



# THE TAO OF CREATIVITY BUDDHISM, BUSINESS & STRATEGIC CREATIVITY

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“The world of business is full of attractive captivations, diversions and distortions of reality.”

David Bubna-Litic

## WHY WE NEED TO UNLEARN

We tend to think of Buddhist practice and business practice to be on opposite ends of the ethics spectrum. After all, one is characterized by concern for humanity and values compassion, and the other is frequently associated with exploitation, questionable ethical practices and human rights abuse. However, in his paper *Buddhist Ethics & Business Strategy Making*, David Bubna-Litic observes that “Life in a monastery has much in common with the modern corporation. There is a need for discipline, concentration, awareness and cooperation.” This article is a response to some of the ideas that he put forth in a publication of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, emphasizing his key arguments and some of my own ideas which were triggered in the process of reading his works.

It’s easy to maintain Buddhist practices in a monastery, when you have a small and very saturated community that supports such beliefs and endeavors. It’s much harder to translate essential elements of the philosophy into modern life, especially into the world we live in today, when the ever-ubiquitous rush of modern business activities is such a major aspect of our living, working, learning, and playing space. Bubna-Litic and many others have pointed out that “Many Buddhist practices can be incorporated into business organizations with positive strategic outcomes.” But many decisions and activities that are directly influenced by or a byproduct of business practices are deeply in conflict with Buddhist values. This is because, the author explains, that business decisions often focus on outcome, what impact they have on economic performance, profit, return on investment, growth, market share. This is not only because corporate directors have a legal duty in most countries to maximize wealth of shareholders, but because firms which are not driven to optimize economically rent simply do not survive in the long term.

In this direct comparison, Buddhism appears to be set to a radically different agenda, but it is not. Buddhism is not against the business market as a mechanism of exchange: Earning an income is necessary and important in this day and age, and it’s simply not a practical or sustainable lifestyle to ‘ignore’ (if that’s even a possibility) the pervasive influence of business organizations. Rather, the author emphasizes that the Buddhist concern is with the questionable ethical behavior that can occur between market relationships, stating that “The idea of a market is ultimately an abstraction which downplays that most real markets are made up of transactions and relationships between people... Fundamentally, a market exchange is a cooperative relationship. It is when such a relationship is abused for “excessive” profit that problems arise.”



The current assumption that drives our economic system is that business depends on inequality. Because where there is inequality, there is trading and commerce. We assume we depend on imbalance to get a tactical advantage, when we have something they don't. We call this opportunistic behavior. And it is from that signal that two types of strategic business decisions emerge: The content of the decisions, and the process by which the decisions are carried out. Bubna-Litic suggests that both of those follow a cycle or pattern of thought, because "how one goes about making strategic decisions affects the type of decisions that are made."

The article puts forth that it is during the early stages of strategy development that many organizations show a lack of integrity in neglecting to develop ethical strategic options. I think it's because we're confused. Up until recently, human concerns in the corporate world have been perceived of as a weakness, whereas the ability to command large returns on a capital a mark of greatness. While the latter consideration is unquestionably an important element of the early stages of strategy process, many business decisions clearly lack integrity or sense of compassion because they've forgotten to focus on the entire design process – not just what we produce, but what we take from each other and the earth, and what we leave behind.

This is why strategic creativity is so necessary and so fitting – many Buddhist ideas are already inherent in what we are trying to do. "Because the strategy creation process...does not follow the rational planning models: of setting goals; analyzing internal resources and external opportunities and threats; developing a series of options; evaluating the best option, choosing and implementing this option; and finally, instituting a reliable control process. The reason for this is manifold, but perhaps the most significant is that the future is unpredictable and so even the best laid plans go astray... Real time strategic decisions responding to such situations inevitably result in an organic, evolutionary strategy that emerges independently of any one stakeholder or plan."



What this presents is an opportunity to re-evaluate the relationship and interactions between Buddhism, business, and strategic creativity. The implication of Buddhism into business practice isn't really about asking people to meditate, it's asking them to unlearn what they feel a business should be and imagine what it could be; aligning creative possibilities, business capabilities, and the one thing we should desire most from each other: our sense of humanity.

Instead of suggesting that businesses need to rethink their structure and draw from a religion, we should consider rather a philosophy lending itself in the form of tools for the genesis of strategic creation. It is, in a sense, asking businesses to unlearn many of the fundamental assumptions of economic rationalism that our society holds, and considering a new duality: One that aligns altruism and hedonism, community and individuality, uniqueness and equality, differences and oneness, even revenue and spirituality, creativity, imagination.

Wu and Ubuntu. This is the Dharma, the underlying order in nature. And it makes sense, since it is within this nature that humans revolve their business practices and spiritual beliefs. Seems like they weren't far apart to begin with after all.

#### **WORKS CITED LIST**

Bubna-Litic, David. "Buddhist Ethics and Business Strategy Making"  
Journal of Buddhist Ethics (September 1995)