



# DHARMA IN THE WORKPLACE

*Buddhists are transforming the workplace, using honesty, compassion and non-attachment.* HELEN CHANG reports

Is it possible to be a Buddhist and compete in your job? Or spread the Dharma in the workplace? Depending on your field, your motivation and your karma, it may not be easy. Or it may.

**Ian Green** once lost a campaign from his largest advertising client, due to his Buddhist beliefs. The client was a soymilk manufacturer, and the marketing manager wanted Ian to create an ad campaign that gave the impression that its soymilk was made from non-genetically modified beans, when in fact its beans were genetically altered. Ian, who took Buddhist vows not to lie, could not do it. He told the client that misleading consumers would in fact create a backlash, and sales would drop. Instead, he advised the client to reformulate the product, using non-genetically modified beans, and run an honest ad campaign.

The client refused and went its own way. But 18 months later, the client was back in Ian's office. Everything Ian predicted had happened; consumers suspected that they were being misled, and the company had lost significant market share. The company decided to reformulate its product, and briefed Ian's company to create a new ad campaign.

Ian is a partner in one of Australia's top 50 advertising agencies, Cook, Green & Moore Pty Ltd. And he credits the Dharma for much of his success. "Once I became a Buddhist, and took the five precepts, then things like [false advertising claims] really would bring it home to me. If you're going to engage in a right livelihood, then you have to incorporate those five precepts into what you do."

Buddhists like Ian are redefining life in the workplace. While many people believe that work is about competing in a "dog-eat-dog" world, based on competition, getting ahead and making as much as possible, Buddhists in the workplace are bringing new values, based on honesty, compassion, letting go of ego, giving up attachment, and benefiting others. They are applying these principles to all fields of work, in dealing with colleagues, clients and the community. The Dharma has also helped in a range of work situations, including job retrenchments, job searches and job satisfaction. While the choices practitioners must make are not always easy, many say they experience greater peace and satisfaction, by practicing Dharma at work. Ironically, they say, following this path has also led to more job security and financial benefit than before.

## LOVING KINDNESS AT WORK

Litigation lawyer **David Andrews** practices not just law, but also loving kindness. In the process, he has earned a reputation for honesty and integrity. As a partner with Holding Redlich Lawyers and Consultants, he works with large companies in the telecommunications, computer software and other industries, in Melbourne, Australia.

When confronting other lawyers in lawsuits, he recognizes that he is dealing with big egos and attachments. Yet, he is not daunted. "They are as empty as I am," he says.

David strives to resolve disputes amicably, going to court only as a last resort. He asks himself, "What is the real problem here?" Often, he is dealing with people's minds, he says, "People holding on to things they should have let go of, grasping and attachment." His work is about "reducing their suffering as much as possible."

**Linda Hoeber**, nurse and now clinical director for quality assurance at the Northern California Kaiser Permanent Medical Group, has also learned to practice loving kindness towards others. A highly ambitious nurse in her younger years, Linda sought to outperform her colleagues, even at their expense. She says: "My whole motivation before was to get ahead – ruthlessly, but in a nice way."

As a Filipino-American, who grew up in a mostly white neighborhood, she also had a racial motive. "It was definitely about my ego," she says. "Being seen as a smart, funky ethnic nurse. Being better than the white nurses."



Ian Green



That resulted in behavior that was less than ethical, Linda says. "I blew my own horn. I would take credit for other people's work." After becoming a Buddhist, she realized that taking credit for other people's work was in fact stealing. So she stopped. Now, she lets staff do their own presentations, and credits them when she can. "I uphold my bodhisattva vows," she says. "I don't take anything that's not mine, that I haven't earned, developed or created myself."



David Andrews

And she has stopped competing with white nurses, realizing they are just like her. "They are sentient beings, who only want to provide less suffering to other human beings," she says. "They become nurses because they want to serve. We're all here to serve."

At Ian's advertising agency, the employees whisper, whenever they are tempted to kill an insect, "Better be careful, or Ian might see you!" They use glass cups to take their ants outside the building, even if they are not Buddhist. Ian has found other ways to reduce suffering in his company. He introduced meditation sessions at work, and gives talks on stress management through meditation. The result, he says, has been more relaxed employees, greater staff loyalty, and a harmonious work environment.

## LETTING GO OF EGO

The Dharma also helped David, the lawyer, let go of his ego and reduce suffering for others. In his earlier years, he worked with a senior lawyer who was brilliant at law, but verbally abusive towards junior lawyers. At first, David would take things personally, feeling hurt and deflated. But he watched the play of his ego, transformed the suffering, and soon started learning a lot about law from this lawyer. "He became my law guru," David says.

Eventually, the firm asked the senior lawyer to leave. This was because staff turnover was so high among junior staff, who complained about his abusive behavior, that management decided it was not worth it to keep him. This dealt a huge blow to the senior lawyer. David was able to show compassion – towards a man he had once felt abused by – but unfortunately was unable to maintain their friendship.

## LETTING GO OF ATTACHMENT

Linda used to be constantly afraid of losing her job. "Before, I was looking over my shoulder," she says. "I thought, someone's gonna find out what a terrible person I am. I had fear that my boss would find out." This led to constant worry about keeping her job and getting promoted.

But after she met the Dharma, she let go. "Now, I hide nothing. I admit my mistakes. When you're honest and upfront, you have no fear." If she were fired tomorrow, Linda says, she knows something better would come along. Ironically, letting go of this attachment seems to have brought her more. She was appointed clinical director.

David had a similar experience. A few years ago, when his own practice was going through a lean period, he was asked to

take a 50% pay cut. He was devastated. But for the next year, he kept working at it, letting go of his ego, his attachment to the job, and focusing on compassion. He also strengthened his spiritual practices and performed more pujas. Gradually, he picked up more clients, bringing in so much work for the firm, that they hired two more staff to help with his casework. After 18 months of challenges, David's law practice is now flourishing more than ever.

Ian's non-attachment to advertising clients has also helped build his company's reputation for integrity. He has turned down clients whose products are not in alignment with his Buddhist beliefs, including an ultra-conservative Australian political party, which touts gun policies that go against his vows of non-killing. And he has personally declined doing ads for a beef producer, since it involves killing animals. (Ian's two business partners – a Catholic and a freethinker – respect his standards.)

In fact, the company's motto is based on telling the truth. It touts: "Great advertising without the bullshit." This policy has worked to the company's advantage, says Ian. "When you're honest with clients, people don't expect it from an advertising agency, and you develop a close bond.

It works positively. I'm sure it has been a big part of the reason for our success."

Ian sees no conflict between advertising – which increases desire – and Buddhism, which decreases desire. "Most people think advertising is deceitful and creates desire," he says. "But it can be done with honesty." His goal, he says, is to choose clients that make credible claims, and can be seen as good, honest citizens of the community.



Linda Hoeber

## SERVING OTHERS

For many Buddhists, the Dharma also inspires them to serve the larger community. Ian has done numerous *pro bono* advertising campaigns for charitable organizations, including Save the Children Fund Australia, Australian Volunteers Abroad Program, and the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. And David's firm has a large *pro bono* practice, which he even extended to convincing them to become a benefactor for charitable projects, such as a visit by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to the country a few years ago.

Linda says that her job has become her practice. "My practice is not always sitting on the mat. My practice is being really mindful, being aware of how [my behavior] affects the other person. The reaction I see in their eyes, or their body language. I'm mindful of the lack of compassion I give to people, that is my practice."

This has given Linda the freedom to serve others. "I really practice mindfulness all the time. I really look at my attachment and my ego, and I really come to my job to serve," she says. "My whole motivation is to serve." ❁

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