



Go ahead, make *your* day!

Become a **Zen Master** of the long **Walks** check cashers make daily By *Cheklis* columnist Richard Kelsky

AS I RECENTLY CHATTED WITH ONE OF MY CUSTOMERS, our conversation turned to life philosophies, and his explanation of some core Buddhist concepts. From there, the discussion took a natural turn to the “deep” subjects of dishwashing and tea drinking. Now you may wonder what any of this has to do with your business – or, more cynically, about what the two of us may have been smoking. But the moral of this story, which I promise to flesh out in short order, is that dishes and tea have more relevance to your business than you’d imagine.

To get a better feel for where I’m headed, insert yourself into this not-so-hypothetical situation: You return from work at the end of a long day, the house dark, loved ones fast asleep. After quietly enjoying the simple snack you’ve fixed, you entertain the idea of capping it off with a delicious cup of tea before turning in. But waiting in the sink is a pile of dishes. Some are yours, others the product of an earlier meal you missed. What to do? Is it your mission to wash them as quickly as possible, carping all the way, and then have your cup of tea? Most people would say “yes.” But, as I’ve learned, they’d be wrong. About now you may be muttering, “Ok, so screw the dishes then, have the tea.” And still you’d be wrong.

The right answer is to cheerfully wash, wipe and put away those dishes with the greatest of care. Then, have your tea. As the Supreme Buddha might argue, if you approach the dishes with a thoughtless desire to get them done faster than reasonable, or worse, with negativity, the attitude will carry over and the cup of tea won’t provide the enjoyable moment you expect. By contrast, if you do the right job on the dishes, and don’t get bent out of shape doing them, the enjoyment you hope and plan to get from the tea will be that much greater.

After a full night of having this transcendental logic do a spin cycle through my head, I was determined to put it to work. Lacking a sink full of dishes, and planning on coffee, I ventured out on the farm I call home to attend to my morning chores. Feed the cats, walk the dog, feed the horses, muck the stalls, get the paper from the rural box far out at the main road, get back inside for a couple of treadmill miles, and have some breakfast. How was I going to make the dishes and tea fit into my day? Let me begin by saying that I wake up happy – every day – and I was skeptical about how this concept was going to cause an improvement in my day-to-day existence. I enjoy my mornings immensely, and never complain about them in any way. However, I did realize from my days of practicing law that I have a built-in desire to be efficient, and always keep a bit of pressure on myself to “speed up the process.”

To fight this natural inclination, I set out to identify what in my morning routine was always under pressure to be “sped up.” I deliberately switched up the order in which I did things by first heading for the paper -- the part of my routine I tend to “rush.” As the dog and I walked by the path through the woods to the barn, I inhaled deeply, and deliberately, but with a calming gentleness, exhaled in the same way, and looked around. The sky was black, but hinting at its readiness to make a bright turn. Under the moon, a beauty filled the trees. Ice covered their every limb. The cold mid-winter Northeast air smelled clean. The dog was bounding with a joy only a dog can have when heading toward an open road. I took in everything and, then said aloud “this is so beautiful.” The slightly pressured pace common to this part of mornings past gave way to a slow, strong, stride. I could feel the snow crunch comfortably under my boots with each step. By the time I ►

got to the paper box I was smiling. I picked up the paper, tucked it under my arm, called to the dog, and headed back down the drive to the barn path.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT IS WHAT THE STORY IS ABOUT.

I got to the barn, fed the horses their grain, put out their hay and began to, well...shovel. Believe it or not, I have always enjoyed this part of the morning. But that day, and days since, it seems, I enjoyed it more. I could see beauty in those tasks because I was in a better place after embracing my long walk to the main road as a positive – as part of the day's perfection. How does this relate to the financial services industry? I'll tell you.

It's not enough to just get through the day. You've got to sculpt it – to mold it into an experience you can appreciate. In my case – and I'm not ashamed to admit this – I've managed to draw as much Zen-like psychic nourishment from handling real manure as others might dealing with the metaphorical kind.

By way of disclosure, I'm hardly a New Age Buddhist. If anything, I've got some pretty sound behavioral science to back my views. A 2008 University of Alberta study found that encouraging employees to be more present and purposeful in their attendance to tasks had the effect of making them "healthier, happier and more productive." Those encouraged to actively rethink how they viewed their jobs saw a huge drop in absenteeism (60% lower) and turnover (75% lower) compared to those who hewed to the status quo. *Science Daily* further reported that "the result for the intervention group was a 23 percent increase in teamwork, a 10 percent hike in job satisfaction and a 17 percent jump in workplace morale."

What we're talking about here is feeding the inner-self by giving gladly, thoughtfully to the tasks at hand, however ugly or mundane they seem. Like any good fertilizer, this enriched attitude spurs the growth of your relationships with significant others, family, friends, employees, vendors, and customers.

All that being said, let's put aside talk of dishes, tea, or even my long walk for the paper. Let's focus on *your* day. What are the good parts? What are the tough parts? Make a mental list. Pick the toughest element of your day. Could it be the moment you walk through the office door and get bombarded by "issues"? Or perhaps it's the morning call from the bank about the checks that came back "account closed"? Or maybe it's the call on your cell from a teller when you are out having lunch? Or could it be your whole day, because you never leave the store and feel like a prisoner?

I've drawn
as much
Zen-like
psychic
nourishment
from the



handling
of real
manure as
others might
in their
dealings
with the
metaphorical
variety.

Whether it's a five-minute period or ten hours, we all need to learn to deal constructively and deliberately with the "stuff" that's piling up, to put it to positive use. But whatever you do, deal with it pleasantly while it's still only ankle-deep. Say you have a manager who's prone to ticking off a list of all the things that are wrong just as you walk through the door each day. Do you come in "ducking" as if a reporter is about to throw a shoe your way? Since you know you are always going to have to take that long walk past her each morning, why not see the positive in it. Put a smile on your face as you get close to your store. Be bright and positive as you

enter. Don't wait for the "other shoe to drop." Challenge your manager to bring you all the pressing issues straightaway. But instead of joining in the gripe-fest, ask her what she proposes to do about the issues. Quickly establish a plan of attack and communicate that plan. Cut down the list of issues in small bites – and do it with a good attitude.

Increasing one's mindfulness of tasks at hand doesn't have to be – nor should it be – and unpleasant occupational undertaking. An evenhanded acceptance of the normal ups and downs that are part of each of our daily "long walks" can help immensely. If the problem is a bad check, start gathering information and preparing for collection; if an employee is unexpectedly absent on the Friday that is start of a month, grab a cash drawer and a window and shorten up the line; if a teller says she cannot print money orders, have the loading and resetting process repeated in front of you; if a teller gave a check back to a customer after cashing it, find the customer and

retrieve it; if you cannot get on the Internet to send a wire transfer, reboot your modem and PC and see if it returns. The point is, don't get led down the path of negativity by panic, pressure, and transference to the point that you arrive at a self-created nadir.

If the workday begins badly, it takes a lot of work and energy to end better, if that's even possible. But if it starts on a positive tone you calibrate from within, management of the daily issues that arise becomes infinitely easier. Possessing full knowledge of the issues each morning brings isn't bad – unless you let it be. We do what we choose to do. If you can't deal with it, change. But if you don't want to change, accept and embrace the everyday challenges you face with a grateful energy that can carry you through the rest of the day. It's the best way to ensure that whatever follows from there will be just your cup of tea.