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Mindfulness as Waking Up: Musings About How to be Optimally Alive*

Abstract

Although mindfulness-based methods can be used to reduce stress, such practices have long been intended for more profound purposes. The goal of this paper is to convey how people can learn to attend to the moment mindfully without extensive training, in ways that shift their approach to leadership, work, other people—and life. My recent research invited people to direct their attention towards “waking up” rather than training them in mindfulness techniques by drawing on the inherent curiosity and wakefulness of the human mind. Subsequent to the completion of this research project, I began exploring how leaders might work from such a model. The paper describes the difference between seers, who need deep, traditional-nourished practices, and leaders, who may benefit from less extensive approaches that instead invite them to pay attention to what lives in the moment. I use C.G. Krone’s approach to systems thinking to distinguish between these two types of leaders. I close with a case study, briefly describing one leader’s use of my work in her organization.

Keywords: mindfulness, awareness practices, seer, wisdom teacher, waking up, embodiment

About the author

Kathryn Goldman Schuyler is a sociologist, organizational consultant, and educator who supports leaders in moving creatively with awareness through challenging change. Among other publications, she is author of *INNER PEACE—GLOBAL IMPACT: Tibetan Buddhism, Leadership, and Work* (IAP-2012) and editor of *Creative Social Change: Leadership for a Healthy World* (Emerald, 2016).

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* Dedicated to Charles G. Krone, whose passing while I was thinking about these questions inspired the way I framed the piece. May his fiercely independent thinking nourish us all.

As the use of what is called “mindfulness” expands in the workplace, I have been reflecting on what mindfulness has meant over the centuries. Although mindfulness-based methods can be used to reduce stress, mindfulness practices have long been intended for more profound purposes. There is benefit for people and workplaces in reducing stress, yet it concerns me to see the deeper meaning of what has been a core attribute of the wisest human beings reduced to a technology of stress relief. I hope to see such awareness practices become foundational for encouraging business and political leaders to take a longer view in making important decisions, so that the world will have more of the kind of leaders needed to guide humanity through the levels of complexity and systems change we face as a global society (Goldman Schuyler et al., 2016).

These wise beings are my version of what I believe is often meant by shamans, edgewalkers, or wayfinders. We in contemporary Western societies lack a shared terminology for such a person or the role they fill, although cultures throughout history have accorded an important position in society to such leaders. What I refer to here as a *wisdom teacher* or *seer* is a person who has come to understand deeper meanings about the nature of life, usually through some type of ongoing mindfulness or awareness practice. I have been drawn to, and in search of, such leaders for many decades—really since I was in high school and watched old movies at night on the Late Show with my mother. Two that I recall are *The Razor’s Edge* (Zanuck and Goulding, 1946) and *Lost Horizon* (Capra, 1937). Both feature heroes who sought to understand what was truly worthwhile in life, who found people who seemed to exist outside of normal time and space from whom they were able to absorb these teachings, and who then returned to regular life transformed, with a desire to help people and a quality of inner peace. I continued to search for such teachers in “real” life and finally, after many years, began to find them. For me, they have come from Tibetan Buddhist traditions, but I know they exist all over the world, in many cultures. They offer what are often described as “wisdom teachings”: teachings, from whatever culture, that focus on the meaning of life, taught by people who actually understand and live in accord with them.

My goal for this paper is to convey some of the more far-reaching aspects of mindfulness practice, explore the difference between leaders nourished by such deep practice and leaders who can benefit from less extensive approaches to mindfulness, and suggest some options for action. Initially I will explore these questions by presenting background about the particular mindfulness traditions with which I am familiar and describing how they led me to develop another way of “playing” with mindfulness that seems useful for many people who are not interested in immersing themselves in lengthy practice. I will then apply a framework developed by J.G. Bennett (See Bennett, 1961, 1966) as taught by Charles G. Krone (1971, 1975) to distinguish between those teachers or leaders who live nourished by the richest meanings of mindfulness and those who can appreciate mindfulness, yet choose to focus on what is materially practical in the short term for an organization. I will conclude by describing how an approach to mindfulness that is grounded in the inherent curiosity and wakefulness of the human mind can be used, without extensive training, to shift people’s approach to leadership, work, other people, and the planet.

Finding Ways to Explore Mindfulness in Relation to Leadership

From my experience as a leadership consultant with an academic background in sociology, I sense that what business leaders understand, see as feasible, and are able to enact depends both on themselves as individuals and on the culture they have been nourished by and in turn need to influence. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, what people view as “normal” varies considerably over time and place (see Mannheim, 1923/1952; Watters, 2013); I am intrigued by how such culturally-influenced perceptions shape human experience and choice.

Therefore, in my search for wise leaders, I found myself seeking a culture with a radically different approach to questions about values and change from the culture of the United States, where I grew up, or even Western industrialized and post-modern society as a whole. I began to study Tibetan Buddhism and considering how it had been able to survive and even thrive outside of its home culture (Goldman Schuyler, 2007; Goldman Schuyler, 2012). I traveled to Canada and Switzerland to study with its best-known leader the Dalai Lama, an edge-walker himself, and sought to distill what I could about how its view of life can nourish people searching for new perspectives on how to live well. A qualitative study of Western Buddhist leaders that I conducted (2007) suggested to me that although they seemed completely different on the surface, Tibetan Buddhist culture and U.S. culture might share a comparable kind of entrepreneurial *creative agency*. Defined as the “capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” (Merriam Webster, n.d.), in Tibet this creative agency was directed inward toward “taming” one’s own mind in order to impact the surrounding world, whereas in industrialized societies comparable levels of intentionality (if one can compare such ineffable things as creative agency) are directed outward toward mastering or conquering the material world (see Figure 1, Goldman Schuyler, 2007). This insight is similar to what Thurman (1998) described in Tibet as “inner modernity” (See ch. 8, pp. 223-257 for full discussion). Where the European version of modernity involved a unified world-view that was increasingly secular and focused on the domination of nature, the Tibetan “inner modernity” involved a unified world-view that perceived everything as sacred. “...Agency in Tibet became a force for individual enlightenment, to the greatest extent possible, whereas in the west, similar forces were channeled into social and economic development” (Goldman Schuyler, 2007, p. 56). It is not surprising that if an entire culture invests in inner development, it might begin to produce “enlightened beings”: a deliciously hopeful thought. Tibet even has a category of life story called a *namtar* or spiritual autobiography: a book about this by a noted Western scholar is entitled *Enlightened Beings* (Willis, 1995).

I sought to develop and depict ways of drawing upon such wisdom traditions that would fit an outward-focused culture, aiming to help us as scholars and our clients as executives to move smoothly and painlessly between right and left brain, contemplation and strategic planning, meditation and action—to find the stillness in the movement and the movement in the stillness. While consultants are increasingly speaking and writing about the benefits of what they refer to as mindfulness for health and stress relief, I felt that the real value lay in the deeper practices of compassion and awareness that had been known for centuries. This led me to distinguish between two types of leaders: those whose primary focus is on spiritual leadership, as contrasted with those who could benefit from training and practice in mindfulness, but whose main focus is on leading a practical, worldly organization, whether a business, educational institution, or government. Since the spiritual lineages of teaching handle the deep training of seers (wisdom

teachers), I considered what aspects of this deeper work might be appropriate for those I will call simply “leaders”: people with key roles in many types of secular organizations who need to face increasingly complex and global sets of problems.

I began in a familiar setting where I could interest people in exploring the experience of what we chose to call “waking up”: the moments when one notices one is actually present to people, the world, and life. I developed a qualitative action research project with Susan Skjei, who is both a social scientist and designated *acharya* (authorized teacher) in a tradition of awareness that is of Tibetan Buddhist origin. For two years, we invited colleagues from the Academy of Management and their colleagues and students to notice when they felt more fully present and to take notes on their experience (Goldman Schuyler et al., 2015). While those participating were not global business leaders but professors, consultants, and leaders in educational settings, this study provided a foundation for learning about waking up as it is actually experienced. Rather than assuming that we knew what mindfulness was, so that we would have to define it, we decided to use a phenomenological approach to the experience. We sought to see what people would be aware of if they held the intention of noticing “moments of waking up” in relation to their work. Many participants had years of familiarity with meditation but some had none, and the difference in the types of comments and experience between those who were experienced and the novices was not very noticeable.

Instead of trying to develop a training program appropriate to today’s pace and values about uses of time, we wanted to find out whether some intrinsic capacity to fully notice and attend to things would be elicited by sustaining a desire to “wake up.” We intentionally did not distinguish for participants between waking up and mindfulness, as our approach was one of not knowing, not defining, but instead exploring, sensing, and describing. This was more like a humanities project in some ways than it was like a typical social science research project, in that we sought to support participants in finding their own textures for their own experiences. There are surprisingly few such qualitative research projects on mindfulness or meditative experiences: Kerr et al. (2011) studied written diaries of MBSR students and Bradbury (2013) studied the experiences of caregivers.

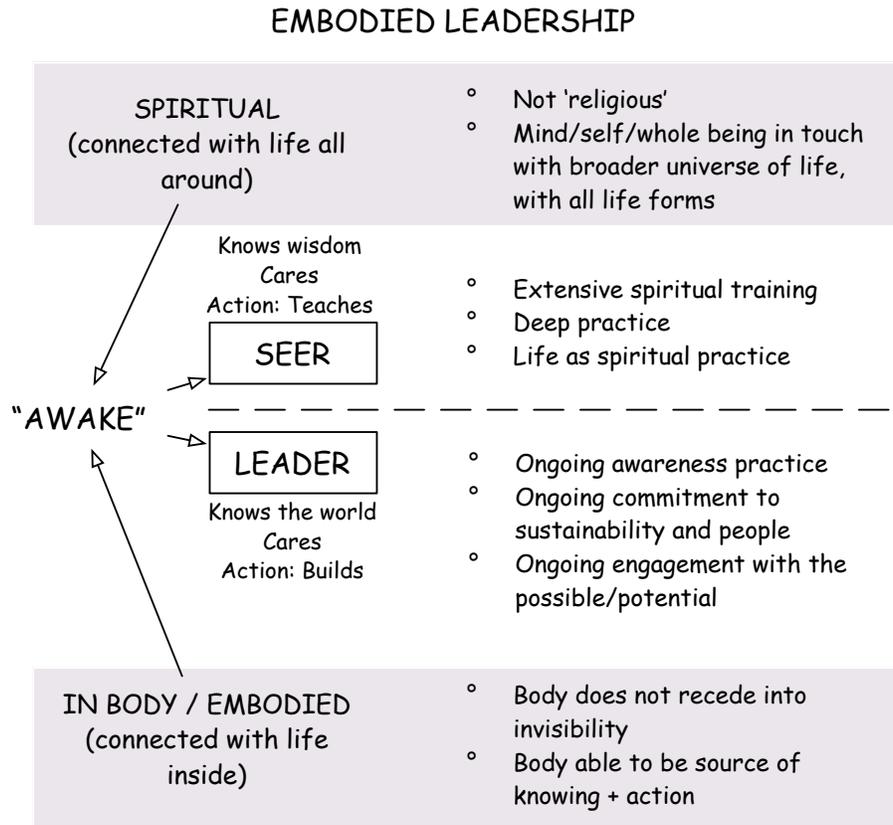
This research project helped me explore how to introduce people to the notion that what is lacking is sheer curiosity about each moment, combined with remembering, as human beings, to remain curious and open to whatever is actually happening. I sought to experiment with ways to help people sustain what seems like a natural curiosity and wonder about life. It seems to me that *wisdom*, whatever it may be, has everything to do with being fully alive, somehow realizing that if I deserve this, so does everyone else, and caring deeply that all should have such opportunities in life. Author and consultant Michael Carroll described this as a “love affair with being awake”—a phrase that catches my intent perfectly, as it conveys the excitement, joy, and light energy that people feel when they are in love¹. If one is in love with being awake, one never forgets this intention, whereas normally people forget easily and get caught up in activities and schedules.

After observing myself and the small group of scholar-practitioners who participated for over two years in this collaborative action research project, I proposed the following model,

¹ Personal communication with M. Carroll, January 19, 2016.

which I am still developing and testing. This research, combined with my observations at dharma centers and interviews with Tibetan teachers and their Western students, as well as my own somatic and Buddhist awareness practices, led to the insights informing my *Embodied Leadership Model*. While seers like the Dalai Lama 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. I call this *embodied leadership* to emphasize that we learn and live in bodies: that reflection and action equally are informed by the embodied nature of our existence.

Figure 1. Embodied Leadership



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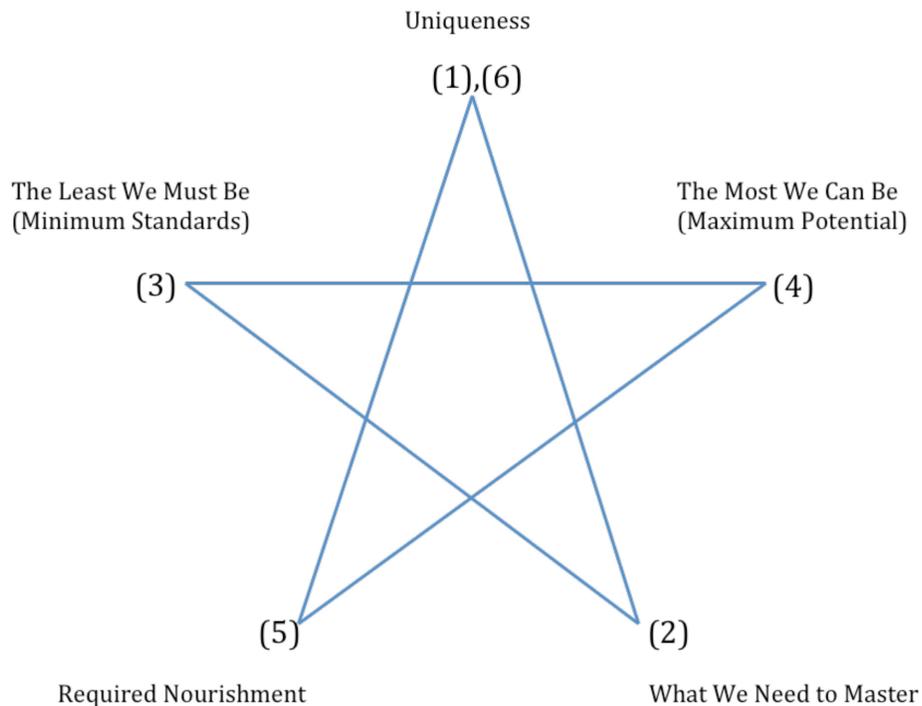
Some seers are also leaders, but leaders may not need the depth of spiritual education or training that seers require. They do need ongoing awareness practice to help them be present to the people in their organization, to the world and its evolving needs, and to the people who nourish them, whether close friends or family. This has rarely been researched, but is suggested by a study conducted by Waddock and Steckler (2009, 2013) of leaders who created the field of

corporate social responsibility. To be effective in creating organizations that can generate new societal infrastructures or initiatives that endure means being a leader: a person who is committed to caring action and who nourishes him or herself through ongoing awareness practices. At their best, either and both can be *embodied leaders*: people whose actions emanate from deep convictions, respect for others' values and cultures, and a unity of head and heart. Additional important research in this area includes Neal's (2006) study of edgewalkers and Pruzan et al's (2007) study of spirituality as the basis for business leadership, as well as books and articles by McIntosh (2015), Spiller et al. (2015), and Waddock (2014).

Distinguishing Between Seers and Leaders Using the Pentad

Krone developed an approach to organization and leadership development grounded in Bennett's *systematics* (Bennett, 1961, 1966), which is a way of understanding the organization of life and valuing that is based in turn on G.I. Gurdjieff's Sufi-based approach to human development. I am drawing on systematics for one component that I learned from Krone, which is also used as an ordering principle by Sanford (2011, 2014) in her pioneering work about the *responsible organization*: the pentad as a structure for understanding the meaning or uniqueness of something. 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. For some publicly available material, see Krone (1971, 1975).

Figure 2. The Core Pentad



The pentad model (see Figure 2) is very useful for enabling members of a system to conceptualize the nature of their team or organization. It helps one to appreciate the *uniqueness* of a given system: what it contributes to its world that is distinct in 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 complete in and of itself, rather than performing or existing as something less than it is intended to be, after which we imagine what is the most it possibly could become. In my experience, thinking about this range between *the least it must be* and *the most it could become* is very useful for many leaders of organizations. I have not seen other consulting processes approach the uniqueness of an organization in such a way. 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 the system 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 gives a rich and differentiated sense of the uniqueness of the given system, and the combination of structured thought and reflection done in a group yields a way of reflecting on values second to none that I have experienced in organizational consulting.

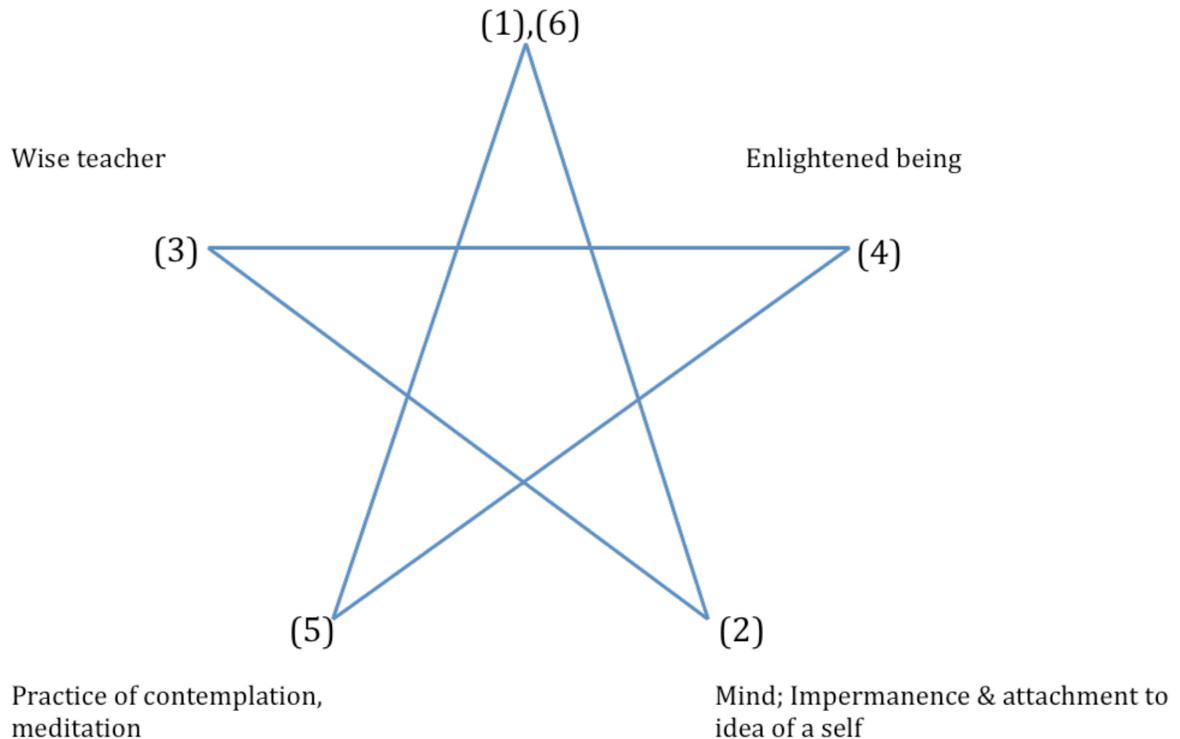
Applying this to the insight in the *Embodied Leadership* model that seers and leaders are distinct, I see seers as people whose main focus is wisdom for the sake of all beings. They seek to become wise, to understand the nature of life and the human mind, but not for themselves or to promote knowledge, in the academic sense, but rather to help beings align with life. The goal is to help beings become wise, which, depending upon the various wisdom traditions, may mean different things, but in the Tibetan Buddhist context means helping beings to understand impermanence, so they neither grasp after any form of eternal separate life nor give way to nihilism—the sense that nothing matters. Seers care deeply for both wisdom and beings. They are, by definition, both kind and wise. Their lives are dedicated to transcending the attachment to self and to helping others to do so, and to seeing daily events in the larger frame from which they as individuals do not matter more than any other individual. Often, they devote considerable time to contemplation and even to silent retreat.

The seer’s role is distinct from that of most leaders, as the seer embodies a living tradition. In addition to being someone who cares deeply for the well-being of all beings, he or she has been taught a living wisdom: a way of understanding life that has been the actual foundation for living for other such teachers. Buddhists are told that such wisdom cannot be learned by reading, but must be imparted directly from someone who lives with this as his or her core principle to another person who is prepared to live in this way, usually, although not necessarily, through deep practices of silence and contemplation. This is one of the unique qualities of Tibetan Buddhism as a wisdom tradition, and perhaps of other wisdom traditions: traditions which only exist as long as there are living people who can pass on what is known to someone else orally, whether or not it has been put in writing. It is important to preserve texts where they exist, but the wisdom itself can only be passed from a master to a student or colleague.

Mapping this on the pentad model, the various points of the star are seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The Pentad of the Seer

Sustains the living connection of a tradition across time and space – Represents a particular lineage or way of understanding life

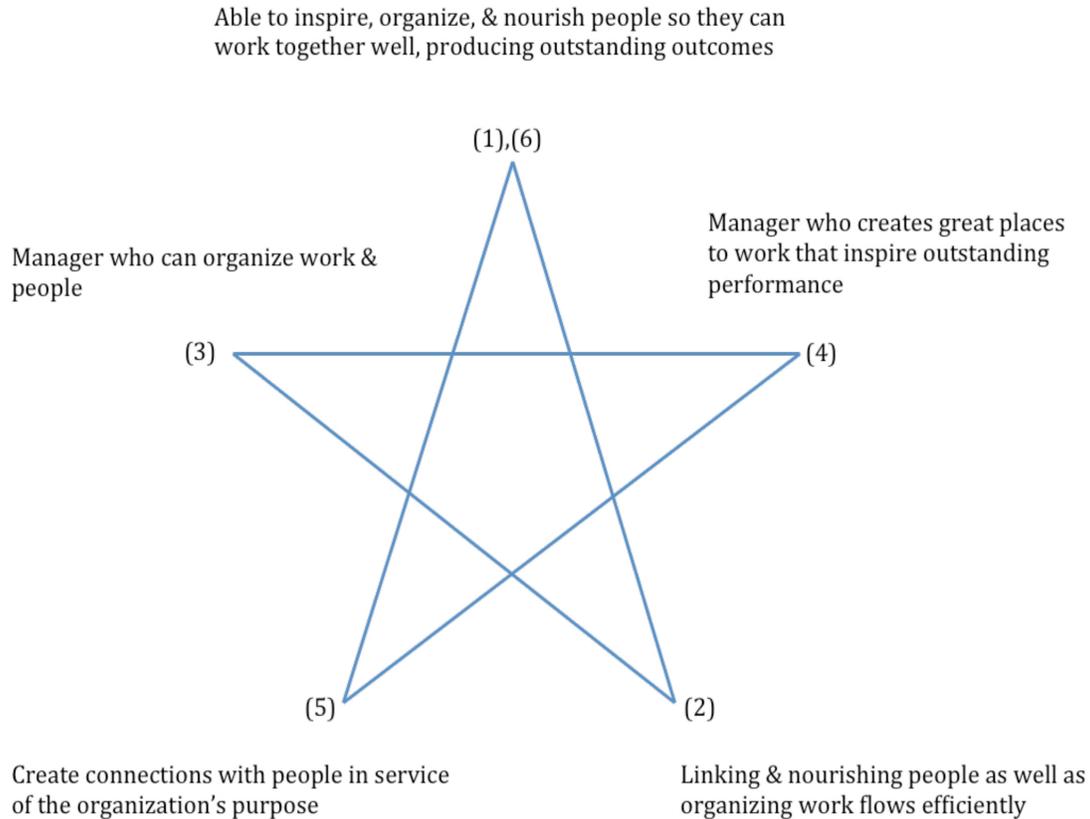


On the other hand, a leader in the secular meaning has quite a different focus in life, so requires different training and life experiences. To be masterful embodied leaders, both need some level of mindfulness and caring for others, but the nature of the awareness and training is, I suggest, very distinct. This is important to consider as increasing numbers of people with little background or depth of knowledge in mindfulness traditions begin to conduct research on mindfulness for leaders and to train leaders and other professionals in what they call mindfulness. In the context of many of the wisdom traditions, what is now being suggested for secular leaders and professionals is indeed a form or part of mindfulness, but it is certainly not the whole of it.

In this context, an embodied leader is able to generate significantly better performance in an organization than ordinary people might be able to in the same role, and is aware of him or herself in ways that could be called mindful, and also cares deeply for others, as does the seer—but the arena of action and intention is distinctly more short-term and oriented toward the needs of one organization or one society. Where the seer is focused on all beings, with little attachment to ego or sense of his or her importance, an embodied leader cares about the people in his or her organization—those under his or her care and leadership, and probably those impacted by it as well. Self knowledge is foundational for the secular leader, so as to be able to perceive clearly

what others care about and express, but they may have distinctly different understandings of the meaning of *self* (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The Pentad of the Leader



From this perspective, leaders are focused less on wisdom than on performance in a particular setting. The awareness of self and care for others is in service of organizational goals. Nourishment may come from meditation or contemplation, but more comes from connections with people and performance, and what needs to be mastered is not the wisdom of impermanence and the lack of any real identity for anyone or anything, but instead the capacity to bring people together and nourish them in ways that enable them to simultaneously feel valued and perform as needed by the organization. To bring the above thinking alive and make it more concrete, I will share brief stories about several seers whom I have experienced as teachers and one leader who is deeply interested in mindfulness and being awake.

Portraits of Seers

While most people around the world have come to know of the 14th Dalai Lama, he is not the only Tibetan Buddhist teacher who can be described as a seer. Each spiritual tradition has less well-known teachers, all of whom have also been trained in depth, have experienced lengthy contemplative retreats, usually for periods ranging from three to twenty years, and sustain a serious daily practice of many hours. Since many people do not come in contact with such beings, I am including photographs of two of my own Buddhist teachers. When I look at these

photographs, I have the sense that they convey the kindness and depth of wisdom of each man. There is something intrinsically similar that emanates from each of the photographs; to me, they convey a deep knowing and caring, combined with a sense of humor about what matters in life.

Image 1. Seers



Photo by Morgan Mussell, used with permission
Lama Kunga Thartse Rinpoche



Photo by Libby Luning, used with permission
Lama Tharchin Rinpoche

Lama Kunga Thartse Rinpoche (see Image 1) has lived and taught in the San Francisco Bay area since settling in California in 1972. He was born into a noble family in Tibet, studied in depth, and became the Vice-Abbot of Ngor Monastery in 1959. Since emigrating to the United States, he has taught Buddhism and the Tibetan language across the US, in Brazil, and in Costa Rica. He is highly respected by his students, many of whom have studied with him for over twenty-five years, and is the founder of the Ewam Choden Tibetan Buddhist Center in Kensington, California.

Lama Kunga was able to bring his father to the US after decades of imprisonment in Tibet by the Chinese and helped him to write and publish his life story (Carnahan and Lama Kunga Rinpoche, 1995), which gives a colorful picture of life in Tibet. He has translated many of the songs of Milarepa (1995) (one of the most important seers in Tibetan history) into English, publishing a book of them. In introducing Milarepa's thinking and wisdom as shown through these songs, he brought up the importance of directly experiencing wisdom teachers:

If the reader is expecting something like a magical and instantaneous reward from this book, I would say that it is rather difficult—do something else. This book is not just a collection of entertaining short stories. It should be read like a road map while traveling through the unfamiliar inner roads on the way to the central valley of the fully aware mind where you can peacefully camp out. ... This is the real thing—like a child being nourished by a good mother. ... However, everything will not be immediately understandable. When traveling by map and reaching an unfamiliar town one must stop and get detailed information of the locality that is not clear on the map. Similarly, the reader of this book

should find assistance to get at the meaning of these songs, a special teacher who is skilled in this particular subject. (Kindle Locations 115-122.)

I sensed his quality of heart when I first saw him across a large hall; I don't know how, but I did. From him and from Lama Tharchin (see Image 1) I have come to sense that the real learning that one can gain from these teachers is only partly in the words and very much in some kind of contact that I don't know how to describe. For a description of this, I turn to Lama Tharchin, who spoke to this in an interview I conducted with him in 2009 that appeared in *Inner Peace—Global Impact* (2012). Although I did not know at the time, this interview actually helps to clarify what it is that is so unique about this category of leaders that I refer to as seers.

Lama Tharchin Rinpoche was a tenth generation yogi (in Tibetan *ngakpa*), who completed over eight years of retreat in Tibet under the direction of the great Nyingma teacher Dudjom Rinpoche before traveling to the United States to teach on the request of his teachers. He left Tibet on foot with his family in 1960 as a young man and lived in India and Nepal before coming to the United States.

During an interview, I asked him about what was different in teaching Westerners. His first response was that nothing needed to be modified because Buddhism inherently contains sufficient variety for all kinds of people: it was developed that way since the beginning (see interview, Goldman Schuyler, 2012, pp. 297-308). He emphasized that although “the essence level of mind, which is called ‘awareness,’ fully enlightened mind, or the nature of mind” is “not complicated,” “this needs to be introduced by a teacher who has experienced it, because although we have it, we don't recognize it without this introduction” (p. 299). He went on to describe how some Westerners think they do not need teachers, feeling that they can “do it themselves,” re-creating the dharma in a Western or American way. He explained that what such people fail to grasp is that the understanding they seek is not conceptual, something that they can learn from books, but is instead an experiential quality that can only be comprehended through interaction with someone who has experienced it. This is called *lineage*, which is also described in my book by Western social scientist Margaret Wheatley (2012, pp. 334-335), as meaning that such wisdom teachings emanate from a source of knowing that is beyond individual minds and has been passed down for centuries from one enlightened person to another. Westerners, according to both Lama Tharchin and Wheatley, tend to overemphasize the value of creating something oneself, as compared with learning from someone with a depth of wisdom. It is this living chain of people who are enlightened that generates the possibility for people today of understanding something that is fundamentally not conceptual at all

In describing his personal experience of attempting to convey what was initially such a foreign tradition in the US, he said,

... I don't want to chase after more people or become famous—I'm just not interested in that. ... not many people have the taste [for this]. It's like that everywhere. What gives me satisfaction is helping anyone who is really doing practice. ...

In Dharma practice, you are a hundred percent reliant on the kind of teacher that you have. It is important to rely on a good teacher who has the ability to open our own wisdom and compassion. They will lead us on the path beyond dualistic mind ...to full

liberation. (Italics added for emphasis by KGS.) Although Buddha nature is inherent in all of us, it has not blossomed due to always relying on our own dualistic mind. So *we must develop the ability to choose teachers with wisdom and compassion, who are not teaching out of confusion or for their own fame or gain, or to further their Dharma politics.* (Italics added for emphasis by KGS.) ... I am old now ... and have no need to collect more students or fame. ... [I] only wish to give advice that will actually benefit beings and release them from their suffering and confusion. (Goldman Schuyler, 2012, pp. 301-304)

My experience of meeting these teachers has in many ways been like having a long-standing dream somehow emanate into life. I had believed in the possibility of wisdom teachers from what I'd read in Sufi and Buddhist literature, and had met the Dalai Lama at a distance, but these teachers were people I could talk with, walk with, and even hug. It is clear to me that what we learn growing up from our parents is in many ways similar to why we need such teachers. Harry Harlow's (somewhat cruel) psychology experiments from the middle of the 20th century showed how even monkeys are warped emotionally if given wire surrogates for mothers, whereas when given soft cloth surrogates, they could somehow survive and thrive. (See Smuts, 2003 for further sources.) Just as humans and perhaps many animals learn something about being the species they are from their mother (or father), we can learn to be the wisdom beings that we are only from wisdom teachers.

The Impact on a Leader

How the wisdom traditions and practices may be differently relevant for leaders was suggested to me through a meeting with a remarkable woman leader whom I met through a Women's Leadership Conference sponsored by the International Leadership Association that took place at beautiful Asilomar, in Pacific Grove, California in 2013. I offered a roundtable on the recently-published *Inner Peace—Global Impact*, held at a corner table in the large and very noisy dining room of this woodsy, ocean-side conference center. A participant in the conference came over with a colleague, saying she was highly intrigued by the book. We attempted an in-depth conversation about the nature of Tibetan Buddhism and its implication for leadership, despite the surrounding noise, but I had no idea how deeply my words or the book were to affect Michelle (see Image 2).

Michelle Taylor had just assumed a position as Vice President of Student Affairs at a large and rapidly growing university, with over 600 employees in her division. Her responsibilities included all student recruitment, admissions, retention, financial aid, the registrar, and student life (including conflict resolution, disability services, career development, advising, the Medical/Mental Health Center, student conduct, intramural sports, and student clubs). The year that had begun just before she met me and the book proved to be difficult beyond her expectations or imagination. She had to terminate several employees from the university. These were difficult transitions that created tensions between staff members. She was accused of mismanaging scholarship funds (later to be exonerated), which created feelings of not knowing who she could trust. She lost three key members of her staff within weeks of each other and had to rebuild her executive team. In short, she lost her confidence and wondered if administration was for her, despite 20 years of previous successful leadership experience within higher education for which she had won many awards. While she is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon Church), the concepts in *Inner Peace—*

Global Impact about compassion and mindfulness spoke to her deeply. She commented to me “I thought only Jesus could be like that – and here was your book saying that I could do this—that I could experience difficult people as wise teachers and appreciate them and honor them, that I could see no difference between myself and them!”

Image 2. Michelle Taylor, Vice President of Student Affairs, Utah Valley University



Michelle realized that she hated her long commute and was beginning to hate her job and would have to move on or change. She read the book over and over – parts of it three times—finding both the concepts and personal stories inspiring and nourishing. Finally, one day she stopped the car at the top of a mountain pass as she made the hour-long drive to work, looked around her, and noticed how beautiful it was. She said to herself, “I can continue to hate this drive and the people I work with, and the situation I am finding myself in, or I can change it. I can stop and see the beauty every day and see the beauty in difficult people too.” She has continued to value what mindfulness and compassion bring for a leader. Recently, her son died unexpectedly in his early twenties; she wrote to me that these concepts helped her tremendously, supporting her in staying present to the experience, rather than using medications to dull the pain.

Since then, she has told this story to everyone in her department, quite openly, encouraging them too to investigate the benefits of mindfulness both individually and as a department. She and they are exploring the very question that intrigues me: what aspects or elements of mindfulness are actually essential for these perspectives to make a lasting difference to people at work, people who are focused on what they do together, in contrast to people who seek wisdom in the sense it is described by seers. They are seeking to figure out what is that minimal essential level of mindfulness (point #3 on the pentad) that allows it to nourish, without devoting one’s life to wisdom and spiritual teaching.

Conclusions: Wisdom and Practicality

My intent in writing this paper has been to elaborate on the distinction between what mindfulness is in relation to seers (wisdom teachers who are a very unique kind of leader deeply steeped in the wisdom traditions) as compared with people who aim to bring wise leadership to business or government. There has been much interest in mindfulness and compassion in the workplace in the past ten years, with increasing discussion about what mindfulness is and whether it can or should be used as a tool for improving performance through relieving stress, or whether that misuses it, turning it into what has been dubbed *McMindfulness* (Purser and Loy, 2013). I intend the distinction between seers and leaders to illuminate the gap that some people assume exists between wisdom and practicality, as I believe that wisdom is extremely practical for the world and for all societies, influenced as all are by materialistic mindsets about life and values.

It seems to me that there is nothing more practical than wisdom: a deep understanding of the nature of life and its organizing principles. The more that business and political leaders act from a long-term view that respects the inevitability of conflict among needs of various groups of people, with the intent of honoring all, yet being clear about the long-term needs of the organizations, the more likely that humans can work together for a viable, sustainable existence on this planet. Perhaps we need a different term from mindfulness for both, as in most wisdom traditions, *mind* doesn't refer to what is inside of a human brain, but to something far more vast, and many who are unfamiliar with these wisdom traditions think of mind purely in that more limited way. This leads to talking at cross-purposes at times.

Research on mindfulness is increasingly emphasizing the neuroscience behind it. While this is fascinating, from a social science perspective what I find compelling about mindfulness is the promise of wisdom that it points to. It holds the possibility of developing leaders who are genuinely caring and open-minded, understanding the ultimate equality of beings—as Jinpa quoted the Dalai Lama “we are all same!” (Jinpa, 2012, p. 40). “He knows that all differences among people are contingent. They are all due to circumstances. At the fundamental level, when everything is stripped down, everybody’s the same” (Jinpa, 2012, p. 40).

In addition, the narrow perception of mindfulness as an individual, private focus can be shifted to an appreciation for sociological mindfulness, so that leaders attend to systems and their interdependence (Baugher, 2014). Considering the implications for leadership development, I suspect that the emphasis on critical self-awareness grounded in contemplation and compassion that Jinpa (2012) describes as what he perceives as differentiating Western and traditional Tibetan education may be a key, as these can certainly be given additional attention in leadership development. As in the Waking Up research project, remembering to pause and take notice of life, reflecting on what is important, can have far-reaching impact and does not require years of meditation or retreat. We can find out how to draw upon our innate curiosity and caring as human beings and combine these with pausing to reflect and develop advanced skills in critical thinking, in the context of the kind of broad view of the interconnectedness of everything generated by today's electronically connected world. This provides soil for growing the kind of leaders needed to help life on earth and to become increasingly healthy as a society, rather than devolving into brutal competition for ever-scarcer resources.

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