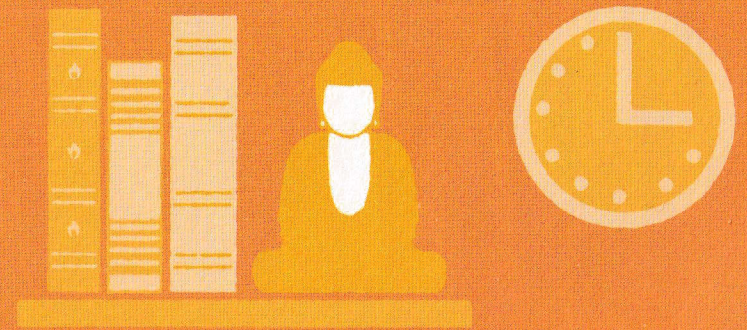


# THE BUDDHA WALKS INTO THE OFFICE

A GUIDE TO LIVELIHOOD | LODRO  
FOR A NEW GENERATION | RINZLER



**"This is a magnificent book that just happens to be truly fun to read.  
Accessible, urgent, and life-changing."**

—SETH GODIN, author of *Linchpin*

## 1 / SETTING AN INTENTION

Most of us spend a sizable chunk of our waking hours at work. Many of us don't even enjoy the work we are engaged in day after day, or see it as a means to bankroll our free time. I'm a firm believer that with the right view—one based in becoming more awake to your everyday life, one that is grounded in knowing why you do what you do—you can live a happier, fuller life in and out of the workplace. You can live a life based around qualities you want to cultivate in yourself and qualities you want to see flourish in the world.

After my first book came out, I traveled quite a bit for it. I would do events at meditation centers, bookstores, and universities. Early on in the book tour, I gave a talk at Yale. I met two young women there, both on the verge of graduating. The first woman (I'll call her Jess) took me on a campus tour and led me to a Starbucks for coffee. Making conversation, I casually asked her, "What do you think you want to do after graduation?" I'm always careful to ask what people want to do, or where they might want to live, as opposed to that nerve-racking "What are you going to be when you grow up?" question.

"It's funny you ask that here," Jess said, "because I want to become the chief marketing officer for Starbucks." She went on to describe how much her happiness related to attaining that goal. I thought this was an interesting choice. Out of all the industries in the world, she had picked one already. Not only

that, but she had picked one specific company in that industry, and she aspired to one specific role within that company. I don't remember being that sure of my career path when I was in my early twenties—or of anything else, for that matter. Furthermore, I know several people who would never consider such a lofty ambition possible, based on how they were raised. Still, I wished Jess luck and chatted a bit with her to see why she was interested in that path.

Later that evening, I met another young woman and asked her the same question. I'll call her Christine. "Me?" she asked. "I have no idea what I want to do. And it terrifies me." This struck me as a genuine answer, one that felt closer to my own experience ten years prior: I had no idea what I wanted to do but was open to exploring my options, as groundless as that experience may be. As I continued to travel on the book tour, I began to see this was a common sentiment among young people on the verge of entering the "real world." Very few of them had it all figured out, which is a scary state, yet full of possibility.

I don't think Christine is in a better or worse position than Jess. In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with wanting to succeed in life. If you aspire to make a positive impact in the world, that is lovely. Also, you can aspire to have material comforts, like a home and clothes; there's nothing in the Buddhist canon that says you shouldn't have them, just that you should not be attached to them.

However, if we base all our happiness on attaining something as specific as one position in one company, we may end up disappointed. Jess, who wants to be the CMO of Starbucks, could find herself spending decades on that goal and miss out on other aspects of her life in pursuit of it. She could end up turning a blind eye to other interesting career choices, or turning down romantic pursuits to focus on her CMO goal, or missing opportunities for fun and connection with others. And, at the end of the day, if she does not attain that position as the CMO of Starbucks, then she will be unhappy.

Here's the funny thing: If Jess does attain her goal, she could still be unhappy! She could end up disliking aspects of it, such as working long hours, or feeling she is underpaid or underappreciated. Alternatively, she might just find that position isn't what she thought it was and hatch a plan to move to a new position or company. With such a fixed idea of what she wants to be when she grows up, she could, I feared, be in for a lifetime of dissatisfaction.

Christine, in contrast, was terrified about what she was going to do for a career, but she said she is trying to remain open to whatever might enter her life. Without the same sense of direction as our future CMO, she seemed more likely to explore her world without buying into the belief that she has to have it all figured out.

As I continued to travel and talk with different people, this theme of livelihood came up over and over. I am (perhaps) annoyingly curious, so I found myself talking with people from all different walks of life, whether they were travel companions, attending a book event, or just sitting next to me at a bar. I spoke with doctors, tattoo artists, grad students, waiters, entrepreneurs, and exotic dancers. The interesting thing all of these people had in common is that they didn't let their job define who they are. The idea they had stumbled onto is that in searching for happiness, it was not so much a question of what they did as why they did it.

Knowing your intention is key in all things. If you want to meditate, it's important to know why you want to meditate. It is a difficult and gradual path, and as such it can be disheartening at times, so when you find yourself shying away from your meditation cushion, it's helpful to have a strong reason you chose to pursue such a practice.

Similarly, it is important to know why we do what we do in other aspects of our life. Why are you going out to drink with friends? Is it because you haven't seen them in a long time and want to connect over a glass of wine? Or is it because you can't deal with the frustrations of your job at the restaurant and need

to blow off steam? When it comes to figuring out a career path, knowing your intention may be the most basic and most helpful step on the journey that links your work with your spiritual path.

### THE THREE YANAS

This book is organized around the three *yanas*, a Sanskrit word that can be translated as “vehicle.” From a Tibetan Buddhist point of view, there are three *yanas* that we can apply to our life in order to truly explore the paths of mindfulness and compassion. These three vehicles are the means to transport us from our confusion to awakening. They each serve specific purposes and emphasize different aspects of the Buddhist canon. At the same time, all are important, interpenetrate, and once learned can and should be practiced at once.

In the first section, we explore the *Hinayana* path, which allows us to dive into the work of discovering what right livelihood means in today’s world and, more important, to each of us individually. Right livelihood is one of the eight aspects of living a good and thoughtful life that the Buddha articulated more than 2,500 years ago. It is the idea that we have to include certain activities in how we work so that we are being of benefit to ourselves and others. Even centuries after the Buddha, the notion of doing a job that is “right” because we are being thoughtful about our work is still incredibly relevant today.

While I represent a lineage that uses the term *Hinayana*, I am not fond of it, as it has been used as a derogatory term in some texts; it is often translated as “narrow vehicle.” It is the path of learning to be authentic to yourself, through developing an in-depth understanding of who you truly are. This is a process of self-discovery, where you are keeping a narrow focus on learning about both your neurosis and your wisdom. As I come from a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, I acknowledge that

*Hinayana* is something of a loaded term; I don’t mean any offense. In fact, the *Hinayana* path is based in working with your own mind and heart in order to build a foundation to apply mindfulness and compassion in every aspect of your life. In that sense, it’s not narrow at all!

From there, in the next two sections we explore the second vehicle, the *Mahayana* path, and focus on offering our hearts in the area where we spend most of our waking hours: our job. The *Mahayana* journey is one of extending yourself well beyond your comfort zone and approaching your life and work from the perspective of what is good for everyone, not just yourself. It is opening your heart to the world and letting that open heart create true change in society. We will explore tools on compassion and leadership that we can all engage in to bring the Buddhist principles of being present and empathetic into every aspect of our work. Along with the aspiration to be of benefit to everyone we encounter, there are also specific skillful means offered, such as the six *paramitas* and Six Ways of Ruling.

When we are proficient at this, we are prepared for the third vehicle, the *Vajrayana*, which is based in the view that our work and our role in society are all part of our spiritual journey. On this path, we no longer view the world in terms of what is for us versus what is against us; every joy and disappointment in our work becomes fodder for our path of awakening. We treat our workplace as a sacred environment, in which whatever occurs is a lesson we can learn and a way to improve ourselves as genuine people.

The steady hand guiding us in these three vehicles is meditation. The Tibetan word for meditation is *gom*, which can be more literally translated as “become familiar with.” Through the practice of meditation, we are becoming familiar with ourselves, our aspirations, and our intentions. The more we are familiar with why we want to do any given thing, the more confidence and care we put into it.

## THE POWER OF LISTENING TO YOUR INTENTION

My first job out of college was to serve as the executive director of a meditation center in Boston, a thirty-five-year-old nonprofit with a lot of history, in both the positive and the negative sense. It was a pretty big deal that the board of directors had trusted me—a twenty-two-year-old with no business experience whatsoever and a complete unknown in that organization—with the keys to that particular castle. Even before moving to Boston, I heard rumors of people voicing their concern and asking the board to reconsider hiring someone so young.

The day I arrived, there was an annual celebration for that Buddhist community. I was introduced to the members of the center and was invited to say a few words after I officially took on my position. I had prepared a speech, but when I got up in front of the hundred-plus members that day, I could only speak from my heart. “My intention,” I said, “is to be genuine and fearless. I may run this place into the ground, but I will do so genuinely and fearlessly.”

With no business background, I held on to that intention for dear life. In the first year, I worked with the community to institute a new generosity policy for all of our classes; we were bursting at the seams with new members; and the organization, which had traditionally run at a deficit of \$10,000 to \$20,000, was in the black for the first time in years. I had taken some big risks, but I did so in line with my initial intention, and as a result things seemed to have worked out.

In contrast to that, I remember a time when I had a clear intention but didn't stick to it. Several years ago, I decided that I wanted to move away from nonprofit work and try my hand at something more lucrative. I longed to be of benefit to society but wanted simultaneously to try to achieve more worldly success. I found a position as the head of operations for a consulting company, and initially I thought it would be a good fit. It was a business devoted to nurturing other small businesses,

trying to support the mom-and-pop organizations of the world. I thought working there would be in line with both my intention to make good money and my intention to help others—a win-win.

Over time, though, I stuck with the good-money intention and watched as the other one drifted off into the sunset. If I had paid more attention to my environment, then I probably wouldn't have ignored so many of the signs that this company was not the right one for me. But I had put my blinders on.

As I continued to learn more about the company, I found the signs harder to ignore. The CEO was constantly behind on payroll for her small but devoted staff, yet she lived in a giant apartment in the West Village of New York City (from which we had to work when she couldn't pay our office rent). The company couldn't hold on to an employee for more than a year because of the high expectations and mistreatment of the staff. The small businesses that we were supposed to be helping were few and far between, and the CEO spent all her time schmoozing investors.

Within a few months, I was the most senior employee, and despite the paycheck I could no longer convince myself that what I was doing was of benefit to anyone (including myself). I quit that job amicably and went back to doing work that felt like it was in line with my intention to help others.

These two experiences taught me a lot about what I need to be happy. The bottom line is that my intention, while constantly changing as I grow older, seems to be about trying to be of benefit to society. If I become familiar with that intention in its current manifestation, then I find myself successful and happy. If I stray from it in an attempt to base my happiness solely in material gain like money or special benefits, then I may find some temporary satisfaction but end up exhausted and discontent in the long term.

This idea of internal exploration is the beginning of the Buddhist path. Before we go into the office and work with others in a way that is of benefit, we first have to know ourselves well.

Once we know ourselves well, we can be true to who we are. The first step is to know our intention—both large intentions, like knowing why we are engaging in our line of work, and smaller ones, such as knowing what we want to accomplish on a given day. This is the foundation of our path. This is the heart of the journey. Knowing our own intention, the why behind the what, is an important first step.

#### CONTEMPLATION FOR SETTING YOUR INTENTION

When you first wake up in the morning, it might be helpful to reflect on your intention for that day. This is not the massive “What am I going to make of myself?” question. It can be much simpler. You could say, *I aspire to be a bit kinder than yesterday* or *My intention is to be a bit more patient when I get frustrated with my coworkers*. Take a moment to reflect on what it is you want to make of your day, even before you get out of bed.

Alternatively, you could sit down and meditate before engaging in this contemplation. In the next chapter, we will get into formal meditation instruction, which is the basis for this work of becoming familiar with ourselves. It is helpful to engage in this practice as a way to feel grounded. Your daily intention may come up at the end of your meditation session, or you might need a minute or two afterward to come up with it.

Then, enter your day. If it is helpful, you could even write down your intention someplace where you will see it. It could be a sticky note on your desk or a Word document on your laptop. This can help remind you to come back to your intention over and over again, just as you come back to the breath during formal meditation practice.

At the end of your day, sit down and reflect on how you did in manifesting your intention. This is not where you get judgmental and down on yourself; quite the oppo-

site. It is a great time to offer yourself gentleness and a sense of friendliness.

If you want to get to know someone, you don't begin by judging them on everything they do wrong. You start by approaching them with a sense of inquisitiveness and openness. You are gentle in the getting-to-know-you process. The same goes for becoming familiar with yourself. With that in mind, take a moment each night and gently ask yourself how you did in following through on your intention.

Were there a few times that day when you were kind to others? Did you keep your cool when your coworker would not shut up in that meeting? If so, you can rejoice in that. If not, then tomorrow is another day to practice this contemplation. If you completely forgot about your intention today, that's okay. If you remember your intention only twice the next day, that's a marked improvement! The more we are familiar with ourselves and our intention, the more we can find happiness in all aspects of our life, especially our work. From that point onward, you can, with all your heart, give yourself to it.