

**Embodied Leadership—Coherent Leadership:
Developing Wise Leaders**

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For many years I have supported leaders in making their organizations healthier, including businesses, non-profits, educational institutions, and government. If it were easy to do this, there wouldn't be so many struggling organizations and unhappy employees. After coaching about two hundred executives and their teams, I began to explore how somatic learning and Tibetan Buddhism might help people to think outside the box about leadership development and have written about both of these methods with regard to leadership and societal change.

Both offer ways to live with greater awareness from moment to moment. They are sources of subtle, refined practices for paying attention to oneself in action in life. Because they arise from a rich understanding of the nature of the body, mind, and action, each can become a lifetime's work in itself. Yet each can fortunately be used to enhance one's life without years of study. Both have led to extraordinary human development, beyond what most people know to be possible.¹

Somatic learning based on the Feldenkrais Method is used around the world to help children live full lives, despite dire diagnoses like cerebral palsy, autism, and other forms of neuromuscular disease.² Such learning also enables people to move and think in more alive, playful, and creative ways, and to perform better in sports and all of the arts that involve movement.

Tibetan Buddhism has been gaining attention worldwide since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s caused its leading teachers to be dispersed around the globe. The 14th Dalai Lama has shown the world the power of a commitment to meditative practice and study as he has become a respected global thought leader, the author of over 100 books, and the winner of major awards including the Nobel Peace Prize (1989), the US Congressional Gold Medal (2007), and the Templeton Prize (2012). I have used his book *Ethics for the New Millennium* in university ethics courses for the last eight years. When asked to think about his views of ethics in comparison with widely-used philosophical approaches that are more common in the West, like utilitarianism and duty-based ethics (deontology), students with no experience or particular interest in Buddhism often state that reading this book helped them clarify their own ethics more than any other readings in the courses.³ As one of my students recently commented, "I saw how lazy my mind is: I think about cause and effect, but he sees long chains of causation linked with every act, every choice. I thought I was a good thinker until I saw this possibility. We are not accustomed to contemplating the interconnectedness of our actions. This interconnectedness provides a complex, comprehensive, frankly mind-blowing perspective on how we all affect one another."

Both of these disciplines offer powerful practical methods to evolve oneself, but they require ongoing use to make a difference. Many people want methods that promise huge change with little investment of time or thought. Others seem willing to read, but not to jump in and see how such methods work. Reading about them does not produce change: only ongoing practice and use of them in one's life. I am continuing to explore how to make them as user-friendly as possible without lessening their intrinsic integrity as methods.

As a certified teacher of somatic learning through the Feldenkrais Method, I am authorized to incorporate it in my teaching, consulting, and coaching and have used it in courses at two universities that taught students how to apply its principles to creating change in their personal lives or work.⁴ As a professor of organization development and change, I've created an international action research project to develop understanding of what it is to be aware and present, outside of the use of any particular method and without particular training. My life has been devoted to education and training, and experience with Buddhist teaching suggested to me the approach that we've taken in our research.

As I studied Buddhist leaders (both master wisdom teachers and managers of Buddhist organizations) and informally observed spiritual leaders in other traditions, it seemed to me that doing practices for becoming aware does not necessarily translate into becoming an aware, capable leader. This seemed true in the world of somatic learning as well: spiritual or somatic expertise might help one be an excellent teacher or practitioner, but they were not sufficient for becoming a great leader. Whatever it is in their training and practice that enabled the 14th Dalai Lama and some Tibetan masters to become great leaders has not had the same degree of impact on all teachers and practitioners.⁵ I've reflected on this for years as I worked on my book *Inner Peace—Global Impact*. This led to creating and conducting a research project on moments when ordinary people (not wisdom masters) felt themselves to be more awake and present, working with a team of colleagues from around the world. I chose to focus on these moments of alive presence, because the longer I studied Buddhism, the more it seemed to me that the experience of such moments was perhaps unrelated to one's amount of training. In other words, sometimes years of meditative practice lead to open, simple presence, but not always. And some people seem to experience such moments before any extensive study and training.

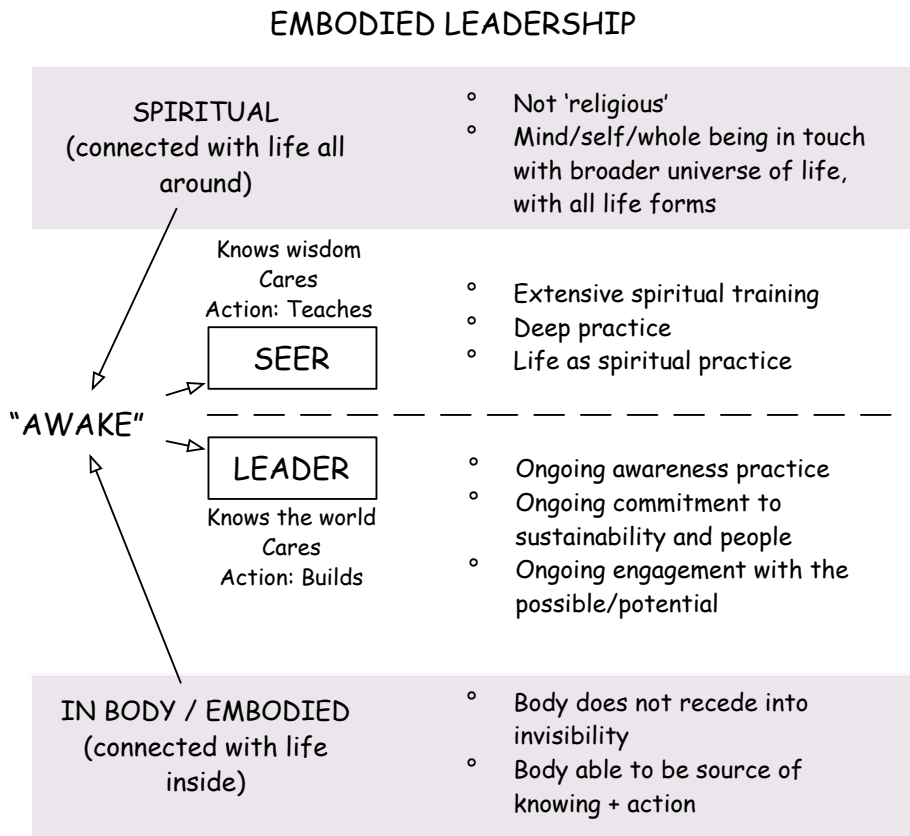
The research project we developed to explore this process of learning is described briefly in my introduction to a book to be published next year by the International Leadership Association, entitled *Leading with Spirit, Presence, and Authenticity*.⁶ If years of meditative or somatic practice are invaluable, yet do not necessarily lead to wise leadership, what might do so? How might these well-tested methods be used by people interested in honing themselves as leaders?

The basis of this research was my notion that human beings may not need to be trained to notice, pay attention, and sense themselves and their environment. Instead, for the purpose of this research project, these are regarded as basic capacities that come with embodiment as human beings, and so people do not need to be trained in them. I am guessing that the vivid connectedness with experience that human babies and very young children share fades for most people as they learn to talk, drive, think, and write. Perhaps people need what we could call basic training in compassion and mindfulness, plus ongoing reminders to pay attention, rather than needing extensive education and training in these areas? This led to the design of our research as an action research experiment.

A core notion in this project was that as humans, we have not learned how to fully use all of our equipment: we haven't yet mastered the fine art of living with the rich and complex body/mind/sensing apparatus (or self) that we are. Rather than assuming that what is needed is ever more training, I became interested in questioning whether simply paying attention might trigger a different way of approaching life and action. This is similar to what I perceive in the method of dialogue, where participants sit together patiently, allowing silence and time between

people’s words, rather than jumping in with preplanned notions of what should go next. Both approaches give space for something new to emerge from being present to one another. In our research project, we invited participants to pay attention and be aware of moments when they felt “awake” or present, and to write or record notes about the experiences.

The model illustrated below shows what I suspect to be true about leadership, spirituality, contemplation, and action, based on my research, teaching, and consulting. I am still developing and testing it.



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While wisdom teachers (“Seers”) like the Dalai Lama (or Lama Yeshe or Chogyam Trungpa—each the focus of a chapter in *Inner Peace—Global Impact*) devote hours to meditative practice and study daily, their goal and focus is different from that of corporate or government executives (“Leaders”), so they need different training. Each needs deep education in what they will be imparting to others and contributing to the world. The Seers bring traditions of spiritual wisdom, while the Leaders focus on creative development and marketing of products that serve humanity and the planet (yes – I realize that not all business is focused on sustainability in this way, but it could be). What they master with regard to knowledge is inevitably different. What they do in terms of action differs too: the seer focuses on teaching, while the leader focuses on building an organization. Both need to care about people and the way their actions impact the planet. Since it’s not easy to know such things, contemplation is needed.

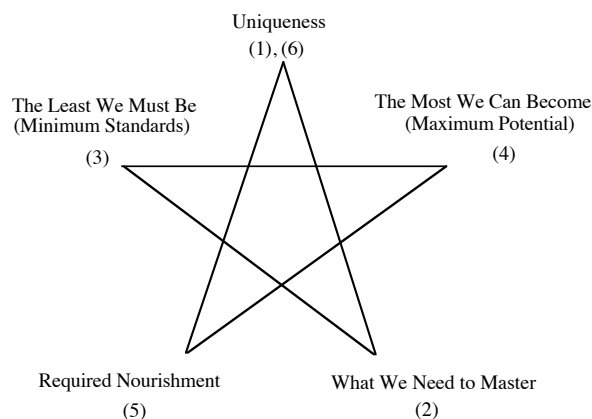
Some Seers are also Leaders, but Leaders may not need the depth of spiritual education or training that Seers require. They do need ongoing awareness practice to help them be present to the people in their organization, to the world and its evolving needs, and to the people who nourish them, whether close friends or family. This has rarely been researched, but is suggested by a study conducted by Sandra Waddock and Ericka Steckler of leaders who created the field of corporate social responsibility.⁷ To be effective in creating organizations that can lead the development of new infrastructures or initiatives that last in the world means being a Leader as sketched in this model: a person who is committed to caring action and nourishes him or herself through ongoing awareness practices.

New Thoughts: 2015

As I’ve worked with this model over the last few years and continued to bring it into teaching and consulting, I have begun to see how to work with this model alongside one developed by Charles G. Krone, based on the work of J.G.Bennett and G.I. Gurdjieff, and used extensively in the 1980s and 1990s. There is very little in print about Krone’s use of this model, but it has been used a great deal in systemwide consulting projects by his associates for helping clients to identify the full potential of a given system.⁸

As I interpret his views, this model is very useful for helping members of a system to conceptualize the uniqueness of their team, organization, or other entity. To do so, we can use a model that has five elements, seen as a 5-pointed star. Overall, we want to appreciate the *uniqueness* of the given system: what it contributes to its world that is distinct in some core ways from other entities or systems. To arrive at this, first we reflect on what the entity needs to master or have mastery over, which could have to do with skills, routines, or outputs—what it needs to be able to do in order to contribute to life or society. Then we consider what is the least it must be in order to be itself, rather than to be performing or existing as something less than it is intended to be, after which we imagine what is the most it possibly could become. Thinking about this range between the least it must be and the most it could become is very useful for many leaders of organizations, as in my experience, rarely do other consulting processes approach the uniqueness of an organization by conceptualizing this range. Then we consider what nourishes the system or allows it to thrive: what ‘food’ it requires to function. This is not normally a physical food, but could relate to the energy or inputs it requires. Given all of this, and reflecting on it as a composite of all of these elements, we return to reflecting on its uniqueness and see how we would now describe what it uniquely offers to the world.

This can be depicted as follows:



Juxtaposing this Star Model alongside my reflections on the distinction between Seers and Wise Leaders, I see that it can be used not only for organizational systems, but also to appreciate the distinct contributions of different kinds of leaders. Rather than just two options, applying this model has allowed me to see three fundamentally distinct types of leaders: the Seer, the Wise Leader, and also the Societal Change Master – who would be more of a thought leader, like Charles Krone himself, Peter Senge, or Otto Scharmer—each of whom has extended and deepened how people think about and approach organizational and societal change.⁹

Applying this model, we can more clearly conceptualize the distinctions between what each contributes to the world and how all three types of leaders are essential for a healthy world.

NOTES

- 1 See my chapter “From the Ground Up: Revisioning Sources and Methods of Leadership Development,” In L. Melina (Ed.) *The Embodiment of Leadership*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass/Wiley, 2013. It can be downloaded by my website at <http://www.coherentchange.com/publicationsOrganizational.html> and Also my book *Inner Peace—Global Impact: Tibetan Buddhism, Leadership, and Work*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012; read about it on the web at <http://www.ip-gi.com>
- 2 See “From the Ground Up” (above) and Anat Baniel’s *Kids Beyond Limits*, New York: Penguin, 2012.
- 3 The 14th Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.
- 4 See “Awareness Through Movement Lessons as a Catalyst for Change,” *The Feldenkrais Journal*, 2003, 15, 39-46, downloadable from <http://www.coherentchange.com/publicationsSomatics.html>
- 5 See the chapters on the Dalai Lama as a leader and on Lama Yeshe and Chogyam Trungpa in *Inner Peace—Global Impact* (above).
- 6 K. Goldman Schuyler (with J.E. Baugher, K. Jironet, & L. Lid-Falkman (Eds.) *Leading with Spirit, Presence, and Authenticity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2014.
- 7 S. Waddock & Steckler, E. *Seeing the Forest and the Trees: Lessons from Difference Makers For Sustaining Themselves as They Create Institutional Change*. Presentation at the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Chicago, 2009. Also S. Waddock & E. Steckler, *Wisdom, Spirituality, Social Entrepreneurs, and Self-Sustaining Practices: What Can We Learn from Difference Makers?* Chapter in J. Neal (Ed.) *The Handbook for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace*. New York: Springer, 2013.
- 8 The main description in print that I know of is by Carol Sanford, a longtime colleague of Charles Krone, who based her book *The Responsible Business: Reimagining Sustainability and Success*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011 on her years of collaborative work with Krone and grounded her consulting in another way of using the five-pointed system, which she described in detail in her book.
- 9 See P. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday, 1990, 2006; O. Scharmer, *Theory U*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009; O. Scharmer & K. Kaufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2013.