



## **Buddha@Work: Being mindful in business**

**An example for Buddhist values and ethos in economy:  
Windhorse Wholesale Gifts in Cambridge, UK**

Good afternoon. My name is Petra Schilm. Today I`m going to talk about a connection between business and spirituality, about Buddhist values and ethos in economy.

In my talk I`ll tell you about the company **Windhorse Wholesale Gifts in Cambridge, UK**, one of the best examples of how Buddhist values can be applied to help to run a company successfully. Windhorse is a company that runs its business according to the **Buddhist values of mindfulness, generosity, fairness and caring for all living beings.**

I`ve divided my presentation into four main parts:

1. Introduction: What does business have to do with spirituality?
2. What is the Buddhist idea of “mindfulness”?
3. Next I will give you a deeper insight into the running of the company *Windhorse Wholesale Gifts*.
4. And finally I will talk about the spiritual-venture-network of *Windhorse Wholesale Gifts*.

There will be time for questions after my presentation. Don`t worry about taking notes. I`ve put all the items on a handout for you.

## 1. Introduction:

Over the past 20 years a new phenomenon has been taking place in companies: Happiness coaching is spreading in the workplace. A growing number of employers have hired management gurus and coaches who use psychological research and ancient religious and spiritual traditions to inspire workers to take a more positive attitude.

Research shows that employees` positive attitudes can be good for business. Successive studies have shown that positive attitudes and positive thinking among staff leads to economic success for companies. Cheerful teams that encouraged each other earned higher profits and higher levels of customer satisfaction. Happier people miss work less often.

The voices for a new orientation in economy are increasing. More and more people are asking for a more “human” way in business, concerning good working conditions, fair wages and a respect for the environment. People are yearning for a foundation in economy that is based on values and a caring attitude, that avoids burn-out and exploitation, both of persons and of the environment.

I want to talk about a company that takes its inspiration from the spiritual tradition of Buddhism for its business activities, which does business the Buddhist way:  
**Windhorse Wholesale Gifts in Cambridge, UK.**

One key-word of this company is **mindfulness**.

## 2. What is the Buddhist idea of “mindfulness”?

This brings me to my first point: What does the term **mindfulness** mean?

The Buddhist system of ethics tells us that persons are interconnected and interdependent. Everything and everyone is connected to each other. They give rise to each other in turn. What we are thinking and doing will have an effect, on ourselves and on others. And we must be aware of this cycle of cause and effect.

Mindfulness means:

Being aware and careful, being conscious of what we feel and do

Mindful thinking and behaving means:

Being sensitive towards oneself, perceiving one`s own needs, both the physical and the mental

- not to act automatically, but more and more aware
- to perceive critically our habits and attitudes
- (self-)acceptance and (self-)estimation

→ **Only a person who can perceive himself / herself will be able to perceive others.**

Mindfulness in business means

- treating oneself and others more kindly
- gratefulness and compassion - and generosity

### 3. The company *Windhorse Wholesale Gifts in Cambridge, UK:*

Let me come to the second point of my presentation. I now want to give you an insight into the company **Windhorse Wholesale Gifts in Cambridge, UK.**

The company is a wholesaler of ethically traded gifts and homewares.

Windhorse Wholesale Gifts operates a wholesale business with hand-made items that are imported from rural parts of poorer countries, for example Guatemala in Central America or countries in the East, such as China or Bali. The suppliers to Windhorse make craft products such as handmade books, wood carvings and textiles. So Windhorse can offer a wide range of products such as kitchenware, furniture, cushion covers, lanterns, jewellery, bags and purses, photo frames, candles and candle holders, bookmarks and magnets.

Its customers are mainly gift businesses, mail order companies, tourist offices and charities. In addition Windhorse supplies numerous garden centres.

#### **The firm history:**

Windhorse Trading has an amazing track record: The company started trading in 1980 as a market stall in London. In 1992 they opened the company-owned affiliated chain "Evolution". Since then windhorse:evolution has grown substantially to become a major wholesaler within the giftware sector. The sales of Windhorse Trading have increased at 30% per year, and now it is a business with an annual turnover of £9 million. The "Independent's league table" says it is one of the fastest growing UK companies. The wholesale head office is in Cambridge, about 80 kms away from London.

That is maybe not unusual in the business world, but this company is so special because of a certain reason:

#### **It has a faith-based approach to business.**

The business is owned by Windhorse Trust, whose trustees are ordained Buddhists. Windhorse is a Buddhist rightlivelihood business run by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO).

Buddhism is central to the business of Windhorse trading in Cambridge, and Buddhist values guide everything from relationships with employees and suppliers to how to spend the profit.

What does it mean to the employees of Windhorse? Where can we find the Buddhist values of mindfulness and generosity in the company`s relationship with its employees?

Windhorse now has around 100 staff members working in its Cambridge wholesale head office. Another 200 employees work in the 18 retail shops. At least 150 persons of the staff are professed Buddhists.

Windhorse has created a workplace that supports the staff to practise Buddhism within their working times.

There is a “welfare-officer“ and a “training-officer“, who support the shop teams in their Buddhist spiritual practice. They meditate together daily to clear their minds and to come to an inner balance. Through discussion meetings, text readings, and sharing devotional practice around the staffroom shrines, the staff are encouraged to put their principles into practice at work.

To illustrate this, let`s have a closer look at this photo:



The warehouse in Cambridge:

a size of 8,000 m<sup>2</sup>  
a range of about 1200 products in stock

a tope (stupa) in the middle

As you can see, the employee undertakes even the most mundane tasks as a form of spiritual work, according to the Buddhist ethic of rightlivelthood.

- Every kind of work has a spiritual worth. It does not matter what a person does, only the dedication to and the concentration on this work is important
- To do sensible and satisfying work means working effectively
- Working effectively brings economic success ⇒ profit for everybody

Can you imagine how remarkable this definition of “work” and of the “value of work” is for business?

The company`s name “Windhorse“ goes back to an old myth of central Asia. The windhorse is a symbol for the good and healthy energy that lives in the body and in the mind of every person. A symbol for the inner power of a person.

Good actions will strengthen this power, but bad and immoral actions will weaken this inside power. When the windhorse appears, it brings peace and wealth and harmony.

Let me go on with further details on **Windhorse Wholesale Gifts**.

The staff of the Buddhist company work in teams of at most 8 persons. Each team has different tasks to do, for example loading the vans, storing the goods, doing the packaging. They start their working day with a collective ritual. Windhorse offers rooms for retreats during the working hours. The staff get their lunch for free in the cafeteria.

There is the opportunity of job rotation in the working places, everybody can work in the place where he or she can bring in his or her abilities. Work and person have to fit together, and vice-versa.

The weekly working-time is not more than 35 hours.

### **The payment of the staff:**

The employees of Windhorse Trading can choose between a fixed salary and a “support package“.

That means:

The company pays all the fixed costs for its employees, i.e. the costs for rent, electricity, food and insurances. And it pays its staff a 6 week-holiday per year, inclusive of the fare.

All members of the staff can use company-owned cars, only paying for the fuel. Beyond this support, they can ask for an extra sum of money, when they need it.

Most of the employees (about 100, and also including the four directors of the company) have decided to be paid a “support package“.

The way of paying the staff in this company is very different from the way in other companies: it is a different kind of exchange of time and manpower for money.

**They work on the basis of “give what you can, take what you need“.**

How does Windhorse Trading sell its products?

- online, to be delivered to the customer`s door (see [www.windhorse.biz](http://www.windhorse.biz))
- at wholesale giftware tradeshows
- in regional mobile showrooms

Their regional sales team visit the costumers with a showroom on wheels every 4-5 weeks, almost anywhere in the UK, Ireland or the Netherlands. If you`d like a visit they will roll up to your door with over 1200 current samples - you can place an order there and then. Your order gets zapped back to the warehouse electronically for packing, and delivery follows by courier usually within a few days.

- in their wholesale showroom in Cambridge

Three times a year - in January, June and August – they invite customers to visit their giftware showroom in Cambridge.

- or in one of their 18 retail shops.

#### 4. The spiritual-venture-network of *Windhorse Wholesale Gifts*:

Let me come to the third and final point of my presentation: a brief look at the spiritual-venture-network of Windhorse.

It is not just the staff who benefit from this faith-based approach to business. The inspiration by Buddhist values and ethos also finds its practical application in the dealings with Windhorse`s suppliers and the environment.

Fairness is another Buddhist precept. Windhorse ensures to pay its bills on time, to make honest statements in its marketing, to treat its suppliers ethically and to guarantee that trade is fair.

Care for the living world is also a key tenet. Windhorse recycles packaging materials, uses green energy, transports stock by sea and not by air, and is investigating eco-fuel for its van fleet.

The "vision statement" of Windhorse Trading:

- ⇒ we give all our suppliers a fair price
- ⇒ we build real and lasting connections with them
- ⇒ we monitor fair wages and good working conditions
- ⇒ we minimise our environmental impact
- ⇒ we treat our customers fairly, honestly and with respect
- ⇒ we use some of our profits to benefit the communities in which our products are made.

Windhorse re-invests a large part of the profit from its wholesale-business in the countries of its suppliers.

Between 1990 and 2007, Windhorse:evolution donated about £7 million to world-wide projects.

Of last year's (2009) £9 million turnover, £0.4 million was given away in donations, mostly to Buddhist projects, but also to education and welfare initiatives in producers' communities. That means Windhorse helps to provide to distant, less advantaged communities.

For example, they have built schools in rural areas in China and central America that provide scholarships to children and computer trainings for them. Windhorse has a close working relationship with its supplier in Bali and supports a local foundation to help improve the lives of physically and mentally disabled children, juveniles and adults in this country. They also donate money for fountains and for building a hospital in Kenya.

Let me give you another example for the spiritual-venture-network of Windhorse:

Windhorse supports the Bridge Foundation, a small organisation which enables underprivileged and vulnerable children to overcome their obstacles and have a better life. Right now they are working with children in and around the slums of Calcutta, India. They hope to extend their support into rural areas of West Bengal.

**Instead of a conclusion, I'd like to highlight the following points:**



Windhorse Trading runs a business according to the Buddhist values of mindfulness, generosity, fairness and caring for all living beings.



The company considers social and spiritual needs in economy.

What is the idea behind **Windhorse Wholesale Gifts**?

⇒ A person who obtains much, can give much.

⇒ Life and work is a symbiosis, they are not separated.

⇒ Every activity, also business activities, should be made for the benefit of all living beings.



The company creates a new definition of "work" and of the value of work.



Work can be much more than being paid in money.



"Give what you can, take what you need" = an alternative for western societies?

That was my presentation on the Windhorse company that practises Buddhist values and ethos in its business activities.

Windhorse Trading shows how faith can create a truly sustainable business.

The social-business activities are an example for a human face in economy, for an estimation of persons in working places and a caring behaviour towards our surroundings. Not an egotistical, impersonal run for more shareholder-value. Employees are more than “human resources”. They are the basis of the company, with a meaningful job and an inner happiness. This proves that a return of values, that many people in business seem to have “forgotten”, is possible.