

## The Bodhisattva as Leadership Model for Sustainable Business

### *Summary:*

While the modern world faces a growing two-fold crisis (economic and ecological), enterprises will be increasingly expected to behave as an integral part of society and eco-systems and to take responsibility for the welfare of all, it follows that ‘business leadership as usual’ will not suffice in the future. The leadership of the future implies a shift from the current way of thinking to a broader, more complex leadership mindset recognizing interdependency as central business principle while serving the needs of multiple stakeholders. This new model builds on the school of Transformational Leadership. This paper will explore to what degree the Buddhist model of the Bodhisattva, who sets out to develop his mind toward wisdom and altruism, could provide additional inspiration to developing the new leadership model.

### *Conceptual Paper*

*Key words: Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Buddhism, Bodhisattva, Positive Psychology, Neuro-science, Mindfulness.*

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## Sustainable Business Leadership

Sustainable development presents a major challenge to business leadership. From strategies such as corporate philanthropy, voluntary employee community services and compliance – known as ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR), sustainability has become a business critical, pre-competitive concept that is on the agenda of every leading corporation.

Milton Friedman famously said: “the only business of business is business”. If this were true, business leadership would continue to operate on a mindset that is predominantly geared toward creating short-term value for their shareholders, employees and consumers while ignoring societal ecological impacts of their business. This mindset, that was the cornerstone of the industrial age when resources seemed abundant and inexpensive, is now increasingly recognized as the prime driver behind the emerging ‘tragedy of the commons’, in which producers, consumers and financiers hold each other in a ‘prisoners’ dilemma’, a race to the bottom of over-production/consumption/borrowing and consequential ecological overshoot and social unfairness. Given the fact that we have finite common resources for a rapidly growing population, this business-as-usual approach is no longer considered an option and indeed leading companies have recognized sustainability as the next business “Megatrend”, just like IT, Globalization and the Quality Movement earlier, determining their long term viability as a business (Senge 2008; Lubin & Esty 2010). Or in the words of Frank Horwitz (Horwitz & Grayson 2010): “The only business of business is *sustainable business*”.

This being so, ‘business leadership as usual’ will not suffice either. The leadership that is required for creating sustainable organizations is equipped to deal with increasing complexity and interdependency among business stakeholders. In particular, this type of leadership is directed at meeting the (present and future) needs of these stakeholders by creating long-term sustainable value for multiple stakeholders, not just short-term value for shareholders, as is the current predominant practice.

Leadership theory offers several sources of inspiration for this type of new leadership, most specifically Transformational Leadership (Burns 1978; Bass 1985), which is directed at changing the social status quo in order to serve unmet needs of people. J.M. Burns defined Transformational Leadership as a process in which leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation. His role models were Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Tse Tung, who had substantial transformational impact on their countries in times of major political tension. In 1985 Bernard M. Bass further developed the concept. He found that the transformational leader offers followers something more than just working for the success of themselves or their organization; they provide followers with an inspiring mission and vision aimed at transforming the social/political structures they work in.

The sustainability mega-trend calls for expanding the definition of Transformational Leadership: given the complexity and urgency of the crisis in global capitalism, transformational leadership should be directed at changing the underlying mindsets and worldviews of the leaders. In the words of David Orr: “*The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perceptions and values*” (Orr 1994). Specifically, a review of leading sustainability thinkers and practitioners (Senge 2008, Goleman & Lueneberger 2009, Doppelt 2008, Marshall et al 2011) learns that the new type of leadership should be equipped with the following mindsets and attributes (Tideman et al 2013):

- Recognizing Interdependency & Sustainability Mega-trend
- Mindsets, Worldviews, Mental Balance
- Courage/Long Term Horizon
- Stimulating Connectedness & Collaboration
- Creating Shared Value to serve Needs of Stakeholders
- Scaling Up and Measuring Sustainable Value

Given the importance of new thinking and mindsets for the leadership that sustainability demands, we will look at what Buddhism – which can be regarded as a practical philosophy directed at developing the mind - has to contribute to the discussion.

### **Contribution From Buddhism**

Much of the writing at the intersection between Buddhism and management and economics has focused on the need for mental contentment and behavioral ethics - the ‘do no harm’ approach as laid down in the Pali-scriptures, known as the Theravadin tradition (Schumacher 1976, Payutto 1992).

Since our focus is on the development of leadership capacity in the context of sustainable transformation, we will take inspiration from the model of the Bodhisattva, who sets out to develop his/her own mind in order create optimal value for all sentient beings. This model arose within the Mahayana-school of Buddhism expressed in Sanskrit scriptures and further articulated in the Chinese and Tibetan canon.

Specifically, the key features of Mahayana Buddhism relevant for leadership are determined to be as follows:

- The mind as object of science
- The mind can be transformed
- Methodology for mind transformation with social impact (Bodhisattva warriorship)
- Historic examples of Buddhist leaders

We will review these before drawing conclusions on how insights emerging from this review can impact sustainable leadership theory and practice.

### **Buddhist science aimed at Mind-transformation**

The assumption of modern (western) science since Galileo is that only the science studying outer phenomena (matter), is real objective science, and that the study of inner phenomena (the mind), because of its subjective nature, is inferior science. In Buddhism there is a tradition of science rooted in very different principles: the mind is the prime objective of science because it is the source of well-being and happiness. The first Buddhist university of Nalanda was established in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, some thousand years earlier than its Christian counterparts, and became the academic model for many Asian civilizations (Loizzo 2006). Its philosophy of selflessness and interdependence (wisdom) and corresponding practices of self-transformation influenced the Vedanta, Sufism and Taoism (Conze 1958). This type of mind-science evolved along side mathematics and physics, but they were considered less relevant than mind-transformation and healing. The Buddhist monastic

academies were discontinued in India through political upheaval (invasion by Muslims), though – fortunately - it has been kept alive in the Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist monastic tradition up to the present day.

In contrast to the Theravadin-tradition in which the end point is individual liberation of suffering, the aim of the Mahayana-path is the altruistic state of Enlightenment, in which one has transformed all selfish (negative) emotions into altruistic (positive) ones for the benefit of all beings. The cultivation of this positive state is not only aimed at inner peace and inflicting no harm on others, but also at removing disturbances from the mind so that the mind can function and serve others better. Negative emotions in Buddhism are considered distortive emotions (klesha's) – they distort or obstruct reality. Positive emotions (free of klesha's) allow the mind to more closely accord to the reality and thus be more peaceful (Wallace 2003; Dalai Lama 2005).

In other words, the Bodhisattva ideal should not be construed as self-sacrificing idealism leading to martyrhood. Instead, the practice of the Bodhisattva is directed and aligned to the full understanding of reality. In Buddhism the understanding of reality is known as Sunyata, which has been translated in terms such as Non-Duality, Emptiness, Voidness and Selflessness. This understanding should not be seen as a merely philosophical or intellectual state but a practice – the practice of Wisdom – that leads to an actual realisation in which one experiences reality as it is: the Truth (Hence the proclamation by the Buddha of Four Noble Truths or the Dharma). A central feature of this reality is that because of its nature of interdependence it is void of a fixed and findable entity called Self. Hence the Bodhisattva's focus on overcoming self-grasping and developing an altruistic mindset. When wisdom is fully developed, the Bodhisattva transforms into a Buddha, an enlightened one – a state of omniscience in which one is fully capable of serving all beings.

Buddhist scholar Joseph Loizzo sums up the central premise of Mahayana Buddhism as follows: “Since the objectivity of human knowledge and expertise is no greater than the objectivity of those who employ them, the best way to advance objectivity, is to maximize the process of mind-transformation by which individuals and groups become more objective over time (Loizzo 2006)”. Given the importance of objectivity (seeing reality as it is) for understanding the causes for societal well-being, the best way to guarantee societal well-being is to train people on the Bodhisattva path.

### Bodhisattva Warriorship

Ever since the time of the Buddha, it has been common for Buddhist teachers to provide teachings to leaders such as emperors, kings and merchants. The first well-known case of a leader to fully embrace Buddhism was King Ashoka in around 260 BCE, who was ruling over Northern India. After a series of violent conquests, he became repentant about his deeds of violence and he turned to Buddha's teachings. He commemorated his change of mind by erecting pillars all around the empire, which are a remarkable source of inspiration for future generations. He promoted the Buddhist practice of conquering the 'inner' enemy, by transforming hatred and fighting into compassion and non-violence. As a result, under his rule, Buddhism was granted an official status as an educational and religious institution. The purpose of the empire thus became to promote the practice of Dharma – the path of mind transformation. In this way, Ashoka transformed military imperialism of the outer world into compassionate imperialism of the inner world, the mind (Thurman 1997).

Ashoka's ethic has permeated Indian politics ever since. It is no accident that Mahatma Gandhi, the modern father of non-violence in politics (and role model for Transformational Leadership), chose Ashoka's lion pillar, surmounted by the Wheel of Dharma, as the symbol on the flag of the newly independent India.

The next example of Buddhist-inspired leadership arose out of a teaching by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Buddhist saint/scholar Nagarjuna to King Udiya Shatavahana, who ruled an area of southern India (ca 150-200 CE), in a teaching known as 'Jewel Garland of Royal Counsel (Nagarjuna, 2007). Nagarjuna instructed the king in what he needed to know for his own liberation and development. Nagarjuna then advised King Udiyana on the basic principle of enlightened social action, the altruism of great love and great empathy. "O king! Just as you love to consider what to do to help yourself, so should you love to consider what to do to help others". He taught the king to look at his subjects like children, including prisoners to be corrected so that they could return to society and fulfill their opportunity for enlightenment. King Udiyana was able to implement the principles of enlightened politics in his kingdom more completely than Ashoka, because of the instructions on universal responsibility, wisdom and compassion – the ideal of the Bodhisattva.

Importantly, Nagarjuna said that if a ruler cannot implement a politics of enlightenment, then the ruler should abandon the throne to pursue enlightenment for himself first. This advice contradicts most other systems of political leadership, which posit the ruler and his work as the most important or most sacred. Nagarjuna emphasizes that the only way to bring society to enlightenment, is that when the leader lives a life in pursuit of enlightenment himself. The ultimate aim of society and of ruling one is to give people in society the opportunity to develop their own mental qualities up to full enlightenment. More than two third of the Jewel Garland contains personal instructions on wisdom – understanding the reality of selflessness and interdependence, which holds the key to becoming a bodhisattva engaged in altruistic action (Thurman 1997).

By combining the insight into the nature of the self with compassion and social action, Nagarjuna added a new dimension not only to the evolution of Buddhism but to the unfolding of Indian society itself. Inspiration from the Jewel Garland created the basis for subsequent empires in India, run by the Gupta dynasty. It became an era of great religious tolerance, ethnic harmony, wealthy cities, powerful monasteries (including the great Buddhist monastery of Nalanda that furthered Nagarjuna's teachings), prosperity and peace. This era of peace lasted for many centuries almost up to the end of the first millennium.

Another important scripture arose in the 8<sup>th</sup> century: the Bodhicaryavatara – A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life – written by Indian Buddhist monk Shantideva (Shantideva 1997). This is perhaps the most widely read and cited text in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Its outline is built on the Six Perfections: generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration and wisdom. By emphasising the need to overcome one's negative emotions by conquering self-grasping and transform the mind into compassion, this work strengthened the ideal of the Bodhisattva as an 'inner warrior'. In essence, the Bodhisattva warrior is committed to fight the *inner* enemy of selfishness, greed and anger, rather than any *outer* enemies. However, rather than merely renouncing the outer world, Bodhisattva-warriors often intentionally took on roles in the outer world as statesmen, teachers, artists and writers, which allowed them to serve others best while simulatenously engaging in an inner practice to transform their own mind.

The Bodhisattva practice has since been articulated by many Buddhist masters and scholars in the Mahayana school. For example, the Bengal scholar Atisha, who left India for Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century where he met relatively uneducated people, explained the entire Bodhisattva path in a simple text “The Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment” (Pabongka 1991, Kyentse 1993). This started a tradition of teachings encompassing the entire Buddhist doctrine in a concise ready-to-practice form, known as the gradual path to enlightenment. The 14<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan master Tsong-Khapa clarified many of these teachings which subsequently became the basis of the Tibetan monastic curriculum. One of his texts summarizes the Bodhisattva teachings in three principles: Detachment, Wisdom and Compassion (Rinchen 2010).

The Mahayana Buddhist tradition distinguishes two paths toward enlightenment: a gradual and speedy path. The gradual path is based on the Buddhist sutra’s and may take many lifetimes to result into full enlightenment. The fast path is based on the Buddhist Tantra’s, which can be practiced by practitioners in the context of a strong link with their master. A central feature of Tantra practice is the usage of imagination and creativity. Negative emotions are transformed through the visualization of Buddhist deities and images. A common meditational form is that of a deity in classical royal attire, through which the meditator can cultivate his innate power to transform his mind, in analogy to a king who can transform society through the power that he wields (Trungpa 1992). Buddhist Tantric teachings were in fact first taught to kings and leaders in order to suit their potential for creating social benefit while remaining in a position of power (Hopkins 1984, Mullin 1997).

In short, the Bodhisattva path became increasingly accessible to leaders interested in putting Buddhism into practice in society.

### Leadership in Asia

From India the practice of the Bodhisattva first spread to China and Eastern Asia, including South East Asia, and later in several transmission to the Tibetan plateau, the Himalayas and Mongolia.

In the fifth through the seventh centuries C.E., the Chinese monk explorers I Tsing and Hsuan Tsang traveled through Central Asia and India. They recorded thriving communities of monks and nuns, with books and learned teachers widely available. Their reports inspired Chinese Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (r. 712–56) to invite Indian Buddhist monk Vajrabodhi to perform at the court, starting a tradition of Buddhist priests advising Chinese emperors of various dynasties (Ebrey 2006). During the Tang Dynasty many Buddhist Emperors emulated the Indian monarch Ashoka, for example by opening their prisons and forbidding capital punishment. Emperors of later dynasties, too, embraced Buddhist principles of statehood and leadership. During the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongol emperors made Buddhism an official religion of China, and Tibetan lamas were given patronage at the court (Nan Huaijin 1997). For example, the Tibetan Buddhist master Phagpa (1253-1280) was invited to China by the emperor Kublai Khan and his reincarnations became the spiritual teacher of Kublai’s successors. This so-called priest-patron relationship continued in the Ming dynasty by emperor Yong-le (1360-1424), who invited Deshin Shepa, the 5<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, to teach Buddhism at the Chinese court (Sperling 1979). Emperors from the subsequent Qing (Manchu) Dynasty, who embraced the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, sought council from the Dalai Lama’s and Mongolian Buddhist masters (Mullin 2001).

Buddhism had a similar impact on leadership in Korea and Japan. The shogunate leaders of Japan, especially during the Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1336–1573) eras, used Buddhist principles and institutions to lead their country toward considerable peace.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when Buddhism disappeared from India, the Mahayana teachings were transplanted and preserved in Tibet, from where it later spread to Mongolia and Bhutan. To make the historical roots apparent: the Tibetan monasteries were modeled on the Indian Nalanda Academy. This took especially form after the political unification of Tibet under the leadership monk/philosopher the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (17<sup>th</sup> century), when the monastic academy was entrusted with both spiritual and worldly powers. Tibetan and Mongolian monasteries became powerful institutions in shaping society up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century when invading Chinese and Soviet communist regimes dismantled them. The political and religious institutions in modern day Bhutan and the Indian Himalayas, which have a similar blueprint as the Tibetan monasteries, have survived up to the present day.

In the history of Tibet and Mongolia there are many examples of powerful tribal leaders who became disciples of Buddhist masters. The most famous is the Mongolian leader Altan Khan, who was converted to Buddhism by the Tibetan teacher Sonam Gyatso, who was posthumously given the title of the (3<sup>rd</sup>) Dalai Lama by his disciple/patron.

The Bodhisattva as warrior is the leading theme in the prophecy of Shambhala, first expressed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Kalachakra Tantra teachings that appeared in India, which foretells of the emergence of warriors from the legendary land of Shambhala who come to our world to fight for the dominion of light over darkness (Birnbau 1989; Trungpa 1982; Mullin 1997). This prophecy has become very popular in Tibet, Mongolia and the Himalayas, where many people believe that the communist occupation of their lands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century indicated the strengthening of dark powers, yet at the same time brought closer the rescue by peace warriors from Shambhala. For example, the Panchen Lama (whose current reincarnation is held as political prisoner in China) is considered a manifestation of the king of Shambhala (Mullin 1997). The Shambhala teachings have also found a receptive audience in the West (Trungpa 1982, Mullin 1997).

This historic overview serves to show that in the Asian tradition mind-science and leadership education went hand in hand. Many Asian leaders have modelled themselves on the Bodhisattva warrior, which provided an alternative to feudal and class leadership orthodoxies who were traditionally locked in military warfare and power struggles. The Buddhist academy effectively created leaders: thought leaders and social leaders who deeply impacted society throughout Asia, generally creating a culture of peace. In essence, the path of the Bodhisattva is a path of leadership.

### Buddhism and Modern Science

In recent times the teachings and practices of Buddhism have been commented on by Western scholar/practitioners, who have built bridges between Buddhism and fields such as Psychology, Medicine, Biology and Neuro-science. This has contributed to the flourishing of studies on topics such as Mindfulness, Mental Balance, Health and Well-being (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Goleman 1996; 2002; Ricard 2003, Thurman 2006; Wallace 2002, 2006; Davidson/Begley 2012; Loizzo 2012).

Increasingly, these studies provide inspiration to management theory and practice (Kofman 2007, the Dalai Lama & van den Muyzenberg 2008, Senge 2008, Tideman 2009). Most recently, the practice of Mindfulness and its relevance for management has become subject to a growing number of academic studies (Glomb 2011, Hulsleger 2012).

The exchange between Buddhism and western science has paved the way to understanding how leadership theory and practice can (and should) be grounded on the capacity for transformation inherent in the human brain. Contrary to what western scientists believed until a few decades ago, neuro-science now underscores that the human mind is capable of transforming destructive emotions into positive ones, hatred into compassion, ineffectiveness into effectiveness, pain into happiness (Goleman 1997, 2003; Davidson 2012). This process of transformation is not merely relevant for the person in question. Since there are clear benefits of personal transformation for personal mental health and well being (Davidson 2002, 2012, Wallace 2006), the correlation between transformation and positive action and altruistic leadership can be established. When individuals transform, they become more effective in creating positive environments and work-cultures (Goleman 2002, McKee & Boyatzis 2005). People often regard these individuals as ‘natural leaders’ as others ‘naturally’ accept their leadership (McKee & Boyatzis 2005).

The correlation between mind-transformation and social impact (through leadership) is supported by the field of social neuro-science, which speak of the ‘mirror neurons’ and ‘open loops’ in the brain, explaining how individual emotions impact emotions of others, that is emotions are contagious (Goleman 2002, Singer 2005). The school of positive psychology is looking at how positive organizational cultures are created by the development of individual and collective positive emotions and character. This has given rise to the field of “positive organizational psychology” (Seligman 2002, 2012). In addition, there is a growing body of literature speaking of value-based leadership as foundational to personal, public and business success (Boyatzis and McKee 2005, Barrett 2006).

Many of these insights were put together by an executive of Google in collaboration with Daniel Goleman and Jon Kabat-Zinn, to become the first well-recorded Mindfulness in Business program within a company (Chade-Meng Tan 2012).

### Implication for Leadership Theory and Practice

The objective of both Buddhism and business leadership is to deal with reality in such a way that it creates value. The way that they define value may differ, but both are concerned with the same reality.

Human minds that are capable of understanding and operating in accordance with reality are bound to be more effective than those who are not. In Buddhism this is called the perfection of wisdom: Bodhisattvas train in wisdom to better understand reality. Human minds endowed with the perfection of wisdom are better placed in leadership positions. The practice of wisdom starts by training the mind, specifically the practice of Mindfulness, which allows the mind to become more calm and stable. Through these qualities the mind can learn to observe and understand both the inner and outer reality more accurately. With regard to achieving sustainability, the proper understanding of the shifts in the outer context is considered an essential first step. Subsequently, one needs to understand the relationship between the shifting context and people’s way of thinking – their mind. This speaks to the development of consciousness (their own and others’) as the prime task of leadership for sustainability.

While wisdom is the basis of the path, the other qualities expressed in the 6 perfections of the Bodhisattva path – generosity, ethics, effort, patience and concentration – are equally important for leadership. They correspond to what Tsong Khapa called the principles of detachment and compassion. These perfections and principles lead to effective social action, which is an essential feature of Transformational Leadership. This is particularly relevant in the context of sustainability which requires the ability to create social value by addressing multiple stakeholders needs (Porter & Kramer 2011). This speaks to the need to enhance the leader’s capacity for connectedness.

In the Tantric tradition, the mind is trained to enhance its creative powers and skills with which it can transform any adversarial circumstance. The principles of Tantra form an important indication that in Buddhism power is not considered negative provided that the mind is trained in wisdom and compassion. Moreover, Tantra implies that for leadership to be effective, the cultivation of creativity and problem solving should be emphasized in addition to wisdom and compassion. In other words, next to training one’s consciousness and capacity for connectedness, one should enhance one’s capacity for creativity. Through the faculty of creativity, one can find solutions to the enormous challenge of sustainability. It will help leaders can scale up their efforts with multiple stakeholders and achieve collective impact.

In practical terms, this means that leadership education would benefit from including contemplative practices and mind-training; it would enhance vital leadership qualities that will improve both business performance and social impact. The practice of Mindfulness will help leaders to achieve these qualities, while simultaneously improving their health and well-being.

In summary, by comparing the qualities of Bodhisattva leadership with qualities considered important for the leadership required for sustainability, we can present the following framework. In addition to the mindsets that are considered important for leaders tackling sustainability mentioned earlier in this paper, we have translated these in a number of leadership capabilities, abbreviated by 6 C’s (which is subjects of ongoing research led by this author (Tideman et al 2013)).

<b>6 perfections</b>	<b>3 principles of the path</b>	<b>Sustainable Leadership Mindsets</b>	<b>Leadership Capabilities (6C model)</b>
Wisdom	Wisdom	Recognizing Interdependency	(Understanding) Context
Concentration	Wisdom	Mental Balance, Mindsets, Worldviews	Consciousness
Patience	Detachment	Courage/Long Term Horizon	Continuity
Ethics	Compassion	Stimulating Connectedness & Collaboration	Connectedness
Generosity	Compassion	Creating Shared Value to serving Needs of Stakeholders	Creativity

Effort/Enthusiastic Perseverance	Detachment	Scaling Up and Measuring Value	Collectiveness
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Concluding Remarks

Given the importance of the human mind for leadership, there is no doubt that Buddhism as a system of philosophy and psychology – a science of the mind - with corresponding practices of mind-transformation, has much to contribute to the new paradigm of sustainable business leadership. While much of the current global crisis with the mega-trend of sustainability is unprecedented, the integrated and interdependent worldview that solutions to the crisis are calling for has been recognized and practiced by leaders in earlier Buddhist-inspired civilizations. The preservation of the contemplative traditions like the Bodhisattva path suggests that the practice we need to employ in order to deal with this new business paradigm already exist.

The insights emerging from the exchange between Buddhism and modern science have shed a complete different light on (adult) education and thus offer an opportunity for furthering the theory and practice of leadership development. In particular, it can strengthen the cause of Transformational Leadership and its relevance for sustainable business transformation. This will contribute to understanding how leadership can contribute to building institutions and systems that create happiness, well being and sustainability. The development of leadership along principles of the Bodhisattva path could be a critical leverage point for both sustainable business and positive societal change.

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