

# Dhamma Talk : Practical Good Governance

By Sorayuth Vathanavisuth



“Directors of the board should focus on the issue of proper working conditions,” says Ajahn Brahmavamsa Mahathera, or Ajahn Brahm as the English-born monk is better known.

**“There is a case of a company in the UK that has successfully turned around its business by enforcing one simple rule: no overtime whatsoever. This way, employees have better health, both physically and psychologically,”**

In his view, good governance begins with the people at the very top being dedicated to the happiness of employees. Better-rested employees are one reason, Ajahn Brahm stated, that this company’s turnover tripled and profit doubled within a years. “There’s a lovely story of a six years old boy waiting for his daddy to come home. He asks his daddy that how much he earns a money for working hour. According to his tired from work, the father yelled to the boy, then he quickly regreted. After a relaxing time by drinking a cup of tea, he apologises to his son and replied the question. ‘Twenty dollars an hour son,’ the father replies. The boy then gave him \$20 and said, ‘May I have one of your hours daddy?’

Ajahn Brahm brings a unique perspective to the study of human and organisational behaviour from both a scientific and a Buddhist perspective. Born into a working-class family in London, young Peter Betts received a scholarship to study theoretical physics at Cambridge University, where a meeting with a Buddhist monk got him thinking about following a different path. After graduation he had taught for a year before travelling to Thailand. Ordained at Wat Saket in Bangkok, he later trained with Venerable Ajahn Chah in Ubon Ratchathani. Ajahn Brahm is currently the abbot of the Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery in Perth, Western Australia. “This story reflects the basic need that we all have to provide our families with the proper time. Otherwise, we and our families will not be happy, which can cause problems at the workplace. Board of directors can ensure that this kind of issue won’t arise with their employees.”

## **Recognise the process, not the result:**

Ajahn Brahm has also observed that the way workplaces promote competition can be detrimental. At a human resources conference in Singapore, where he was a speaker, he heard a story about teamwork from the HR director with the British Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Ministry. “There is a requirement to get a contract with the EU, and employees are always under pressure as getting the contract is the ultimate goal of their department,” he explained.

“Some of their good people left due to the high workload and uncertainty about the result. In fact, contracts should be awarded based on the way people work together. They may not get a contract this year but with the proper process, they will get it later.

“One of my disciples who comes from West Germany stated that the economy of West Germany (before reunification) was so good because Germans cooperate and work in the same direction. Unfortunately, in our schools we usually compete with our friends to get awards. Schools should promote teamwork instead of individualism.”

Individual ability will only take us so far if we are unable to use it in a way that helps those around us, believes Ajahn Brahm.

“At the end of the school year, why do not grade students with 70% based on their personal performance and 30% on the whole class to which they belong? This approach will allow an opportunity for the bright kids to spend time helping the weaker ones,” he explained.

The suggestion reflects his unique perspective who is renowned for his studies of organisational behaviour from both a scientific and a Buddhist perspective. Those seeking his insights into promoting talent and innovation have included Google, where he gave a speech last February and Facebook, among others.

Elaborating on the 70:30 grading proposal, he stated: “Students will learn cooperation skills from a young age. What they learn will be essential in corporate life where people must work together. The weak people in the office will be helped by the stronger ones. People will not just work for a promotion”.

No temptation and no corruption “You may be aware that a monk is not supposed to have individual money,” he continued. “This is a rule set by the Buddha. Following my master, Venerable Ajahn Chah Bodhinyana Mahathera, as a forest monk, I’ve kept this practice for over 40 years, yet I still manage to travel around

the world with no problems at all. If I need to go overseas, people who invite me will provide the ticket. They meet me at the other end. What would I need money for?

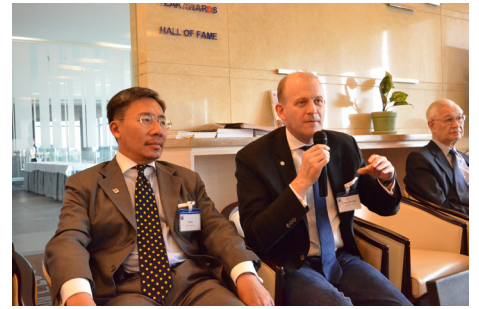
“Governance, either for government or businesses, is important since there’s a lot of money around. We need to provide measures to prevent temptation; otherwise, someone might take an opportunity to be corrupt. That’s why there is a requirement for independent auditors.

“In Australia, our monastery has to be audited every year. To prevent a conflict of interest, so that the auditors cannot be Buddhists.” For leaders, Ajahn Brahm believes it’s essential to stay in touch with what’s really going on. “Directors should listen to what they need to hear, not merely what they have been told,” he stated.

For cyample “The CEO of Air New Zealand really makes an effort by regularly working as a flight attendant, at the check-in counter, as a baggage handler, and sitting in with pilots in order to clearly understand the concerns of the people who work for him.”

In 40 years in monk’s robes, Ajahn Brahm has applied scientific and logical thinking to complement his Buddhist teachings. Often, he says, the simplest solutions are the best ones. “Innovation is an important part of business,” he explains. “I can offer an example of how they cleaned the Thames which was so polluted during my school years back in the UK.

“They fixed the problem by means of a very innovative law. It says that at every factory that uses water from the river, their outlet pipes have to be upstream from their inlet pipes. So if they dump bad water into the Thames, they are the first ones that will get it back. Now the river is alive again with fish and all living things, as it should be.”



## The Art of Decision-Making

“It has been shown time and time again in many experiments that if you have to make a decision, don’t think too much. Your intuition is the most reliable source — or you may want to toss a coin,” Ajahn Brahm stated with a smile.

“Don’t get me wrong. What I’m trying to say is not to believe in heads or tails but to use it as a criterion for asking yourself something. It’s a way to hear your inner voice and find out what you really want to do, which is usually the first intuition you feel. It’s not always the correct decision but 90% of the time it’s more reliable than thinking. That is psychology. That’s one of the reasons why a Buddhist monk like me gets invitations to talk at incredible events because I know how the mind works.

“As a board director, besides hearing your intuition, don’t forget the emperor’s three questions,” Ajahn Brahm stated.

“Make the decision now. Don’t procrastinate. Go down to the bottom to get direct feedback and don’t always trust what people say to you. The management team can work and cooperate more effectively in a flat organisation than in a top-down hierarchy because the latter will delay the right decision.”

## Power of Now

Ajahn Brahm is also a big believer in dealing with what is right in front of us, an idea that has its roots in a short story by the Russian author “Leo Tolstoy”.

“A mythical emperor was fed up with religions because they all claimed to be better than the others. So he made up his own religion that was simple and practical, not just for the temple but something that would help people live successful and happy lives. He then created what became known as the emperor’s three questions .are as follows:

“The first question: When is the most important time? The present moment is the most important for us. You should give immediate feedback. When Sir Alex Ferguson was the manager of Manchester United and a player was not performing correctly, he wouldn’t wait until next week to tell him. He told him right away.

“The second question: Who is the most important person to listen to? The most important person is the one right in front of us because he or she is the one that connects us to the world.

The last question: What is the most important thing to do? The most important thing to do is to care. To care is half-way between being careful and caring for one another. When you care you can move the team together. You should care for your boss, yourself and others. Because of your care, people will work for you.

“People want to come to my monastery even though it’s in the middle of nowhere, because we care. Our website, Buddhist Society of Western Australia, is in the top 100 in Australia — it gets more views than Cate Blanchett’s website. That happens because I care for them.”