

I Am How I Work

by Lisa Hoffman

As I sat down to lunch with one of my favorite colleagues, I also braced myself. I knew an onslaught of gossip was coming. How could I maintain this important professional relationship without engaging in the dish that was how he connected?

The Buddha didn't exactly offer a discourse on dishing dirt at work when he taught Right Livelihood. He did talk about Right Livelihood as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha's first teaching after his enlightenment. Committing to this path means committing to a way of living that cultivates compassion and wisdom.

Right Livelihood is classically described as earning a living without causing harm to others, animals, the environment or yourself. Several specific professions are listed as examples of wrong livelihood: dealing in arms, the slave trade, the meat trade, the sale of alcohol, drugs, or poisons; making prophecies or telling fortunes.

Wrong livelihoods are pretty obvious. But how does Right Livelihood apply to those of us in nonprofits, helping professions, or private sector jobs that are important to our every day lives?

I think it has to do with day-to-day behavior. I've always felt that I really get to know someone I work with by seeing how that person treats the UPS delivery person and the secretaries. How do I express anger and impatience? How do I handle the clients I find frustrating than the vendors who screw up?

Lunch with my gossipy colleague provided the perfect opportunity to look at Right Livelihood. I knew that simply cutting off the conversation by stating that I do not engage in gossip would affect our professional closeness. Plus, such a statement seemed a bit too holier than thou.

I also had to admit that jumping into the dish was really tempting. The embarrassing truth is that gossip is fun! It seems like intimacy because I feel on the same side as my conversational partner. But that alignment comes at the expense of others. How could I honor my non-harming vow and maintain my professional relationship?

As I listened to my colleague, I found ways to respond that moved the discussion on to other topics. When he commented about how a mutual acquaintance was developing saddlebags instead of hips, I said I liked a woman with a little meat on her bones. He laughed and asked, "So, who *are* you dating these days?"

Later that week I met with a client I found incredibly frustrating. He had signed on to a plan with a variety of fundraising tactics for his nonprofit, but as we moved forward I realized he was focused on sending out letters. I left the meeting ready to pound my head against the next

available brick wall. I felt like marching back to his office and telling him all the ways in which he was completely wrong.

Fortunately, I went to the gym. As I swam laps, I thought about the fact that I was dealing with an introvert who was passionate about the group he had founded and operated himself, with the help of many volunteers. He seemed to conceptually understand the approach I was suggesting, but change was not going to happen quickly. I knew I could only push him so far. What did Right Livelihood mean in this situation? We had goals to meet!

Much as I yearned to move broadly forward on our lovely fundraising plan, I realized that I needed to start where he was comfortable and build from there. We needed to be allies, and my strong-arming him would not fulfill this purpose.

Mindfulness is central to Right Livelihood, and the heart of finding an approach that would serve this client. I had to notice, understand and accept his limitations, as well as my frustration and impatience. It's all too easy to get caught in reaction or wanting someone to be different than they are. Mindfulness is a gateway to understanding because it cultivates awareness. As my frustration eased, I began to feel compassion for my client, how hard he always worked, and how he was trying to do his best for his organization.

When I approached him in this spirit, I realized that he was committed to most of our plan. There were aspects of the plan that simply would simply not work. The rest would happen over the next few years, gradually and as his comfort level increased.

I reflected on wisdom from Thich Nhat Hanh in [The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching](#): "To work in a way... that encourages our ideal of compassion, is to practice Right Livelihood."

And sometimes compassion simply means slowing down to really understand the person before me.

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