

Dharma Lessons from Starbucks

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I continually repeat one of my favorite phrases “anything, any idea can be the beginning for a Dharma talk. Everything is Buddhism.” Recently I read a book (well, truthfully, I listened to it through books on tape) which gave me ideas for a dharma talk on Buddhist concepts. As I read through the book, there were many ideas which reflected Buddhism and the concepts we strive to live by. Among the lessons learned were these. See if you agree with these ideas:

- Compassion & Gratitude
- Change / Impermanence
- Vision
- Belief
- Growth
- Values
- Self-Examination

Do these concepts sound familiar? Do they sound like Buddhist concepts you learned as you grew up in the community of Jodo Shinshu? Do they sound like the concepts that would help us all have more peace and love in our lives, if we followed them?

I most certainly thought so as I was reading the book Onward by Howard Schultz.

The interesting piece of information is that Onward is a book written by the founder of Starbucks, about the founding of the company and how it changed and he changed over the years.

Surprised? See, I told you, anything can be related to Buddhism.

Actually, as I listened to Howard Schultz talk in his book, I started to take notes because I realized that many of the ideas he has used to run Starbucks are Buddhist concepts. His philosophy reflects Buddhist thought in many ways.

Compassion and Gratitude

For Starbucks, compassion and gratitude was about actually doing something with the words besides saying them. Howard Schultz believed in giving health care benefits to even part-time workers, even when it meant, perhaps, making less for the company. He also believed in helping workers in 3rd world countries learn how to make a better living and a better life by growing a better coffee bean, with help, proper knowledge and a fair price for their coffee beans. He said “hold people accountable but give them the tools to succeed.”

Lessons from Starbucks:

What does it mean for us in our lives? We know that compassion and gratitude are two of the most important concepts in Buddhism but what do we do about them?

*Live the values daily.

Talking about compassion and gratitude is not enough, we must live those concepts every day. Is this simple? Yes. Is this easy? Not at all. Compassion isn't always easy for many reasons, after all we are human and we have egos. Compassion isn't "one size fits all." I am reminded of a story I read about a monk and a deer. A monk was teaching a class to novice monks. On a daily basis, a deer would come down to the monastery garden to eat the grass. Each day, the monk would go outside to yell at the deer and drive it away. After a few days, one of the novice monks protested, saying it showed no compassion for the deer. The monk replied: "You do not yet understand. If we do not chase away the deer, it will soon become too tame. When hunters come, it will surely be killed because it is so tame and has no fear." In this case, showing compassion meant chasing the deer away, not feeding it. We never know.

*Listen with empathy

Listen to others, even when you do not agree with them. It's surprising when we really listen; we might discover a new idea or a new compromise. It's about taking a different perspective. We don't have to stay in that perspective, just try it out.

*Be grateful every day, even for your "failures"

Even on those days which are not so great, we can be grateful. At least we have the opportunity to try again when we have made mistakes.

*Don't take life for granted, it can all change tomorrow.

In business and in life nothing is guaranteed. Love the day, be grateful for each day. After all, not everyone gets to have another day or another birthday. Love every day, even the difficult ones.

Change / Impermanence

For Starbucks, or any business for that matter, not changing is the most effective way to kill a company. Companies must continually change in order to keep up with a changing public. Again, change for us is often most difficult to accomplish. Human nature loves to keep things from changing, but no matter what we do, we cannot stop life from changing.

Lessons from Starbucks

*Times will continue to change, with or without us.

We all have decisions to make about change. We can bury our heads in the sand and pretend that change isn't happening or we can accept change, try to embrace it and allow changes to happen. What happens if we don't change? Nothing, nothing at all. Well not really. If you don't make changes to your house, it will eventually fall down around you. If you don't change the prescription in your glasses, you won't see very well. Change is important, no matter how big or how small.

*Technology, love it or hate it, but it is changing our world at a very rapid rate.

Our world is not the same as it was 50 years ago. It isn't even the same as it was 10 years ago. Technology is changing our world and we must keep up with it. If we do not take advantage of technology, as a church, we will be left behind. You may not be comfortable with technology, but the young people are and we must appeal to the young people to keep our church alive and thriving.

*Change causes anxiety & fear, can we live through it?

Anxiety and fear are reactions to the unknown, it's that simple. We are afraid of change and fearful of what it might bring, simply because we do not know. Can we live through it? We have no choice. Some things have already changed and we haven't fallen apart. If we want to continue to thrive, we need to be open to change. Ask questions, find out the reasons for the change. We want to move forward toward the future, not take giant steps backwards in our growth.

*Change: we don't need a heart transplant, just a face-lift

I absolutely loved this phrase when I heard it. It absolutely rings true for Buddhism and for our church. We don't need a heart transplant; we don't need to change our inner core of beliefs. They work as well now as they did over 2,000 years ago. We do, perhaps, need a face lift. We recently received a facelift . . . we did away with programs and we have had the exterior and interior of the temple painted. The face lift goes beyond the superficial painting though. Personally, I think we need to also do a face lift on some of the other aspects of our services and our temple Buddhism is joyful, Buddhism is inclusive of all who come. Let's make it that way.

Vision

For Starbucks, vision meant taking some risks but always maintaining their vision for what the company should represent. There were many times Howard Schultz could have made changes to the company, but if they did not represent his vision, the changes didn't happen.

Lessons from Starbucks

*Vision offers hope

When we have a vision of where we want to be it brings hope. When we see where we are going, we know that we are not just wandering in circles but actually have a map that will get us where we want to go. There will always be little "tweaks" to our vision, after all, change happens to everything but vision provides structure.

*Vision allows us to see the difference between short-term popularity vs. long-term relevance
Short-term popularity might demand that nothing changes, that we continue to do what we have always done. That, I believe, is a sure way to fail. If we look at long-term relevance, it expands our horizons and lets us look down the road. We need to look beyond the next 6 months and focus on what we want to have 10 or 20 years from now. We must stay relevant to our ever changing world or we will be left in the dust.

Believe

Howard Schultz always believed in Starbucks, from its humble beginnings in 1971, to 1988 when he bought the company, through its rocky expansion times, through the downturn in the market when the stock was not worth much, to the present day. His belief has never wavered, even though the company doesn't look the same and isn't run the same as it was in 1988. He believes in Starbucks.

Lessons from Starbucks

*Believe in the future

I believe in us, I believe in our church, I believe that we are an important part of our larger community. I believe that we, as Buddhists, can make positive changes, not only for ourselves but for everyone. Can we do it in the same way as we always have? No, because I also

*Believe in change

I believe that change is good for us. Notice that I didn't say that change is comfortable but that change is good. We cannot stay still and do things in the way we always have and hope to continue to be important to the community at large. Yes I believe in change because I want us to be around for the next 10 or 20 or 50 years, well past my lifetime. For this to happen, we need to ask

*What is important . . . Ritual or habit?

When we do things, whether they are in our homes, our travel or our temple, I think we should always ask ourselves, are we doing what we are doing out of habit or is there a reason for what we are doing (important ritual)? A story that reminds me of this very thing is this one:

There was a young mother making a roast for her family and her daughter was helping her prepare everything. The mother cut the end off the roast and then placed it in the roasting pan. The daughter asked, "How come you cut off the end?" The mother replied, "Well, that's the way my mother always made her roast, but I don't really know why she did it. Let's call her and ask her." So, the woman called her mother and asked her why she cut the end off her roast. Her mother replied, "Because that's the way my mother made her roast." This got her to thinking, so she called her mother (who was still alive) and asked her why she cut off the end of the roast before cooking it. Her mother replied, "Because it wouldn't fit in the pan."

How many things do we do because it has "always been done that way" and we have never even thought to ask why or question the reasoning behind it?

Growth

For Starbucks, that seems an easy concept. Companies just need to keep growing. But Howard Schultz knew that growth was more than opening more stores and bringing in more people. It was about appealing to more people, to new people, to people who were younger than he was and listened to different music and used different technology. He knew that change was critical to growth.

Lessons from Starbucks

*Continue to grow, never stop changing

Growth only comes with change. We want to grow and prosper as a temple. We need to be willing to make changes, some significant and some smaller ones, but all important. We can't sit still while all else around us keeps moving. Change, update, move forward. Change, by taking a giant step backward, is not ok. We must keep moving forward. Quote from Howard Schultz: "Embrace what we have done in the past but continue to innovate." Perhaps the same could be said for us too.

*Never take anything for granted; continue to ask questions

Just because we are here now, do not take for granted that we will always be around. We need to continue to build, to grow and to do so, we need to ask questions about everything. Ask questions to be sure we are not like the lady cutting the end off the roast just because it had always been done that way.

Values

In building Starbucks, Howard Schultz was open to change, as long as the underlying values of the company were not compromised. As he said, reinvent yourself but stay true to your core values.

Lessons from Starbucks:

*Our values drive our message

Values don't change; our values should drive our message. We must stay true to our Buddhist values, the ones I have talked about today, but they can be interpreted for today, for our youth, for the community at large.

*We need to protect our values; they define who we are

We can innovate around our core values, without losing who we are as Buddhists in the 21st century.

*Don't confuse history & heritage

Values are our foundation; how we express those values may change, they may indeed look very different from the way things have always looked. Maybe we need new perspectives, new ways of looking.

Self-Examination

When Howard Schultz worked to make changes, not everything was a success. He used self-examination, self-reflection to help him understand his failures, instead of blaming the other person. He said, "Find truth in trials & lessons in mistakes."

Lessons from Starbucks:

*Look into our hearts to see who we are

Self-examination is another word for meditation. Although Jodo Shinshu doesn't rely on meditation as heavily as other Buddhist denominations, it is still a vital and important part of Buddhism. The medical field is finally catching up to Buddha's wisdom of quiet sitting after almost 2600 years. Self-reflection is good for you.

*Be open to the change that can come from self-examination

Once you begin to honestly open yourself to self-examination, you will be able to see in a different way, you may even see that some of your ideas of "how things should be" may even change.

*Do not embrace the status quo; after all, the status quo is always changing anyway

When we embrace the status quo, the way things stand, we are holding on to the rock in the middle of the river, refusing to let go. When we let go of the status quo, let go of the rock, we find that we can go with the flow and appreciate all that we see on our journey.

Thank you sharing with me the dharma of Starbucks. Amazing how Buddhism is everywhere and lessons can be found in our daily lives. Buddhism is in everything. It is our lives, it is how we live not just what we do on Sundays.

Please put your hands together in gassho:

Let gratitude be your goal. When you cannot be grateful and accepting, examine your resistances and objections. They will reveal the terms and conditions you are dictating for how Reality should appear.