



# Business- sattva:

## The Business Bodhisattva

By Fred Kofman

*My daily affairs are quite ordinary  
But I'm in total harmony with them.  
I don't hold on to anything, don't reject anything;  
nowhere an obstacle or conflict.  
Who cares about wealth and honor?  
Even the poorest thing shines.  
My miraculous power and spiritual activity:  
Drawing water and carrying wood.*

Layman P'ang

*The market system brings prosperity to those  
who satisfy the desires of others  
in the best and least expensive way.  
Wealth can only be attained by serving the consumer.*

Ludwig Von Mises

*Work is love made visible.*

Khalil Gibran

After many years of prayer and meditation, an old monk felt sad and frustrated since he had not attained enlightenment. He then asked the abbot of the monastery: "Please let me go see the hermit who lives in the mountain and finish my process". The abbot, knowing that the monk was ready, granted his permission. As he was going to the hermit's abode, the monk crossed paths with an old man who was coming down the mountain with a heavy load of wood on his shoulders. The old man asked: "where are you going, monk?" The monk, not knowing that this was the very hermit he was seeking, answered: "I am going to the top of this mountain, to sit with the hermit until I attain enlightenment or I die trying". As the old man seemed very wise, the monk was moved to ask him: "Tell me, brother, do you know anything about enlightenment?" The hermit fixed his gaze on the monk and without saying a word, let go of his logs. At that

moment, something dislodged in the monk's mind and he attained enlightenment. "Is it that easy?! Just letting go?" After an ecstatic moment of pure joy, the newly enlightened monk frowned, and asked the old man: "And now, after enlightenment, what am I to do?" Again, without saying a word, the hermit bent down, put the logs back on his shoulders and continued his way to the town.

### The Path of Consciousness

One of the oldest depictions of the path of knowledge comes from the Zen tradition. This map of enlightenment is represented by a series of 10 images from 12th Century China called: "The Ox Herding Pictures". In these carvings, the spiritual path is described metaphorically as the search for an ox (consciousness) that seems to have gotten lost and wonders, disoriented, throughout the world.

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engage passionately in  
worldly affairs, without  
losing sight of his  
transcendent nature.**

In the first image, "Looking for the Ox", the shepherd cannot find the ox. He thinks it is lost and starts looking for it tirelessly through forests and mountains. Allegorically, the human being discovers that he has lost his mind and that is wondering, disoriented, in illusion (*Maya*). This is the beginning of the search that will take him to the realization that nothing was ever lost, and to the recognition of his own self as a manifestation of the Ultimate Nature of Reality.

After a long process the ox-herder gets to the ninth station: “Return to the Source”. At that juncture, the shepherd, already enlightened, discovers that the ox was never lost—how could it, the ox is none other than an aspect of the herder himself--; that Pure Consciousness is totally void (with no content and capable of containing all contents), but it manifests as form (each and every one of the concrete objects), without losing its emptiness or original nature.

The original text explains the ninth image affirming that the (relative) reality of the surface is based on the overflowing nature of the (absolute) source of being: *“The comings and goings of life are not ghosts or illusions but manifestation of Source. Why, then, would there be a need to struggle? The waters are blue, the mountains are green.”*

Lex Hixon (Coming Home) remarks that in this next-to-last state of consciousness there is still some unfinished business of integration. “There remains a subtle trans-human flavor in this Return to the Source. The process of Enlightenment has come so far, through so many simplifications, that there is difficulty in recognizing and accepting the constructions of human personality and society: *‘It is as though he were now blind and deaf. Seated in his hut, he hankers not for things outside’*. There is a subtle twoness here between the Source flowing as pine or cherry trees and its manifestation as the chronic delusion and suffering of human civilization. This very Return to the Source must deepen to include the return to mundane life.”

This “being blind and deaf” and “hankering not for things outside” illustrates the negative image that the man of spirit has earned in the mind of the man of the world (or businessman). The preoccupation for the trans-worldly, thinks the man of action, implies a disregard for the immediate; if you are with the mystics, you can’t take care of the logistics. This is a grounded assessment. In the path of consciousness there are detours that lead to a complete loss of interest in daily affairs. There are seekers who get lost in these paths never to be seen again. For them, transcending means disappearing. For them, the ordinary world is simply an illusion that must be left behind.

Genuine mysticism, however, does not end in abandonment. On the contrary, it leads to full participation. For example, the bodhisattvic vow is to not abandon the wheel of reincarnations and the pain of this world until all sentient beings attain enlightenment and are liberated from suffering. The bodhisattva vows to remain in the world, helping and educating all those still trapped in illusion and ignorance. In the same spirit, the Bible says that (the holy) man “must be in the world but not of it”. This man is able to engage passionately in worldly affairs, without losing sight of his transcendent nature. He knows that the ordinary is a manifestation of the extra-ordinary and, therefore, he holds it with deep respect. He also knows that his essence is not worldly and, because of that, he can take risks, trusting the

infallible support of his spiritual harness. This allows him to participate fearlessly, wholeheartedly in Lila, the Universal Play.

Economics, business, the marketplace, corporations, production and distribution systems, the improvement of life through goods and services, the increase in physical, emotional and intellectual well being of humanity, these are all fundamental aspects of Lila. It is impossible to live in a society (ours or the Chinese of the 12th. century) without dealing with them. That’s why a genuinely spiritual life cannot disregard them. A spiritual life develops as one participates in the network of interpersonal transactions that constitute “the market”.

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The tenth ox-herding picture is called: “Entering the Marketplace with Helping Hands”. The shepherd, finally awakens to the Truth of Being, appears as “a jolly rustic that wanders from village to village, from mundane situation to mundane situation. His body is overflowing with life-energy. His being is full of compassionate love. His open hands express perfect emptiness.” A perfect emptiness that is ready to manifest as creative and helpful work. As Hixon describes, “He has gone beyond, gone completely beyond, not to move farther away from humanity but to return completely into the human world. He has even abandoned the Source as a citadel where Enlightenment may subtly isolate itself. [...] Carrying a gourd, he strolls into the market. He leads innkeepers and fishmongers in the way of the Buddha. Bare-chested, barefooted, he comes into the marketplace. Muddied and dust-covered, how broadly he grins! Without recourse to mystic powers, withered trees he swiftly brings to bloom.”

### Market: Greed and Service

The only way to enter the market is with helping hands. The voluntary exchange of goods and services is a mechanism that rewards those who are ready to serve their fellow men. Contrary to all the pseudo-spiritual, socialist and fascist arguments, the marketplace is a space of freedom where human beings can cooperate in a spirit of mutuality. Whoever enriches himself (legitimately) in the market is someone who offers goods and services that are appreciated by those who buy them. For example to get someone to pay \$1,000 for one of its computers, IBM needs to make a device that supplies the buyer with a satisfaction above the one he could achieve by any other thing he could purchase with those \$1,000. And if Compaq wants the buyer to select its computer rather than IBM’s, it has to offer a better deal (higher quality, lower cost). By the same token, to get someone to buy in its supermarket,

Whole Foods Corp. needs to offer a better (better for a particular consumer) combination of quality, price and service than any of its competitors. Since different people have different tastes some will assess Whole Foods as better than Albertson's while some others will consider Albertson's superior. The beauty of the free—yes, free as in freedom—market, is that each one can shop wherever he pleases.

Adam Smith, the founding father of modern economics, argued that there are two forces that guide human actions: sympathy or benevolence towards others, and “self-interest”. Smith claimed that with the development of the market economy and with the separation of the individuals from their communities of origin, self-interest becomes the primary factor, but that it can never fully substitute benevolence as a necessary element to attain “universal opulence”.

It is not necessary to be an enlightened master to enter the marketplace with helping hands. In fact, that is the only way to do it. As Smith says: “The most apt to prevail [in the marketplace] are those who can draw others' self-interest in their favor. (...) ‘Give me what I want, and you will have what you want,’ is the meaning of every offer.” Every act of commerce is an act of mutual service. Even though it can be motivated by self-interest, the market system channels that selfish energy towards helping others.

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We are constantly told that the business world is inherently evil. Movies such as “Wall Street”, “Erin Brokovich”, “The Informant”, “Other People's Money”, “The Night Before Christmas”, and “It's a Wonderful Life” paint corporations as vipers nests, full of greedy executives that poison everything they touch. Even though there are many examples of disasters caused by business organizations, these episodes don't reflect—but rather contradict—the spirit of a free market. Such spirit is essentially virtuous and oriented towards the attainment of the highest values of a human being.

Imagine that in the middle of the tennis match, one of the players grabs a knife and stabs the other. Nobody would take that as an example of the depraved nature of tennis. The evil one is the player who committed the criminal act. Suppose further that when questioned by the district attorney, the accused acknowledged his deed but justified himself explaining that the stabbing was an effective way to win the game. Undoubtedly, he would be found guilty. Violence is not

a valid strategy in tennis: it's a “fault”. One must win “within” the rules of the game. If the players don't abide by the rules, then they are not playing tennis.

By the same token, if a company's employees pollute the drinking waters of a town and poison its neighbors (as PG&E executives are portrayed doing in “Erin Brokovich”), that's not an example of business management, but of crime. Or if the members of a corporation use inferior materials to build a bridge that then collapses and kills people, that is not an example of business risk, but of cold-blooded murder. It may be true that these managers acted to “maximize profits”, but they did so breaking the more basic rules of the game: to not initiate aggression against other people or their property. When they break this rule, companies abandon the economic domain and enter the realm of criminal activities.

There are criminals in all walks of life: in sports, medicine, law, government and business. Nobody would dare say, though, that sports, medicine, law or government are inherently immoral activities. However, many “spiritually inclined” people treat business with extreme prejudice. The essential question is not whether there are some participants in an activity that behave criminally, but whether the activity itself is inherently criminal. For example, extortion is always criminal; nobody can be an extortionist without using violence against other people or their property. But a Laundromat is not a criminal organization, since it is possible to operate it according to the moral norms that rule a civilized society. This does not mean that some laundromat cannot swindle its clients or pollute the environment. To say that the activity is not immoral simply means that it is possible to perform it (although there is no guarantee that it will be performed) honestly and without transgressing against others.

There are two types of transactions between human beings: voluntary and involuntary. The first involves a non-coerced decision of each participant; the second always involves the threat or direct use of force against the person or his property, or of fraud. When a voluntary transaction takes place, each one of the parties involved must receive at least as much (and generally more) satisfaction from what he gets than the one he foregoes through what he gives up. For example, if I desire to trade my orange for your apple, that means I like your apple more than I like my orange. Similarly, if you accept the trade you must like my orange more than you like your apple. Thus, the transaction is based on two inequalities rather than one equivalence. This disparity generates a surplus in satisfaction: both parties expect to be better off (or at least not worse off) after the transaction takes place. (Of course, they might be wrong. People make mistakes about their future tastes all the time. But who has the right to make the mistake, if not the individual himself?)

The marketplace is the realm of voluntary transactions. As opposed to a battlefield or a prison, in a free market nobody

is forced to do something they don't want to do—as long as they respect the right of every other participant to only do what they want to do; that is, choose their behavior without coercion. The market is an alchemical process that transforms self-interest into service, pettiness into greatness, greed into the desire to satisfy others' interests.

There are those who see the free market as an enemy. But the market is an invaluable instrument for human development. Every act of commerce is an act of mutual service. Even though it can be motivated by personal interest, the market system channels that selfish energy towards assisting others. There are also those who spend their life fighting and denigrating the ego. But the ego is not the enemy. On the contrary, the ego is the executive function of consciousness; it is the one who manages the projects of the soul in the world.

The problem occurs when the ego stops being the employee and usurps the role of president. Since it is designed to manage operational functions, the ego does not have the capacity for strategic planning or visionary leadership. Those are functions of the soul. It is not necessary to “suppress” the ego; it is simply necessary to place him in the organizational position where it can make its greatest contribution. There is no struggle, simply the reestablishment of the hierarchy of consciousness, a “spiritual process reengineering”.

Selfishness is not evil: it is myopic. Lost in the illusion of separateness (“I am a mountain that does not depend on the surface of the earth”, “I am a wave that does not depend on water”), the ego doesn't dare to aspire high enough, it doesn't even fathom the magnificent possibility at hand. That is why, in order to overcome its limitations, it needs the guidance of the soul. The last ultimate wish of the ego is to be absolute and unconditionally free, to experience the perpetual bliss of infinite love, to feel the overflowing fullness of life. That is the deepest, most transcendent “egoism”.

**... it is simply necessary to place (the ego) in the organizational position where it can make its greatest contribution.**

That's why the goal is to be so egoistic that the ego realizes it must surrender to the soul and the soul to Spirit. Then, and only then, can Spirit lead soul and ego to actualize its infinitely loving vision of non-duality. Then, and only then, does the ego become a vehicle for manifesting Consciousness in the world.

The spiritual path does not end in disconnection. On the contrary, as the last ox-herding picture describes, those who attain the pinnacle of enlightenment “enter the marketplace with helping hands”. The enlightened being dives into the

world “with the widest grin” to share his enlightening presence with “innkeepers and fishmongers”. That's why he doesn't need to show off with mystical powers, just being conscious of who He really is, is enough to make hearts blossom.

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This is the essence of compassionate love. I have found this love in most of the business leaders I've met in my 12 years of teaching and consulting. Perhaps I've been blessed. Perhaps, just by coincidence, I've only worked with enlightened organizations. I don't think so. Most people would not consider General Motors, Chrysler, Electronic Data Systems, Microsoft, Royal Dutch Shell, Citibank and American Express particularly “spiritual” organizations (whatever that might mean). However, these business executives are seeking meaning in their life as passionately as my fellow students of Ken Wilber's Integral Philosophy. (In fact, many executives have become students of Ken's model after my introduction.) They all feel the calling to make this world a better place. Every person who has tasted the bittersweet emptiness of fulfilling his petty desires, knows that there is a deeper thirst that transcends them, a happiness that cannot be achieved with any object. That is the true happiness, of which ordinary pleasure is but a pale reflection. That happiness requires transcending and including the small preoccupations of the ego in the ultimate ambition of Spirit.

#### **The Purpose of Business**

There is no reason to separate human development from business effectiveness. The important question in assessing business behaviors is: “effective for what?” Effectiveness is an assessment that depends on one's goal; without considering such goal it makes no sense to ask if one is being effective. Sadly, most of us operate automatically, not having thought deeply about our purpose. So in order to understand what it means to be effective in business, it is worth considering what is the purpose of business.

What is the purpose of business? Ask five people, you'll get six different answers: produce goods and services, sell those goods and services, earn profits, pay dividends, grow revenues, maximize shareholder value, create jobs, help the community, develop new technologies, and so on. Before we answer this question, however, it is wise to ponder the meaning and presuppositions behind it. Otherwise, we run

the risk of engaging in non-sensual disputes about non-sensual issues.

Business is an activity, not a conscious subject. Therefore, it cannot have a purpose in the sense of my dog having the purpose of chasing my neighbor's cat or my children having the purpose of getting me to take them to see the new Harry Potter movie. What does it mean, then, to ask for the purpose of business? Let's explore the issue using a simpler activity such as tennis.

Tennis doesn't have a purpose, it proposes a goal for those who accept to play by its rules. In tennis, as in every competitive sport, the goal is to win; win over your opponent. Let's call this "the point of the game". In a singles game, each player tries to beat the other by scoring points according to "the rules of the game". For example, if the ball bounces within your opponent's court and your opponent is not able to return it to your court, that counts as a point for you. If he returns it and you hit it out of bounds, it counts as a point for him. Every game has a point (the goal) and rules. Winning the game means achieving the goal according to the rules. It is important to remark that if you and a friend go to a tennis court to "just hit the ball" for practice or fun, you may be engaging in an activity that looks like tennis, but you are not playing tennis. You may be training, you may be enjoying yourself, you may be fooling around, but you are not playing tennis. To play tennis, you must count score, and you must try to win.

Similarly, business doesn't have a purpose; it proposes a goal for those who accept to play by its rules. In business, a simple statement of the goal is "to make money today and in the future"—or more complicatedly, to maximize the value of the enterprise by maximizing the present value of its future cash flows. This is the point of the game. Each business organization (analogous to a sports team) tries to carry on operations such as invention, production, distribution, marketing and sales of goods and services at a (long-term) profit. There are some aspects of business that are like tennis; for instance, you compete against the producers of substitute products for market share. Some aspects are more like golf; for instance, you try to make the most (present-valued) money, regardless of who you are "playing" with. On the other hand, as opposed to tennis, golf or football, business is not a finite game. It doesn't have an established ending circumstance or time. It extends without bounds into the future. That's why its limits are set by the perspective of the players (relevant time horizons and discount factors.) It doesn't have well defined spatial boundaries. The "playing field" of business is the world, (and potentially outer space); business is transacted anywhere and everywhere human beings live.

When a tennis player enters the space of tennis, he accepts the established goal and rules of the activity. Thus, when we loosely talk about winning as "the purpose of tennis", what

we are really saying is that winning is "the purpose of the tennis player". So the meaning of the question "what is the purpose of tennis?" is really, "what is the purpose of a tennis player?" By the same token, when a businessman enters the space of business, he accepts the established goal and rules of the activity. So when we say that making money is the purpose of business, what we are really saying is that making money is the purpose of the businessperson.

Tennis is a game, and "tennis player" is a role adopted by a human being within that game. Business is a game, and "business man" is a role adopted by a human being within that game. If we expand our view and focus on the person that transcends the role, we have to focus on "life", as the larger game that transcends both tennis and business. In the meta-game of life, playing tennis or doing business are strategies, means to pursue a larger end: the point of the meta-game. In this larger framework, it makes sense to expand the question and ask "what is the purpose of a human being that takes on the role of tennis player or of businessman?" or "what does the game of tennis (or business) afford the human beings who enter into it?" How does tennis (or business) support the pursuit of its participants' life objectives? This is a critical question; without it, a tennis player or a businessman could be "penny wise and pound foolish", playing the smaller game (of tennis or business) in ways that detract from his winning at the larger meta-game (of life). Just like an army can win a battle and lose the war, a tennis player can win a game and lose himself—and a business man can win money at the expense of his soul.

## Business doesn't have a purpose. It proposes a goal for those who accept to play by its rules.

So what could be the purpose of a human being that plays tennis? Again, there are many answers: fun, physical exercise, emotional release, relaxation, a sense of accomplishment, self-importance, self-improvement, an experience of flow, self-transcendence, etc. We can organize these responses hierarchically from means to ends. We only need to take each one and ask the responder "what would you get through that, that is even more important to you than that itself?" As long as there are answers forthcoming, we can be sure that the previous responses are higher order strategies, not "the point of the game".

For example, if we ask a player who is about to attempt a passing shot, "what do you want to get through your passing shot that is more important to you than the passing shot itself?" The answer could be: "winning the point". We insist then, "and what would you get through winning the point that is more important to you than winning the point itself?"

Sooner or later, the answer will be: “winning the match”. At that point of our questioning we exit the realm of tennis and enter the higher order meta-games. “And what would you get through winning the match that is more important to you than the match itself?” “Winning the championship”, could be the reply.

Let us abuse the patience of our interviewee and pursue the inquiry further: “and what would you get through winning the championship that is more important to you than winning the championship itself?” “Recognition, fame, money”, he could say. These are some larger goals for which playing tennis—or going into business—is a strategy. But these are not ultimate ends either. “And what would you get if you got the money, that is more important to you than the money itself?” I have asked this question of many people, business and non-business. The answers create an inverted tree structure that at its apex shows remarkable consistency. The highest echelon, the things that we want without further purpose, are few and simple, these are things such as happiness, fullness, freedom, peace and love.

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Thus, the ultimate effectiveness of any behavior (including business behaviors) can only be measured against the attainment of these goals. Although it may sound obvious, it is worth reminding ourselves that success, money, achievement and objects of any kind are means, not ends. The ends are the essential states described above: happiness, fullness, freedom, peace and love.

As we organize the games hierarchically (holarchically, as Ken Wilber would say, since each game transcends and includes its juniors), we can say that at the “lower” levels, a competitive activity—tennis, business, etc.—affords the opportunity to prove one’s worth by beating the opponent. Less mature individuals—which, by the way, could be the “best” players according to the internal standards of the game—play to assuage their fears of worthlessness, to show that they are “somebody”. Their belief is that by establishing their worth, they will be able to experience the higher pleasures of life. (We will see later, that this very search for worth subtly reinforces their belief that they are inherently unworthy; that they start the game of life, so to speak, in a state of bankruptcy.)

At the “highest” levels, tennis (business) affords the opportunity for one’s humanity to show up in the particular

role of a tennis-player. Like a diamond with infinite facets, human (True) nature manifests in infinite ways. Tennis (business) is one of these ways in which the self-aware radiance that we are can shine forth. Tennis (business) is a stage in which the Unfathomable Mystery that underlies it all expresses itself as a human being playing tennis—or doing business. Tennis (business) is a space in which Emptiness coalesces and is played (or done) with, against, through and for the sake of Itself. This is the highest purpose of tennis, the highest purpose of business: to be a field in which the Absolute recognizes and manifests Itself as Itself within the Relative.

Let’s say then that tennis is a game embedded in a larger (meta-) game. The point of this meta-game is to fully develop the human being who engages in the game of tennis. For the sake of this discussion, and consistent with the Buddhist tradition, let me define full development as the enlightened attainment of happiness, the release from suffering and bondage and the actualization of this freedom and its conscious exploration through the performance of every activity available to humanity.

The larger purpose of tennis—or business, or anything, for that matter—is not to win but to serve as arena for enlightenment and actualization. Of course, to preserve the arena the players must still attempt to score points and win. But now the desire for winning at tennis is subordinated to the desire of winning at the larger game of life. That is, of attaining enlightening liberation for oneself and all sentient beings. Trying to win stops being the end, it becomes now a strategy; a conditional means to pursue an unconditioned bodhisattvic goal.

Modern man spends most of the day at work. We spend more than half of our awake time in work-related activities. Work occupies more time than all other wakeful activities combined. If work-time is “wasted time”, “dead time” or “unconscious time”, the great majority of life ends up “wasted”, “dead” and “unconscious”. If one conducts his professional activities in a space of pusillanimity (from the Latin, “small soul”), life becomes petty, with no greatness.

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That is why it is crucial to go beyond business as usual and recognize that business is an essential component of conscious life, a gesture of human magnanimity (from the Latin, “great soul”).

Business is a field of possibilities. The market is a stage in which every human being manifests his consciousness. When this manifestation is guided by transcendent values, business becomes a work of art, a work of love and freedom. When this manifestation is guided by vices and unconsciousness, work turns into hell, a swamp of suffering and bondage.

### The Four Noble Truths

Business, tennis, and other human activities exist because we all want to experience the ultimate blissful states: happiness, fullness, freedom, peace and love. We all want to attain liberation from suffering and be delivered from pain. As stated by Buddha in his first noble truth, (unenlightened) existence is suffering. Life entails pain, aging, disease and ultimately death. In addition, conscious life forces upon us the endurance of psychological pain in the form of grief, frustration, fear, anxiety, embarrassment, disappointment and anger. This life of physical and psychological hardship is not a happy prospect. So in our quest for happiness we engage in activities that we hope will extinguish—or at least reduce—the pain of existence.

Our first automatic assumption is that we suffer because we don't have what we want. We think we are miserable because we do not possess the things (material, emotional, mental or spiritual) that will make us happy. For example, I believe I suffer because I don't have the car I want (physical materialism), the relationship I want (emotional materialism), the knowledge that I want (cognitive materialism), or the wisdom that I want (spiritual materialism). If I only got these things, I'm sure my suffering would vanish. Just like I crave food as the antidote to my hunger pangs, I crave accomplishments as the antidote to my existential pangs.

So, I train and play hard. I want to win. I want to be the best tennis player because then, according to my fantasy, I'll be happy, I'll be released from suffering. But as I win more and more, I realize that my fear grows. Rather than happy about the game I won, I'm afraid about the next game I might lose. My sense of identity becomes so attached to being "a winner" that I feel awful ("a small death") when I lose and I feel scared that even if I win this game I will probably lose a later one.

This is the point when I realize that "getting what I want" and "achieving a sense of myself through accomplishment" is not enough to escape suffering. Worse yet, this very activity seems to create karmic entanglements that sink me more deeply into pain. This is the point when I realize that I am a "hungry ghost" with a voracious mouth, a long thin neck, and a forever-empty stomach. This is the point when I had better start checking my premises. Perhaps things are not so obvious as I assumed. Perhaps my suffering is not caused by unfulfilled desire; perhaps my pain is not derived from defeat.

The second noble truth asserts that suffering is not caused by unfulfilled desire, but by desire itself; by craving and aversion,

by attachment and avoidance, by entrapment in illusions and ignorance of the true nature of things. Buddha said that we suffer every time we get hung up in the dream that the world (including other people) must always conform to our wishes. In this realm everything is impermanent, everything arises, abides momentarily and subsides; ignoring this truth is a surefire recipe for heartbreak. Trying to hold on to pleasurable states is like trying to grasp water, trying to "win" our way to happiness is like trying to grasp the wind. "It ain't gonna happen". On the contrary, the very attempts to do the impossible put our lives into a miserable frenzy.

As long as we believe we are essentially individual egos, we will struggle to prove that we are worthy. We will try to get our self-esteem from accomplishments. When we see ourselves as isolated "things" confronting a world of other "things" that threaten our existence (material or psychological), we are bound to live a paranoid-schizophrenic life. Our whole being will be set to fight those "others" who oppose us, our whole energy devoted to win over the forces that curb our subsistence. In tennis—and in business—this appears as the unmitigated, absolute and overarching drive to win the small game at the expense of the larger meta-game.

The problem is not playing to win; the problem is thinking that winning at tennis implies winning at life. These are two dramatically different things. It is possible to beat all my external opponents without achieving inner peace and happiness. It is also possible to lose a game without losing my sense of well-being. And of course, it is also possible to win and be happy. The issue is not winning or losing but the way in which one wins or loses, the way in which one plays. The problem is not trying to win; the problem is *trying to win by any means and at all costs*.

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The third noble truth is that there is a way to play that enables the player to overcome suffering and attain happiness. If we stop the causes of suffering, said Buddha, suffering will cease to arise. If we realize that our circumstances are influenced always by factors outside of our control, then we can give up the ignorant craving for certainty. When we see that success comes and goes with the winds of fortune we can stop clenching our fists in a vain attempt to secure it forever.

Some people think that this means that we stop trying to win. I disagree. Remember that if you stop trying to win you stop playing tennis. In order to play the game you must accept the goal of the game. And that means striving to win. But

something crucial does change. Instead of taking this goal to be super-ordinate, you realize that it is sub-ordinate to the goal of the meta-game. Instead of trying to win at any cost, you realize that you will try to win subject to or within the confines of higher order principles. The principles that will help you win the meta-game.

If you are wise, then you realize that experiencing a perfect-permanent here-now sense of happiness, peace, fullness, love and freedom are the true point of the game of life. This point can be attained by playing tennis in a particular way, rather than winning at tennis. Wisdom is seeing that virtue and integrity are the unconditional success beyond success. That is, when you play in alignment with higher values, doing the best you can to win, but choosing your behavior according to the moral principles of good sportsmanship, you guarantee yourself a sense of dignity. When your play is a perfect-permanent expression of that self-aware radiance that you always-already-are-have-been-will-be, there is no way of losing the meta-game—although of course, you can certainly lose the game.

It is self-defeating to bet on success; the odds are 100% you'll end up losing (if to nothing else, to death itself). The safe-haven is not a place to get to (success), but a process of living (a way of playing). This process is what some call "Nirvana". Nirvana simply means cessation. It is the cessation of suffering, aggression and ignorance; the cessation of the struggle to prove the worth of our existence to the world, to survive as in particular (frozen) ego-state at all costs. What-is doesn't have to struggle to survive after all. The Whatever-is-manifesting-as-me (i.e., Emptiness, Buddha Nature) has already survived, is surviving now, and will survive forever. The struggle to endure as **this** particular manifestation is just an extra complication that we have added to our lives because of our forgetfulness and lost confidence in the way things are. Upon remembrance, we no longer feel the same compulsion to manipulate things, as they are exactly the way they are to be. On the other hand, the natural play of the Universe invites us to operate within the goal-seeking games that serve as the clearing in which our True Nature can show up.

What are the ways of Nirvana? That is what the fourth noble truth is all about. The path to liberation, as taught by the Buddha, has eight points and is known as the Eightfold Path. The eight points are: right understanding (seeing things simply as they are, without superimposing our memories, hopes and fears on them), right thought or intention (adopting an open and non-manipulative attitude, refraining from forcing situations into preconceived notions of "how things should be", going with the flow and working with what is), right speech (being simple, direct, genuine and authentic, not engaging in gossip or lying), right action (operating with simplicity and effectiveness, holding a straightforward relationship to whatever task is at hand and giving up frivolous and unnecessary complications), right livelihood

(earn our living without damaging others or ourselves, work consciously), right effort (no struggle, no war of "right" vs. "wrong" within oneself, working compassionately with every thing, without aggression or combat), right mindfulness (precision and clarity, attention to the actuality of moment-to-moment experience and behavior) and right concentration (disciplining the mind to hold a focus of attention without wandering into daydreams or speculations, being completely absorbed in the here-now-ness of things-as-they-are).

**... the odds are 100% you'll end up losing... The safe-haven is not a place to get to (success), but a process of living (a way of playing).**

But now comes the question: is playing tennis (and therefore, trying to win) compatible with seeking enlightenment? Can the path to Nirvana take us towards the net, where we intend to hit a winning volley?

#### Love or Fear

There are two basic attitudes or frames of mind: love and fear. The first is based on a sense of fullness, an overflowing inner richness that wants to express itself by giving itself to what transcends itself. The second is based on a sense of emptiness, a feeling of lack that wants to be filled by external (material, psychological or even spiritual) objects—in some communities, meditation is a cutthroat competition. Any activity can be performed out of love or out of fear. Love and fear are features of the performer, not of the activity.

It is possible, for example, to play tennis out of fear: trying to prove that one is "better than" the other (not just a better player, but a better—worthier—person altogether), attempting to distract or hurt the other in order to get an advantage, or even sabotaging the adversary by poisoning his food the night before the game (the Tonya Harding incident comes to mind). Disgraceful behavior is an indictment of the player, not of the game. Tennis, as an activity, does not encourage these actions. Fear-based wicked players are not created by tennis but by the immoral and debased frame of mind in which they operate. If that hellish mindset did not find an outlet in tennis, it would easily find another activity in which to play out its karma.

**Any activity can be performed out of love or out of fear.**

It is also possible to play tennis out of love: seeking to express the Precious Worth that one eternally is. A tennis player operating from fullness would not seek to "prove" his value—



that is so obvious to him that it does not require any further justification—at the expense of the opponent. He would not need to “cannibalize” the opponent’s self-esteem to quiet his fears of worthlessness. Such an enlightened player, however, would still put his heart and soul in the game, playing to win. Not because the result is that important, but because his very essence calls him to give 150% of his energy to the task at hand. That is the spirit of “right action” and “right effort”.

Business activities can also stem from love and fear. Fear-based competition is the game of hungry ghosts. In desperation, these people turn the natural hierarchy of means and ends upside down, sacrificing the higher (morality, consciousness) to the lower (satisfaction of biological impulses and primitive psychological urges). There are no limits to the strategies that they may use to make money. A criminal organization (mafia) is a perfect example. Love-based competition is a game of realized beings. With gentleness, these people keep their priorities straight, taking the lower as a path to the higher. To get a glimpse of this state of mind, imagine that tomorrow you inherited 100 million dollars, what would you do then? —That is, after recovering from the most awesome party ever. Whatever your answer, that is something you would do for love. (The money is supposed to erase financial fears; the real issue would be to inherit 100 million units of Transcendent Self-esteem and Self-confidence. This would erase all fears.)

I doubt Bill Gates is worried about his retirement, or Warren Buffet about his personal finances. Yet they are fully engaged in the game. I don’t know them personally, so I can only speculate, but whatever keeps them playing, it sure isn’t the fear of poverty. Those who transcend their fears (through accomplishments or through conscious realization) find that love is the most powerful engine for playing in the world.

A striking illustration of this type of play can be found in the Bahvagad Gita. Prince Arjuna is besieged by doubts as he faces members of his own family in a battlefield. Torn between the desire to do his duty (fight) and to not harm his relatives (leave), he turns to his charioteer, none other than Lord Krishna, for advice. In one of the most beautiful pieces of mystical poetry ever written, Krishna tells Arjuna, in no uncertain terms, to go to battle and fight with all his might, focusing on the process and releasing the outcome. In blazing words, Krishna explains that virtuous behavior is more important than life and death itself. If Arjuna was about to play a tennis match with his brother or develop a marketing campaign for Windows XP, as opposed to fight a civil war, I suspect Krishna’s advice would not be different. The key is to adopt the “right attitude” and play with “right consciousness”, whatever the game might be.

Many a “spiritual” tennis player has faced Arjuna’s dilemma. The regard for the other can get in the way of playing as best one can. In order for me to win, the other must lose (at least in the small zero-sum game), and that offends a certain sense

of fairness or a wish that everybody could win together. The problem of that wish is that it co-opts any competitive game, and therefore, forecloses a set of opportunities for the expression of our infinite human possibilities. It also subtly patronizes the opponent assuming that “he couldn’t take it”. That is, that he couldn’t metabolize the loss as soul food, as nourishment for his physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development. In the larger game, the logic is not zero-sum: everybody can win. A full-out game of tennis ennobles all players equally: there is no difference between the winner and the loser.

That demonstrates a deep misunderstanding of the developmental process. Psychologists have found over and over that the best environment to foster growth is one that combines support and challenge in the right proportions. A world where nobody ever lost or suffered a reversal of fortune might be extremely comfortable, but would leave the human being extremely stuck. To grow, the baby needs to exit the womb and face the drama of Life on Earth.

Perhaps the “fear of winning” or “fear of making the other lose” is consequence of self-doubt rather than high morals. The premise of the other’s suffering caused by the loss could be no more than a projection of one’s own inability to deal with the pain of experience. Life, and every experience in it, is impermanent. In the realm of embodiment there is no “final success”, no ultimate state of bliss forever lasting. Everything changes and unless one develops the noble consciousness necessary to deal with this fact, one will be stuck forever in suffering. The suffering is, therefore, the symptom that alerts us that “not everything is well” in our affairs.

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When we experience suffering, we can take either of two paths: assume that it stems from unfulfilled desires and strive to fulfill them by attaining more and more things or realizing that our suffering stems from ignorance and attachment and strive to transcend them by growing into a higher state of consciousness.

### **The Great Paradox**

Those who have stopped “looking for the ox” (and enlightenment) because they discovered that it was never lost, pose an apparent paradox. On the one hand, they affirm the principle of perfection. Everything is perfect just the way it is, there is nothing to change, everything is a radiant expression of Spirit itself. On the other hand, the same

masters affirm the principle of evolution. There is much developmental work to do, there are great opportunities to make things better, and therefore it is worth applying our efforts to liberate all sentient beings from ignorance and suffering. As a mystic said: "Everything is perfect as it is... and there's lots of room for improvement".

This universe started with the Big Bang. One moment there was nothing, and a millionth of a second later, the whole energy-matter complex that comprises our universe was there, born out of nothing. As Ken Wilber documents extensively, those who have followed the contemplative prescriptions that open the eye of spirit, report unanimously that this appearance of the Kosmos is nothing else than the manifestation of Divine Consciousness, the process that Plato, Plotinus, Aurobindo and Wilber call "involution" or "descent" from Spirit to matter.

This is the point of view out of which "everything is all right". Everything is Spirit-in-Manifestation, and it is impossible to improve anything since every single thing is pure and perfect suchness. Whoever sees this (with the contemplative eye), feels a deep peace, a serenity that fills him with joy. There is nothing to do, since each thing and event is a perfect expression of infinite Love.

But at the same time, the universe is in continuous expansion. The Big Bang is still unfolding its potential, moment by moment, in everything that exists: the interstellar distances that grow, the biological species that evolve, and the human beings that strive for enlightenment. Everything, absolutely everything that exists is an expression of this universal dynamic, this infinite unfolding of cosmic energy. As Andrew Cohen says, each thing and each one of us is "the explosion in motion", an unknown potential for "evolution" or "ascent" of Spirit towards its own Self.

This is the point of view out of which "everything can be improved". The path is infinite, since possibilities of expansion are limitless. Whoever sees this, feels a tremendous energy, a passionate commitment that fills him with strength, inspiration and enthusiasm (from the Greek en-theos-siazo, to have God inside). There is so much to do, so much to grow. Every being, trapped by illusion and suffering, can evolve towards full liberation and bliss. And as every liberated being transcends the illusion of separateness, it realizes that Being is One, becomes a Bodhisattva and takes on the job of working endlessly for the liberation of all sentient beings. There is a lot to do, since every being cries for freedom.

The traditions that identify these two movements of Spirit identify the ascent towards the One as wisdom or freedom, and the loving descent of the One towards the many as compassion or fullness. Wisdom sees the True Nature that lies beyond the chaos of worldly life. That's why it attempts to go beyond the immediate and reach the transcendent End. Compassion sees the True Nature within the chaos of worldly life. That's why it attempts to embrace the immediate as a perfect expression of the immanent Source. The ultimate

integration is the non-dual awareness that the One and the many, the End, the Source and everything in between are not two. Non-dual Spirit breaths in wisdom and breathes out compassion. This supreme breath occurs in all frequencies, from the billions of years of the universe to the billionths of a second of the sub-atomic particle.

## The path is infinite, since possibilities of expansion are limitless.

These two perspectives must be in equilibrium for the person to operate in harmony. Health is in the balance and disease is the preponderance of one of the poles. Whoever focuses only on perfection, lacks energy and drive. Whoever focuses only on evolution, lacks trust and serenity. The first person would never go into business because "there is nothing to do". The second person would be a workaholic because "nothing will get done unless I do it". The balanced businessperson is the one that is able to breathe in and breathe out, to act and relax, to strive to develop while knowing that everything is already perfect.

As Rumi explains,

*Everything you see has its roots in the unseen world.  
The forms may change, yet the essence remains the same.  
Every wonderful sight will vanish, every sweet word will fade,  
But do not be disheartened,  
The source they come from is eternal, growing,  
Branching out, giving new life and new joy.  
Why do you weep?  
The source is within you,  
And this whole world is springing up from it.  
The source is full,  
And its waters are ever flowing.  
Do not grieve, drink your fill.  
Don't think it will ever run dry, this is the endless ocean.  
From the moment you came into this world,  
A ladder was placed in front of you,  
That you might transcend it.  
From earth, you became plant,  
From plant you became animal,  
Afterwards you became a human being,  
Endowed with knowledge, intellect and faith.  
Behold the body, born of dust, how perfect it has become.  
Why should you fear its end?  
When were you ever made less by dying?  
When you pass beyond this human form,  
No doubt you will become an angel and soar through the heavens,  
But don't stop there, even heavenly bodies grow old.  
Pass again from the heavenly realm and  
Plunge, plunge into the vast ocean of consciousness,  
Let the drop of water that is you become a hundred mighty seas.  
But do not think that the drop alone becomes the ocean.  
The ocean, too, becomes the drop.*