency whether it is due to bad systems or a team not working as a team, can cause stress and frustration, because everybody is expending a lot of energy, making an effort and the results are not satisfactory. Inefficiency means that people have to do more work than necessary and that leads to stress, which leads to illness, which leads to absence, which leads to fewer people having to do more than necessary which leads to more stress and so on in a vicious circle.

 Efficiency, on the other hand, is conducive to good mental states and positive mental states are conducive to efficiency. This is a virtuous circle. Higher mental states are more creative and are likely to lead to elegant solutions and this is what we really want to achieve at Windhorse. We want to encourage the development of higher states of consciousness and see those higher states of consciousness manifesting in creativity, co-operation and satisfying relationships and results. And if we can achieve elegant creativity in our systems and teams that will encourage higher states of consciousness.

It is like a Zen garden. The garden is created out of a tranquil state of consciousness and the garden in turn produces tranquillity in those who use it. It is the idea behind having a shrine. The shrine should be created out of a state of devotion to the Buddha, out of shraddha, and then that in turn has the effect of encouraging a mental state of devotion and faith in those who contemplate it.

When we are exploring how our work can be a spiritual practice we can at the same time be exploring how we can improve our efficiency, because efficiency leads to positive mental states and positive mental states are the basis for even higher states of consciousness. We are exploring how we can use the work task and the work team to encourage us to develop the qualities which are part of the positive and higher states of consciousness

that spiritual practice is about, and in doing that that we inevitably have to look carefully are what we are doing and how we work together, which should produce efficient and even creative solutions to the issues that are always arising in a work environment. In the work on Group Flow which Shakyakumara is looking into, there are a number of things mentioned which help to bring about cooperativeness and creativity in a team – what they call 'flow'.

- A team needs to have a clear goal, which is well understood by everyone in the team.
- The team needs to be fully engaged with the activity, what they refer to as concentration or the merging of action and awareness.
- Team members feel part of something bigger and don't feel the need to assert themselves at the expense of the team.
- There is a lot of close listening and good communication, especially communication that moves things forward. Close listening and good communication means keeping the discussion moving forward towards better solutions. It means, rather than saying things like, 'that will never work' or 'we can't do that' or 'that was tried before', we say things like ' and also we need x y or z to make it work better' or 'let's try it for a while' or 'It's worth giving it a go' – something more positive and open to new directions. It is not that every new idea is good or should be tried but that we should be open to new ideas and willing to look into them, rather than always saying no, and pulling the plug on ideas before we have really considered them.

These are just some of the points. But the outcome is that everyone is happier and more satisfied, because individual efforts are bearing fruit and the working environment is both pleasant and creative. I remember when I was in London the Evolution team at one time was particularly good. They had really mastered this Group Flow and seemed to be so well tuned in to each other and engaged with the work that every task went very smoothly and they were all happy to be there and felt fulfilled. They could all engage with any task whether stocking shelves or unloading or serving and were quick to help each other, without even the need to be asked. They were asking me what they could do now. It was almost as if they had achieved such a level of co-operation and harmony that they couldn't think how anything could be better. My answer was that now they needed to individually rise to a higher level of awareness, a higher state of consciousness and then the harmony and flow between them would also be raised to a new level.

Productivity
This brings me to the last term I want to define, which is 'productivity'. I will call it individual productivity to be clearer.

This is about how much of the task each individual achieves. The reasons why this is important are to do with personal development and integrity, team morale and costs.

It is useful to have some objective measurement of how each person is contributing to the team effort, so that there is no need to rely on how people feel they are doing or worse still how people feel others are doing.

An objective measurement of what each person is contributing will give the manager an idea of what is a reasonable expectation. It could be that some people do too much because they have not learned to pace themselves and that leads them to feel resentful. Or it could be that some people in a team do very little either because of lack of engagement, ability or aptitude. Either way it is useful to have an objective measurement, where possible.

Team morale and harmony is obviously affected by individual productivity. If everybody in a team is pulling their weight then the team is likely to be a happy team. If some people are not pulling their weight then there is likely to be dissatisfaction and frustration. It also affects the level of trust between people in a team, because if someone is not pulling their weight then others can experience that as someone being dishonest and ungenerous. A team is trying to achieve a high level of co-operation, friendliness and good communication. All of that is undermined by poor individual productivity.

Individual productivity is also related to spiritual practice. If the reason for a poor level of productivity is because someone is not engaged with the task or with the purpose of being here then that person needs to think about why they are not engaged with the task and work at becoming more engaged. It may be that someone just cannot become more engaged because they don't really want to be here. Then they have to think even harder. It is not good for anyone to spend so much of their time doing something that they don't want to do. It is a way of treating yourself badly, and someone who treats himself badly is likely to treat others badly. It is also a matter of spiritual practice in that the effect on others is unkind. It is forcing others to do more than they should need to do. When there is harmony and flow and co-operation everybody does their fair share of the work and nobody is allowed to take on more than is reasonable. In the ideal situation people care enough about each other not to want others to get stressed. The best way to make sure others don't have to do more than is fair is for each of us to do our own fair share of the work.

It could be that the reason that someone is not pulling their weight is because they are not capable for physical or psychological reasons of effectively doing the task that they are supposed to do. In that case their personal integrity will lead them to acknowledge that and find something else to do.

Five principles of windhorse
In a talk I gave a couple of years ago I outlined five principles of windhorse. These were generosity, ethics, personal development, collectivity and making money. All of these principles can be worked out by focussing on the three essentials of developing

higher states of consciousness, being creatively efficient and paying attention to individual productivity.

Generosity

Generosity is a key practice in developing both compassion and energy, and generosity should be a characteristic of an efficient team and making an effort to pull your weight by being personally productive is a way of being generous to your colleagues.

Ethics

Ethics is all about how we relate to others and is essentially a matter of metta and awareness, so it is a key practice in developing both wisdom and compassion. A team will be more efficient if its members are trying to be ethical in relating to each other. To be ethical in relation to others means to be aware of them, and to treat them well. In the workplace, one way of treating others well is to conscientiously and honestly do our own work well and look out for how we can help others when we have the time and energy. In the work environment we can develop a shoulder-to-shoulder kind of friendship. We can develop a friendship and camaraderie that is not dependent on lots of conversation but is based on our actions. When I worked in Friends Foods in London some years ago I had this kind of connection with one of my work-mates in particular. Khemananda just got on with whatever needed to be done and I knew I could rely on him completely. We didn't need to discuss it or talk anything through. It was just obvious by our actions that we were aware of each other and willing to do what was needed to help each other and therefore that the work would flow. Each individual can see the issues of engagement and effort in ethical terms, because they have a direct effect on other people.

Personal development

Personal development is about both ordinary development in terms of training and improving our ability to do things and it is also about developing spiritually, about developing all the qualities that are characteristic of higher states of consciousness. I have already said something about how this relates to efficiency and individual effort. I would just add that in terms of spiritual development what we are really trying to do is transcend or go beyond the narrow confines of ego consciousness and realise more and more our connectedness with others, our interconnectedness. So this can sometimes seem like a paradox, personal development is in the end not especially personal; it is as much about others as it is about us. If we are developing ourselves then we are becoming more aware of others and of their development.

Collectivity

The principle of collectivity follows on from this quite easily. Sometimes people think of collectivity in terms of doing things together, e.g. doing a puja together. And this kind of communal practice is related to collectivity. Working together is another communal activity that is related to collectivity. But more deeply and profoundly collectivity is related to the union of wisdom and compassion, because that union is a profound realisation that all beings are interconnected. This is what is seen when the

Buddha's teaching of Pratitya Samutpada is penetrated. The law of dependant arising or conditionality is all about how all conditions are always interrelated and therefore how compassion is a natural outcome of the wisdom that sees conditionality. It is clear that when we talk about efficiency or individual productivity, we are talking about conditions that are part of a matrix of conditions that all act on each other all the time. So our reality is constantly being created by what we do and how we do it. That is why it is important for us to pay detailed attention to what we do individually and collectively. We are creating a world or realm and it is the only realm we can live in. If we are creative enough our realm becomes a Buddhaland. If we are not engaged it degenerates into something else. Here at windhorse we want at least to achieve a truly human realm!

Making money

Making money is stated as a principle of windhorse because it is the condition that allows us to exist and also because the business exists to give away money for good causes and in particular to give away money in ways that will help other people to set up conditions that are conducive to spiritual endeavour. Making money to give away encourages the spiritual quality of generosity. The more generous we are individually the more the business has to give away. Our individual generosity manifests in the effort we make, in our contribution to the team and the task and in our willingness to live a simple life, to some extent. And if we can be efficient and therefore not waste energy, we will also not be wasting money, which can then be given to others.

The spiritual dimension of work is all about engaging as much as we can with the overall project, the team task and finally our own job. This engagement leads to a certain intensity of effort and relationship and spiritual progress is really made when we reflect on the issues that arise out of that intensity. By reflecting deeply on our daily life and activities, within the context of the Buddha's teaching, we will gradually gain deeper insights into conditionality and interconnectedness and those insights inevitably give rise to a compassionate heart and compassionate activity.

I set out with this talk to try to describe how efficiency and individual productivity are related to spiritual development in the work place. I don't know whether I have succeeded, but perhaps I have at least given you something to think about and discuss in your teams. My wish is to see teams that are working in harmony and working efficiently and to see individuals who are engaged and happy in their work. This is the basis for any further spiritual evolution in the work place. This is the heart of work as a spiritual practice.

Ratnaghosa
July 2008