

Killing Me Softly with Dharma

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About ten years ago I gave up the notion of ever being a successful manager. I vowed to never again work in a place where my job was to guide and support others. The suffering experienced in that position was too much to bear, and I gave up trying to work out how to manage it. Last year I started work as the Center Manager at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Why did I change my mind? What happened? What part did my Buddhist practice play? Let's go back those ten years.

The corporate world

My job was to manage people in a public service environment. The government department I worked in was huge, and the opportunities for promotion spiraled up many rungs of a corporate ladder toward heaven. The mind was greedy for status and money; it wanted the world to perceive how successful this self was. Ego thought that success meant approval, that approval meant love, and that love meant I would never have to be lonely. I felt that loneliness was the penalty for not having status and money, and I did not want to be stuck with that.

In the competition, ego did not care how it got to the finish line. I did not often entertain mindfulness, but I did allow myself to be pulled around by all sorts of unskillful motivations that the deluded mind thought would guarantee its success. The defilements stacked up on top of one another, and what the outside world saw was the image of a corporate poster child. Ill will and clinging to preferences were constant threads in my work. I clutched a dark, tight, hot feeling of hatred for management techniques I despised, for bosses I disrespected, for procedures I longed to improve on, and for the imperfect system that allowed people to disregard the rules I clung to for security. Ill will turned some jobs into hell realms. Clinging to preferences created a whole package of suffering. The mind could not let go. It did not have the wisdom of water that moves gracefully around obstacles. I was like a blind drowning victim in a sea of defilements.

All the while, I was not connecting with anyone at work in a meaningful way. My resume looked good, but there was a deep hunger I did not know how to satiate. I was often motivated to help others deal with their suffering, but I had no idea where to start and I did not even know how to acknowledge and accept my own suffering. How could a drowning person help another drowning person? It was easier to focus on status and money than to look inward.

Idealism told me that people in positions of power should be motivated by altruism. Realizing they possess valuable skills, these Ghandiesque folk agree to work hard to serve others. I thought those who seek power were least suited to management positions, because their greed meant they could not be altruistic. I clung to this philosophy strongly, even though I could not meet my own standards. In some warped way, I thought I could be the manager I despised and pretend it was not happening. I could feed my greed and hold the belief in the altruistic manager at the same time, but not without feeling like some kind of Frankenstein character, where things do not quite work. I limped along, with one good eye, thinking I could hold it all together without dropping a limb along the way.

But it did not work. Status and money were not making me happy; ill will and clinging to preferences did not make the world better—they simply made me miserable; and the mismatch between reality and idealism was completely unsustainable. Something had to change. Since I was not living up to my image of an ideal manager, I decided it was better to not even try. I rejected the corporate ladder in disgust, while at the same time bemoaning the fact that I had been an unsuccessful part of it. I quit work and sat down to have a long, hard look at what I should do with my time on Earth.

While trying to figure out the sea I was drowning in, I dog-paddled through a number of different occupations. I deliberately took jobs that did not involve managing people, because I

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saw management as the conduit through which ego could make me miserable. It turned out, however, that other jobs could also make me miserable. Even without the uncomfortable juxtaposition of greed and idealism, I could not settle down. My bosses still did not meet my standards; I grasped at my paycheck because of worry over money, chastising myself for the greed; and I discovered that having less influence in a workplace did not mean my attempts at control ceased. I still seemed to be at odds with the workplace, because I wanted things to be perfect and they never were.

I bounced from one job to another, each time hoping the next one would be perfect. As I moved on toward that mythical place where I could be truly happy, I held to critical judgments of each workplace that fell by the wayside, and to equally critical judgments of my own failure as a useful member of the working class. That perfect place seemed to be nowhere but, in the depths of my intuition, I suspected it might be everywhere. I just could not work out how.

After a few years groping around, I started to spend more time on the cushion, and a tiny switch flicked over in the mind. It did not have a large impact on my way of being, but it was noticeable. The defilements were making me a little less miserable as my attachments loosened slightly. Years of conditioning were not changed overnight but something in this mind was beginning to get a glimpse of the dharma.

My life moved through some interesting phases, and I eventually decided living in a dharma center was a good step to take. I applied for any job a dharma center might accept me for, usually jobs where I could keep my head down and work with my hands, with no responsibility to burden me, no stage for my ego to perform on. I was starting to feel less like a drowning victim. Someone had thrown me a floatation device. As I job-hunted, I knew I still had an unresolved and unhealthy relationship with management and ego. Going through life refusing jobs that might give me a big head seemed silly, and was likely to make me bored and frustrated. Maybe I needed to actually face

this ego challenge. I found myself applying for management positions again.

Coming to Barre

In June of 2008 I arrived at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies for Round Two with ego. I may have come to BCBS an older, wiser, more spiritually practiced person than the one who vowed to never manage again, but I soon found that I had a whole lot to work with. While greed for money had subsided, ill will and clinging to preferences, along with a pile of other defilements, were simply seeds on the ground waiting to be watered. They sprouted once more. I did not see them take root and grow because I was too busy being swept away by ego.

I jumped in to work at BCBS with both feet, carving out a path that the ego could point to and say, "I did that!" I changed procedures, moved furniture, threw things away and pushed staff members to work hard to achieve my goals. Ego wanted to make its mark as the best Center Manager since the invention of the wheel. After an initial period of shock, the folks around me found a footing in the middle of the hurricane and started to revolt. I was changing too much too soon; I was pushing too hard; I was too focused on my own agenda. Staff members started to track into the office to give me a piece of their mind, started to push back.

Ego was confused. What was wrong? I was the boss—why would there be any complaints? After a number of painful encounters, it started to dawn on me: Maybe I could not inflict my preferences on others and change everything to satisfy ego. Being dragged around by this ego was not comfortable for the people I worked with, and, as it turned out, for me either. It all felt a bit too familiar as I began to have some flashbacks. The challenge had begun.

This was where I started to see how my suffering was connected to the suffering of those around me. This was when I started to notice the feral plant I was nurturing, and it was not a soothing observation. Something, again, had to change. I had to tame ego because it was, again, causing misery. How could I manage it more



skillfully this time? From what different vantage point could I view the processes unfolding before me?

I started to get some perspective on what was happening. Lacking mindfulness in the unfamiliar environment at Barre, ego had stepped in to give a sense of security to a self that had lost its identity. I had left a home, jobs, social circles, even my husband (for a short period) to take on the role at BCBS. With none of these identities available, ego stepped in to carve out new identities to grasp at, heedless of the fact that others might be affected.

This was simply a new twist to the old ego games. Greed, ill will, clinging to preferences and trying to reject dharma were all still there, but this time it was different. As they say, when the student is ready the teacher appears. It seems I was ready, this time, to learn a new way of relating to what ego was doing. With a loosened grip on defilements, the ego started to crumble, to let in the imperfection around me, and to shine light on the imperfection within me. It was horrible. The wounding of the ego was demoralizing, painful and death-like. The forced humility was stabbing and exhausting. Every day there was more death, more pain, as the ego lost some more and gave way to a chasm of spaciousness that felt like a gaping hole in my chest where the wind whipped through.

As I let down my guard and the mind fessed up to its tricks, the realization of the ignoble motives of the ego made me cringe. I saw with the dharma all its ugliness—the mind reacting from old patterns of fear; the way this ego collided with other egos to escalate a situation; how in certain situations I simply had no footing, no means of security; and the mind's reaction to this was often a confused state of not knowing that was very uncomfortable. All this seemed to be laid out before me, and also, I felt, to the people around me. I dreaded interactions with people, where my chest might be torn apart for everyone to peer inside, where ego might muscle in only to end up running away with its tail between its legs, yapping like a spanked puppy. I felt I was being broken by a dharma center.

Learning to let go

As I was being broken, I was also being held together. Working in a dharma center allowed me the space to take some steps I had not been able to take before, and this is where some real growth could take shape. My peers spent a lot of time helping me to work through issues. Other staff members called meetings to air concerns, sometimes in inspiringly skillful ways. Folks were occasionally very blunt with me, aiming straight at the core of my attachments, but when framed in the common language of the dharma these challenges meant more than just painful criticism—they became signposts along a path that could be used for guidance. The people around me held the storm, the whole time looking on, as if benevolently watching a two-year-old burn out a temper tantrum, to see what would happen.

I have not experienced a conventional workplace with that capacity, nor have I been in a work environment with such unique opportunities for spiritual growth. Learning about management from a Pali scholar, an ex-monk, and a mentor working his way through the *Majjhima Nikāya* is, by anybody's terms, an unusual experience. Walking down a country lane—part of business as usual—in intimate conversation with a staff member; drawing on the wisdom of some of the most prominent dharma teachers in the country; and being given all the space in the world to explore the dharma, are not things a conventional workplace could allow. And no conventional workplace had forced me so far into the quagmire of ego, then through a process of dying, and finally toward something else.



Gradually some understanding shone through the chinks. Part of what became apparent is that I am not the manager of my ideals. I am the result of cause and effect, circumstances that have been enough to get me to this point, but that is all. I am not the gracious, wise, tolerant, flexible master of all management skills. Instead I am “this,” and “this” is what there is to work with.

In a moment of clarity I saw that while I am not all that ego thinks I am cracked up to be, I also am

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not the clumsiness of the past. The bits that made up the person that “was” came together in a moment, but that was the only time they ever did. They never did before and they never will again. I am not encumbered by my past actions—my failures, my self-criticism, my unskillful actions, the opinions of others—none of these are me and I do not have to carry any of them with me. I can decide to be a new person every day, and I am in an environment where people are open enough to see me in each day, rather than relegate me to the realms of the unteachable. Coming to some understanding that I am teachable, changeable, and acceptable are some of the most liberating realizations in my experience so far.

I had enough skill and experience to get me to BCBS, where the education I intuitively knew I needed could begin. The piece that came next was learning to be mindful, to cease creating difficult karma in each moment, and to seek right thought, word and action as often as I could. The mind that had previously used every clumsy action from the past to hit myself over the head, and that cringed when it thought someone else might judge it negatively, started to back away from this old way of being. While I clung less to being perfect, I provided less to chastise myself for.

I realize now that management does not take place because I am able to live up to some unrealistic view of what a manager should be. Management takes place in each and every moment, during which each little decision is a choice between skillful and less skillful. This is a new version of management because it is no version of management at all. It is simply a version of being.

Not self

Events at BCBS propelled me rapidly along the path. During a discussion group in the Integrated Study and Practice Program, a practitioner said that she suffered from ill will. I did a double take. How could a person suffer

from their own ill will? Ill will is a bad thing that you spray out onto the people around you—they are the ones who are suffering, aren't they?

You are a bad person for having ill will in your soul, but that is all your fault, isn't it? Nothing to feel compassion over. I had always considered my own ill will as some kind of bad decision I made that I should be punished for, even though I do not remember actually making the decision in the first place.

Here was a student who put ill will “out there” as something separate from self, as something that visits her, but is not part of her. And what is more, she could pull it out of the closet and talk about it. Shame had prevented me from ever talking about the ill will I clung to. When referred to as a piece of clothing that is put on then taken off, I felt a great burden lift from my being. Ill will is not me; I am not ill will—working with ill will seems like a manageable task when I can hold it in this kind of distanced relationship.

Turning around my relationship with ill will was like learning a new word—I could use it when a suitable situation arose. I was delighted. I created little games with the mind—when I found myself mired in some complex thought around ill will, I could catch myself and, while generating a sense of distance, tell myself, “I used to suffer from ill will.” This had the effect of creating space from the defilement that previously seemed permanently attached. And when I told myself that ill will was in the past, it was—thoughts created the reality. They might have created the reality in only that moment, but it was a promising start.

In the same way, I started to say to myself, “I used to suffer from greed,” and, “I used to suffer from clinging to preferences.” A whole new way of being with these defilements blossomed; the disassociation I felt from these mind states freed me up to enjoy moments fully. Ill will, greed and clinging to preferences could be relegated to the



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past. There has been no permanent freeing from these defilements, but that does not concern me greatly. I have been able to create freedom in a moment, and that is okay for now.

After the group discussion I reflected on the wonder of sangha, especially the sangha at BCBS where the wisdom of hundreds of years of collective practice seeps into every nook and cranny of the space. I had come to the right place to work. As events unfolded, a tiny fire of compassion started to burn in my chest. The chasm started to be felt as the spaciousness around things rather than something to be feared. A pause started to remember how love and patience and tolerance felt much more authentic than pushing and judging. Where the fullness of ego-preferences once existed, there is a growing space of consideration and moderation, where preferences are faded, given no fuel.

Death and rebirth

Out of a dying ego sprang new modes of practice. A diligent enterprise in Right Speech has unfolded in a way not experienced before. Where complaining, gossip and idle speech used to drag me along by the nose, I have a new-found strength to often resist fueling these harmful ways of being. A new relationship with preference is also dawning, and each time an experience of liberation is to be found by not clinging to preferences, my practice is bolstered again. Seeing how clinging to preferences contributes to my suffering, and how it contributes to the suffering of others, shows me again and again the only sensible path to follow—the Great Way.

Where greed once held me in its grip, generosity is now often exercised. Like a child learning to walk, generosity has stumbled along clumsily, sometimes causing confusion in the minds of others. Once again, being in an environment where wise practitioners abound, I have been lead through an understanding of how, when ego is tied to generosity, the results can be confusing. There is a growing sense of balance and maturity around the use of this new tool, and delight over the benefits of its discovery. The space left where ego had once been squashed in

seems to have opened my practice up to more and more growth and depth. I can see how this process might have unfolded in any endeavor in my life, but the crucible of the dharma center fueled this process like a dry grass fire.

I still struggle with the notion that I cannot single-handedly defeat the First Noble Truth, but I am starting to get a more balanced perspective on this. When I refuse to accept suffering, I take on the responsibility for shielding everyone else from suffering, setting up many ways for ego to fail. When ego fails, it looks for someone to blame. That someone has been everyone, including me. By accepting suffering, I am more open to the truth of things. When I can look someone in the eye and simply accept their suffering, rather than mentally running through ways to fix things or ways that I have been negligent, compassion flows like a river.

Ego has not died overnight, but it is given less say in decisions, and can sometimes be quietly picked up and placed in the corner to play harmlessly on its own. While I still feel its pull, it is no longer the twelve-foot toddler it has sometimes been. Balancing compassion and patience with what the ego still nags at me to do is a task requiring diligence. I cannot fall asleep at the post, or ego will see its opportunity and force its will again. It is a labor of necessity—it seems there simply is no other way things should be right now.

So I am dying here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, in a good way. Ego is being killed off and, as brutal as the experience is, I would not have missed it for the world. I could not have found it in most other places, because few are interested in holding that process with gentleness and patience. No other workplace would have invested such time in nurturing a death. Eight months ago I did not know my move to Barre would be so difficult and so rewarding. I could not have foreseen the richness of the practice opportunities available in the workplace of the dharma center. May I continue to live in interesting times—and places.

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