Being a Bodhisattva at Work:
Perspectives on the Influence of Buddhist Practices in Entrepreneurial Organizations

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores the fit between the lived reality in entrepreneurial organizations and the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva *in order to see whether the juxtaposition of these two very different realities can shed light on the impact of spiritual values in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an array of entrepreneurs who have been practising Buddhists for over three years to see whether they were using core elements of this concept in their daily work and, if so, how they experienced the value and impact of these notions. The interviews showed that it was very much a part of the participants' daily work lives and seems to be a force in creating a happier, more nourishing work environment. All participants brought up the notion unasked and provided stories describing how their relationships at work were influenced by this and other fundamental aspects of their spiritual practice. The data have implications at the levels of both individual action and societal change. Buddhism has shown a strong ability to retain its core concepts while developing new practices as it moved from one culture to another over the centuries. Perhaps Western societies will prove to be as conducive an environment for the further evolution of Buddhist teachings as was eighth-century Tibet. As Tibet's unique form of aliveness was infused into Buddhism without changing the core constructs or values, perhaps what is alive about Western culture (such as entrepreneurialism) will nourish analogous new forms.*

Introduction

> To me, going to work is like a bunch of guys making a rocket-ship and it's really hard and nobody wants to talk about anything else, it's about the rocket-ship. In that context, people aren't first; the rocket-ship is first. Buddhism is saying 'you have to put how you are with people' first. If you just think about the rocket, you go nuts. So for me, the challenge is to go back and forth. The whole world of Buddhism is like a cooling antidote to the overheated 'working on the rocket-ship until you die'. (Interviewee)

> Often in work situations people feel that since they paid you they've bought the right to mistreat you, or treat you like a machine. (Interviewee)

> Although having the mind that wishes to shun suffering, they rush headlong into suffering itself. Although wishing for happiness, out of naivety, they destroy their happiness as if it were a foe. (Shantideva 2005: 11)

I explored the fit between the lived reality in entrepreneurial organizations and the centuries-old Buddhist concept of the *bodhisattva* in order to see whether the juxtaposition of these two very different realities might shed light on the impact of spiritual values in the workplace. It is critically important for entrepreneurial organizations to be learning organizations. Moving from nothing to something—from no organization, simply an idea or dream, into functioning as a concrete, productive outfit—requires tremendous learning and innovation on the part of all involved. Entrepreneurs must be able to create not only new products, but also new organizational roles and forms, and then to move through iterations of change in these roles and forms as the organization grows. This process of ongoing development and change seemed to hold intriguing parallels with Tibetan Buddhist practices for developing wisdom.

Since Buddhist concepts are unfamiliar to many behavioural scientists, in this paper I initially clarify what it means to be a *bodhisattva* (very roughly: a person committed to helping all sentient beings become enlightened and thereby free from suffering), then share the results of my pilot study, and afterwards discuss its theoretical and practical implications. The main concepts to be presented are the *bodhisattva* notion itself, *bodhicitta* (the altruistic wish to relieve others' suffering), *emptiness* and *impermanence* (the nature of objects and mind), *dependent origination* (a Tibetan Buddhist term for what we regard as systems thinking), and the impact of *self-cherishing* (preoccupation with one's own well-being, rather than that of others).

I conducted exploratory interviews with an array of entrepreneurs who have been practising Buddhists for over three years. I sought to discover whether these entrepreneurs were using core elements of Buddhist practice in their daily work, and, if so, how they experienced the value and impact of these notions within the workplace. I put to them a simple series of questions without mentioning the notion of the *bodhisattva* ideal, in order to see whether it would turn out to be a core construct in their approach to everyday work and leadership.

The interviews showed that this notion and its constituent elements were very much a part of the participants' daily work lives and seemed to be a force in creating a happier, more nourishing work environment. All participants brought up the notion unasked, even providing stories describing how it influenced their relationships with people at work.

The Sources of My Interest in this Topic

I grew up in the 1960s and came of age in a generation that felt it must step up to the largest challenges, if it wished others to. Many of us felt that the world might be dying at the hands of our human brethren, and that we must take whatever risks necessary to reinvigorate ourselves and one another so that humanity could face and deal with these challenges. We believed that incredible imagination and creativity would be needed, as well as the reshaping of existing organizations in order to transition to a world less involved with mutual destruction. As I experienced the message of our generation, it was very similar to the Tibetan Buddhist ideal of the *bodhisattva*, yet without any contextual framework, training or support from traditions and culture.

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I am interested in both entrepreneurs and *bodhisattva*s, because both can help humanity evolve sufficiently so as not to destroy itself and our planet. The past century's acceleration in the development of technology, including the technologies of both warfare and communication, means that human beings are in a position to create great enterprises. Such endeavours can function to serve individual greed, continue old feuds, or serve the evolution of humanity. Our generation seems to have this choice, yet few of us ever feel that our actions have such a major impact. Effective entrepreneurs are those among us who have the potential to effect such changes.

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I believe that the world hungers for such people—people who have the skill to create vital, viable enterprises, and the values and commitment to serve the evolution of humanity. A *bodhisattva* is a being who *is* enlightened, who sees the suffering of all beings (not only humans, but all beings), and who uses his or her wisdom and skills to help evolve the whole planet, the billions of beings thronging our globe, people of all nations, religions, ethnicities, races, genders, ages—all the divided groups that seem to be clamouring for recognition of their individual types of needs. The *bodhisattva* does 'feel our pain', as people say lightly, but feels our pain so deeply and is so aware of the value of life, that all of such a being's entrepreneurial skills go towards developing enterprises that will help others become enlightened. We might say that a *bodhisattva* is an enlightenment entrepreneur, in contrast to the bulk of today's entrepreneurs, who are business entrepreneurs.

I have wondered for some time whether Buddhist practices can be fully transferred from the high frozen slopes and tundra of Tibet to the crowded, bustling, Internet-interconnected urban areas of our Western 'communication society'. Can these values and practices take root in our culture, when they were nourished for centuries by one that was isolated from most others, with a lifestyle where there were no roads, no cars, no telephones, and travel meant walking? The gulf between the cultures is huge, and the contrast in assumptions and *weltanschaung* (world-view) is equally large. A research-based exploration of the lived experience of entrepreneurs in applying these concepts as leaders of contemporary organizations seemed like one way to begin to answer this question.

My question comes from a series of intertwined interests. As a child, I used to look out of the window at the starry night sky and wonder why people fought wars and hurt each other so much. As an adult and applied social scientist, I ask the same questions and seek practices that may make some inroads on this situation.

As a social scientist, I am fascinated by the experiences of an ancient culture struggling to survive

after being thrown out of its homeland. Its members find themselves living in societies that have dramatically different ways of life, values and practices from those with which they grew up. The potential implications of the Tibetan response to having their country taken from them presents an alternative to terrorism and other forms of extremism—something critically important for today's world. I am also drawn to the Tibetan version of Buddhist teachings as a systems thinker concerned with the survival of humanity and the planet, because they address patterns of change on a global level, with implications that there are influences and levels of being beyond what we know. As an organizational consultant, I am on the lookout for practices that people can use to develop organizations that help the planet thrive, enable people to serve worthwhile purposes, and also provide nourishing places to work.

Nor am I alone in this. Although Tibetan Buddhism was little known when the Chinese invaded and took over Tibet in 1959, it now has a global presence. However, its impact in organizations has scarcely been studied, so this research is a pilot study.

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Conclusions and Implications

It was not easy to go behind the stories to the way they constructed realities. Some spoke very concretely about what had happened in their lives. Others tended to expound Buddhist teachings. Still others used the opportunity to reflect on the deeper issues brought up by the nature of entrepreneurship in US culture when looked at alongside Buddhist practices. What is crucial, from the perspective of this study, is that all emphasized the importance of the *bodhisattva* concept in their work lives, and said that practice was essential both for understanding it and for manifesting it in action.

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Practice and Tacit Knowledge

While some Western philosophical traditions assume that study and reading are sufficient for learning, this is not so in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The element of practice is treated as a core element in learning, so it is assumed that one cannot come to comprehend the 'view' through reading and study alone. Understanding requires a combination of experience with the development of specific skills, developing something that has recently been dubbed *tacit knowledge* in the field of knowledge management (Polanyi 1966). In Western traditions of trade apprenticeships students need teachers who are skilled in particular crafts, so they will absorb both what can be written and also the teachers' tacit knowledge. Such tacit knowledge is highly personal and context specific. In contrast to formal knowledge, which 'derives from the separation of the subject and the object of perception', tacit knowledge comes through the understanding of patterns as meaningful wholes, which comes from what Polanyi calls 'indwelling'— an embodied type of knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995: 59–61). From the perspective of knowledge management, all knowledge can be divided into explicit (objective) knowledge and tacit knowledge. The latter 'breaks the traditional dichotomies between mind and body, reason and emotion, subject and object, and knower and known' (ibid.: 60). This notion is close to the importance in Tibetan Buddhist practice of going beyond subject–object perceptions and thinking.

Although I have not seen Tibetan Buddhist authors use the concept of tacit knowledge (most likely because it belongs to Western behavioural science), I believe that the reason they insist on the importance of a teacher for those who wish to master the 'higher' practices is that these practices involve considerable tacit knowledge. Until the last 20 years the Tibetan texts were not available publicly, because it was assumed that one could not master them without a teacher. Looked at in terms of the necessity of embodying tacit knowledge, this is quite reasonable. The following comments need to be read in this context.

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Similar Underlying Forces

All Tibetan Buddhist teachings aim to assist humans to value human life as being the only opportunity to understand the nature of reality. Because it is so precious, human life is to be used to enable all beings to become enlightened. To be enlightened is to understand what causes suffering (which is attachment, or holding onto things and people out of a feeling that they are permanent, without recognizing their transitory nature) and to live in contact with what is real, while helping others do the same. This is not

necessarily a fit with leading an entrepreneurial learning organization, where the focus is not transcendence but effectiveness in producing the right product at the right time, with the right distribution channels. However, there are intriguing underlying similarities.

As I studied these phenomena, I began to suspect that under the layers of actions and material manifestations, both entrepreneurship and Tibetan Buddhist practices might be conceptualized as different expressions of a fundamental level of agency, as it manifests in two radically different cultures. I am using the definition of *agency* as 'the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power' (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 2006). Looking at agency as the underlying thrust towards undertaking or acting upon something, one might see this creative, energized 'acting upon' in the US context turning outward, focusing upon changing the world around itself, undertaking activities with things and building enterprises. In contrast, in the traditional Tibetan culture, creative agency was directed inward towards 'taming' one's own mind in order to impact the surrounding world. Such a culture used the human force of agency to generate enlightened beings and took seriously the notion of the *bodhisattva*—beings that exist to generate more enlightened beings.

Figure 1
Contrasting Uses of Agency in Tibet and the United States
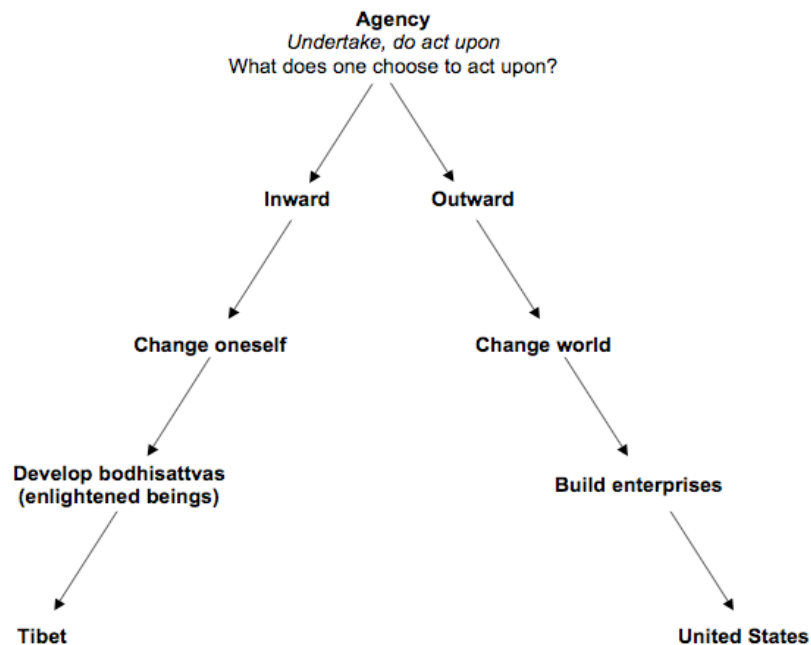
From this perspective, agency might be viewed as the ground of all action. Because of the power of the *bodhisattva* ideal and related training, agency in Tibet became a force for individual enlightenment, to the greatest extent possible, whereas in the West similar forces were channelled into social and economic development. What we see in these Buddhist entrepreneurs is a fusion of these two traditions, whereby both influenced the participants' thoughts and actions. They have been striving to develop thriving businesses or organizations in order to further the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

In addition to the overarching thrust that I sense, in terms of the different focus of agency, one participant pointed out another strong source of similarity:

> Entrepreneurs don't take things on authority. People in insurance or law take authority incredibly seriously. Entrepreneurs look at the world and use mind or intuition. The whole world is open. It doesn't matter if something hasn't been done. This is similar to Buddhism—there is a willingness. 'Don't take my words at face value—test them as you would gold, to see if it's real gold,' said the Buddha. One whole strand in Buddhism is 'don't base your life on received authority, base it on your own experience.'

This strong trust in one's own experience is a deep underlying theme that bridges the very different phenomena we see in Tibetan Buddhist life and entrepreneurial organizations. It is as though two underground streams were flowing that fed both sets of appearances. A raw force of agency flowed, in one part of the world exerting power in the world of the mind, and in the other in the world of things. Throughout both worlds there is an orientation towards questioning everything and not accepting things on authority. The willingness to risk all for what one finds most important connects these diverse sets of people.

Implications: Globalization

But can these teachings travel from the closed, spiritual society of Tibet to the open, materialistic society of the US, Europe and other portions of what we call 'the West' and retain their integrity?

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It is paradoxical as well as unfortunate that the continued existence of the Tibetan teachings now depends on their ability to survive outside of their native environment. A form of thought and learning that developed and thrived in a closed culture is now taught more outside of its traditional home than within it—and the home no longer retains the characteristics that enabled it to thrive. Lhasa, the capital, known for its towering Potala Palace and huge, ancient monasteries, is now dominated by low-quality modern concrete high-rises. The central government of China has encouraged such a large migration of Han Chinese into Tibet that Tibetans risk becoming a minority population in their own country. Since the Chinese conquest many of the most learned Tibetans have been killed or imprisoned and tortured. Many of the Tibetan-educated teachers have already died of old age and others will in the near future.

What happens when such teachings are exported to a radically different culture? Can such a radically different perspective on life thrive within a culture with opposing values? Here history suggests an intriguing possibility. Although Tibet became a nourishing home for Buddhism over the course of about 10 centuries when these practices initially arrived there, it was a fierce and in many ways implausible site for them. When the earliest teachers began to teach Buddhist practices, Tibet was ruled by warlords and had a thriving religion (Bon). If we read the texts of the teacher who is regarded by many as the main progenitor of Buddhism in Tibet, during the eighth century, he commented to his main student: 'Ah—you are the only one who practices—no one practices' (Padmasambhava 1994). In their own way, Tibetans valued material things, prestige and power, although this took different external forms than it does in contemporary society.

Perhaps Western societies will prove to be as conducive an environment for the further evolution of Buddhist teachings as was eighth-century Tibet. New practices developed in what was at that time the 'new environment' provided by Tibet; perhaps something analogous will happen in the West over the next few centuries. As Tibet's unique form of aliveness was infused into Buddhism without changing the core constructs or values, perhaps what is alive about Western culture (such as entrepreneurialism) will nourish analogous new forms, also without altering the core of the teachings. It is an intriguing possibility in the realm of sociology of knowledge and religion, but one that only time will reveal.

The discussion of the underlying concepts and the research results, as well as the endnotes and references, can be found in the actual journal article, which can be obtain from Sage Publications.