

A Framework to Guide Decision Making A Zen Buddhist Perspective – June 2014

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Introduction

I want to say at the outset that I fully support the work of the Blueprint and what it is trying to cause. My response to this paper is a mix of Zen perspectives (with references to other Buddhist teachings where appropriate) and an organisational lens informed by my role as a 'corporate contemplative' for the last thirty years.

The rapid and recent take up of mindfulness based practices in the west has according to Otto Scharmer (Davos 2014) reached a tipping point. Organisations are now comprehensively investigating the value of this practice to well being, stress reduction, leadership and customer service. From a Buddhist point of view all of this is welcome as we view the mind as the route to non violence, peace and collaboration. Zen master Thich Nhat Thanh says "peace in oneself, peace in the world". Or from the Dhammapada we find "all experience is preceded by mind and created by mind".

However mindfulness in itself is not the full story of the Buddhist relationship to organisations. In fact we are likely to see the Buddhist community becoming more vocal about this in the future as the practice of mindfulness on its own, is simply a part of a comprehensive practice of mind and compassion.

Historically Buddhists have kept themselves actively separate from western organisational life. The Western Buddhist Order set up a number of what it termed as "right livelihood " businesses with varying degrees of success. These were run as non profit making activities where the Buddhist Eight Fold Path was actively followed and only practicing Buddhists were employed. Essentially keeping Buddhists separate from commercial life.

In America the growth of western Zen teachers and those from other Buddhist traditions has produced an array of activities in commerce, prisons, charities, the army and social enterprises. Steve Jobs apparently had a Zen teacher. However in 2009 I was the first Zen Buddhist chaplain in the UK to undertake action research into the effect of mindfulness based practices on the leadership of 9 people in City institutions. Over a nine month period we witnessed reductions in stress, increases in conscious decision making and improvements in relationships. We characterised this as 'pro social' behaviour and as such it is a good companion to the BBB framework.

Buddhism and Systems Thinking

One of the strengths of the Blueprint Framework is its emphasis on business understanding that it is intimately connected to all life. The five principles of a purpose driven business, show that adopting this realisation fundamentally increases levels of accountability and responsibility in organisations and the people who work in them. In this respect I might add that if the Buddhist community had been thinking about this aspect of our own practice more deeply, we would not have separated ourselves for so long away from the system of western commercial organisations. In the east this separation has been easier to maintain as the religious structures have created a distinction between monastic activities and the lives of ordinary householders. In the west and in the 21st century we are faced with the challenges of integration not separation. Integration and connectivity are themes that contemporary Buddhism is actively engaged with. In the Zen tradition we say “before enlightenment fetching water, chopping wood; after enlightenment fetching water, chopping wood.” By this we mean there is no separation. Everything must be “rolled in” to our practice. In the west this must include business.

Buddhist environmental activists like Joanna Macy talk about this age as a ‘great turning’ where many people are actively engaged in three types of change across the whole system. Firstly actively campaigning to stop the worst excesses of harmful behaviour, secondly seeking new systems and processes to improve the actions and effects of institutions on the environment and those that dwell in it and thirdly from the inside the act of raising consciousness and speaking differently to change mindsets and therefore behaviour. Blueprint plays its part in this Great Turning.

Zen Buddhists following Thich Nhat Hanh take 14 precepts or what we might call vows. Three of these have relevance to the Blueprint framework:

1. Precept 5: do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time energy and material resources with those who are in need. (Taken literally on the face of it this would not appear to support the use of commerce as a good choice. However the important aspect here is the word ‘aim’. The Blueprint purpose offers a role for this precept to be brought to life in a number of compassionate and connected ways)
2. Precept 11: do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realise your ideal of compassion. (Thinking of business as a vocation may well shift the consciousness of those involved in it. taken with precept 5 business becomes a sustainable vehicle for the Blueprint purpose to be realised in the hearts of individuals working in business.)
3. Precept 13: possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the

suffering of other species on earth. (This calls upon those of us working in this field to make very certain that the activities of business are non grasping and that where we find this to be happening that we speak out against it.)

Penetrating Radical Awareness

In addition to the precepts there exist three fundamental tenets of Zen Buddhism.

1. The vow of not knowing
2. The vow of bearing witness
3. The vow of compassionate action

Not knowing may seem an uneasy bedfellow with organisational life but at its heart is the belief that a constant belief that we already 'know' simply limits our thinking and harden the boundaries to exclude information that may serve to change our minds. In practicing this vow Buddhists offer more curiosity and inquiry based practices into all discourse including round the board table. Once this practice takes hold it enable the second vow of adopting positions from all parts of the system to create wider and deeper perspectives on what is needed and what is happening. Using non preferential mind we can access communities, stakeholders and affected groups more compassionately. This in turn creates the conditions for compassionate actions in business to more naturally arise. This has direct links with the five behaviours outlined in the framework.

Changing the way we have habitual conversations in organisations has the power to change the culture. Solidarity, subsidiarity, reciprocity, plurality and sustainability arise naturally when human beings see themselves as part of a whole system, where the alleviation of suffering both mental and physical is the vocation of being human.

An uneasy ending

There is a concept in Buddhism we call the near enemy. By it we mean how we aspire to certain states or qualities and, in the effort to achieve them end up with something, though it appears similar, is in fact very far away from what we wanted. For example many Buddhists work to cultivate equanimity and end up with an internal state that is more akin to indifference. In other words we can easily delude ourselves.

The Framework requires high degrees of skill and inner consciousness to operate it within companies to a standard of authenticity, rather than achieving the 'near enemy' of box ticking and compliance. Blueprint have recognised this in positioning this framework as a journey rather than a destination.

In Buddhist practice we are deeply concerned with changing the conditions that exist that give rise to suffering. When we say this we really mean any mindset that is based on mistaken views. The ones that most dominate in our western organisations at the moment can be characterised as:

- Believing oneself to be separate from others
- Believing that the environment is a resource to be used in unlimited ways
- Believing that material wealth makes us happy
- Believing that the suffering of communities different from our own has nothing to do with us
- Believing that what we do makes no difference
- Believing that the systems and structures we have created are the only ones we can make work
- Not understanding that impermanence is built into everything