



JOURNEYS AT THE OFFICE DESK

My spiritual teacher, Ramesh Balsekar, would often say that peace of mind cannot be found in the flow of life but rather in our attitude to life and towards the 'other'. Because in daily living, our relationship with others plays an important role.

An office or similar work environment is an ideal ground from which to witness the interplay of various kinds of relationships. In retrospect, I can clearly see that I learnt a lot about people and inter-human relationships through my years at work. Little wonder then that Ramesh, himself a banker for 37 years, was always curious to know how things were at work, whenever we would meet.

We all have our stories to tell, and here's mine as far as my work life is concerned. The intention is to share how I now view all that happened at and through work, in light of the teaching of non-duality. I can clearly see that the conditioning I received during my working years provided a fertile ground on which the seeds of non-duality were planted. Besides the share of life's experiences that we all face, work for me provided the additional facet of being exposed to a multitude of relationships. In my professional life I had already experienced what I heard Ramesh speak

of, when I visited him years later. It was hardly a surprise that I took to the teaching like a fish takes to water.

It is famously said that ‘there are more authors than readers’ and adding to the heap was easy. As I ran a spiritual publishing house, it was not difficult to find a publisher!

The early years

I started going to the office during my third year in higher college, when I was 20. Although my father had passed away when I was 14, the advertising agency that he founded was still functioning. It was being run by the team who were present at the time of his passing. My mother, who had until then been a typical Indian housewife, had also been visiting the office during those six years. Although not knowledgeable about advertising, she played the role of being present to handle whatever challenges the company would face to the best of her ability, while the team was busy handling the clients and work at hand. Bringing up three teenaged children as well as going to work must have been a challenging task, to say the least.

When I turned 24, it seemed that all hell had broken loose on the work front. One fine evening, the management informed my mother that they were leaving to start their own advertising venture. They said they would hire someone in their place to run the show. It was all so sudden and unexpected – a bolt from the blue! However, I was given a hint of this a few days earlier when I went to make a presentation to a client. He was someone close to the management. When he mentioned their plans to me

(I still can't fathom why!), I thought it was such an outlandish idea that I actually went and blurted it out to them. I got no response so it seemed clear to me that it was just the client's fantasy running wild. But from that point on, the only thing I was clear on was that one should be aware that anything is possible. And quite often, that 'anything' was the polaric opposite of the current situation at hand – something one could hardly imagine. Life has a habit of giving you exactly that which you *think* you don't need. Or perhaps, that which would never cross your mind in your wildest dreams.

My mother and I were all shook up, as we knew it would most likely spell the end of the business and therefore the family's income. Nobody knew the clients besides the management – there were no other relationships in place.

Worse things were in store over the coming days. Close on the heels of this development came another big surprise – they sent out invites to all our clients stating that they were starting their own advertising agency and invited them for the opening of their new office. And, we only found this out when one of our clients forwarded me an invite asking what was going on! It did seem quite cheeky of them at first, but then it was perhaps the most logical thing for them to do, in hindsight. After all, they were the ones who had built up the relationships with the clients over the years. However, at that time, it felt unethical as they had been with the agency for so many years, through thick and thin. If they had at least informed us that they would be sending out the invites, we would have been better prepared, as until then we had not informed the clients that they were leaving.

We feared that all the clients would shift their accounts as there was no one else left in the agency whom they had confidence in. Don't ask me why and how it happened, but we were fortunate that only one of the big clients chose to shift their account.

It was then that my recently married brother-in-law, who had an advertising background, was roped in to helm the ship. However, this too provided relief only in the short term as it was to last only for a few months. After the initial few months, he was clear that as he was in charge of affairs he deserved a stake in the company, else he would quit. Asking for a stake was fair, but he wanted the majority share. We almost agreed as no other option was available to us. However, our auditor strongly advised us against this option no matter what the cost, as it would mean losing control over the family business. He said something which gave me much strength in those days: 'Nobody is indispensable. People come and go. Organisations tend to carry on, no matter who leaves. After all, it did continue even after your father.' However, this was more of an intellectual strength. When your income is tied tightly to others, then you certainly think they are indispensable – more so when you are 24 and have not really been exposed to running a business – even if it's a small family business.

We were in a dilemma: *How would we run the show if he left? Whom would the clients have faith in now? After the turbulence in the agency a few months ago, what could we tell them now? What were we to do?* In this situation, my mother turned to her guru for advice. He told her to leave the problem at his doorstep, and let the Source take care of the rest.

We shored up the courage and decided not to budge, thanks largely to his encouragement as well as the auditor's advice. This new position taken by us must have surprised my then brother-in-law. For, we had even agreed to a 50:50 stake in our naivete, without consulting the auditors. Fortunately (as usual in hindsight, of course), he insisted on getting not just half of the stake but a majority, and so stopped coming to work.

Here we were. The luxury of choices was no longer available. Either we would have to shut shop, or I would have to try my hand at running the business for whatever it was worth.

Suddenly, I found myself heading a staff of about 30 people, all of them older than me. When I look back I can see that it turned out to be a fertile ground to 'practice the teaching' as far as human relationships were concerned, as Ramesh would later say. Up until then I had not been exposed to Ramesh's teaching. That's why I realised, when I started visiting Ramesh and attending his talks, that his teaching was a validation of my life's experiences thus far.

I remember an incident when a new client had come over for a meeting and walked into my cabin. He kept waiting without speaking much. After talking shop, I asked him if I could help him with his requirements, and what services was he looking for from our agency. He said it was quite alright, and continued to sit silently in his chair. This was a bit odd, I thought. Both of us were quiet as we had run out of conversation, and I was at my wit's end as to how to take this forward. After 10 minutes passed, he asked me, 'Why is your boss taking so long to come?' He was quite flabbergasted when I told him that I was indeed the boss.