

MOMENTS TO MIND: PRINCIPLES OF BUDDHIST LEADERSHIP AND THE PROCESS OF COGNITION IN THE SAUTRĀNTIKA SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Leadership informed by Buddhist principles does exist in a clearly definable manner and can be applied in service to sustainable peace. Utilizing the Sautrāntika Buddhist model of the process of cognition and the arising of afflicted states of mind, this paper demonstrates the metrics by which Buddhist Leadership is defined. Locating afflicted states of mind in the decision-making process and understanding the process through which one arrives an afflicted judgement presents the possibility of consciously undercutting some of the most unwholesome activities masquerading as effective leadership. The application of this model of cognition to leadership recognizes the high degree of personal responsibility that people in leadership positions hold. Further, this awareness emphasizes personal agency that promotes both the well-being of leader and follower(s). Finally, this analysis underlines the seemingly obvious principle that simply considering one's self a "Buddhist" does not thereby make their decisions illustrative of Buddhist Leadership.

This essay utilizes the Sautrāntika Buddhist model of cognition to isolate the arising of unwholesome states of mind. The insights

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gained through the analysis are non-sectarian and need not be seen through a religious lens. The Sautrāntika Buddhist School provides the intellectual backdrop for this analysis. Sautrāntika literally means the “followers of sutra”. Vasubhandhu in the *Abhidharmakośakārikā* effectively juxtaposed the Sautrāntika view against the Sarvastivada-Vaibhāṣika Abhidharma that the text relates (Lusthaus and Buswell, 2004, p.878). The nuanced description of the causal processes of cognition offered by the Sautrāntika school, provide the backdrop for understanding its relationship to leadership. The theories of modern writers in the field of leadership are reinforced and given fresh perspective through the integrations of the Buddhist view.

Most of the modern work on the topic of leadership is organizationally focused. The leadership principles developed here are some of the dominate themes they explore. In *Enlightened Leadership* Oakley and Krug present a key characteristic of enlightened leadership as intentionally moving away from reactivity in the decision-making process. As they say, “Enlightened Leadership is not so much about things *to do* as it is a place that leaders *come from* with everything they do. It is actually a state of being.” Such an understanding directly aligns with Buddhist teachings. Avoiding reactivity in our thinking process is clearly a central factor of leadership development. Oakley and Krug juxtapose the “reactive” and “creative” thinkers on a spectrum of relative performance (1991, p.59). To the extent that the leader is exclusively interested in business and performance, basic attitude adjustments can be very helpful. The Sautrāntika Buddhist model for changing from a mindset of reactivity is not directly concerned with business interests, but with a fundamental shift in the manner any individual processes all stimuli. Enlightened leadership in a Buddhist lens is thus defined first and foremost by the internal disposition of the leader and the degree of reactivity and cognitive affliction they entertain.

There are a variety of topics that could be used to explore this topic in relation to Buddhism. Here we will confine the inquire to some a couple of the common topics that are addressed by modern thinkers in the field of leadership development. Specifically, the paper will bring into dialogue the Buddhist understanding of what

mindset a genuine leader cultivates, the manner of focus they apply to their work, the method for working with implicit biases, and the larger vision of the practice with modern leadership theories about the same. Through the analysis it is also established that personal identification as a “Buddhist” does not necessarily mean that the person exhibits Buddhist leadership. Quite to the contrary, Buddhist leadership principles must be defined through actions and the psychological underpinnings that support the articulation of the action.

Buddhist psychological theory is notable for the thorough treatment of the topic and ability to be applied broadly to many areas of thought and innovation. As such it is important in this initial analysis to structure the approach to leadership an approachable manner. There is significant room for further research on this topic.

Although Buddhist psychology in the abhidharma tradition can appear intimidating and inapproachable at the outset, the take away from this research are remarkably approachable. Indeed, that basic logic the Sautrantika Buddhist model exposes about leadership and so forth are principles that most small children can readily recognize. For example, a child may initially place blame for an unpleasant situation upon whoever is at all related to the occurrence of their discomfort. For that child the other individual is characterized as innately bad and the source of all problems. The skillful parent will remind the child that although the other person appears as the cause of their suffering, they are not. Further, the other is not innately bad as the child believes. This example as we will see contains the message of the Sautrantika Buddhist model of cognition without being inapproachable to the non-specialist. With this in mind we turn to the first topic for our dialogue, the mindset.

1. MINDSET

To begin, one of the striking features that is shared by Buddhist and modern authors is the mindset of the modern leader. From compartmentalizing to cultivating positive self-image for oneself and their subordinates, modern writers on the topic of leadership take pains to show how we have clear agency with regard to our own attitudes and that our mindset may be skillfully cultivated in service

to a larger goal. The Buddhist tradition likewise offers a detailed path of practice for understanding the process of mind to gain direct control over reactive impulses. Still, the Buddhist path is distinct in significant ways. The “mindset”, which is to say the ambition and drive to succeed for Buddhists is not only viewed as something to be adjusted, but a clear indicator that ignorance is dominantly present for that being.

In the Buddhist tradition, “mind” is pure and undefiled, is not a product of matter and cannot directly interact with matter.⁽¹⁾ When the mind is charged by an afflicted state (Skt. *kleśa*), the purity of mind’s fundamental essence remains unchanged. The stains of afflicted states of mind are superficial (Gyaltzen, 2004, p.84). *Kleśas* are generally classified as three with respect to the root of their afflictive nature, attachment (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*). Still, *kleśas* are diverse, and different Buddhist schools provide various explanations, but these three are always considered the root of the other afflictions.

When a *kleśa* is present, it greatly disturbs the natural state of mind. Through viewing the affliction of a *kleśa* to be the natural state of mind, some feel that their *kleśas* do not disturb their mind. However, all of the afflicted states of mind arising from the three root poisons are unwholesome in the Buddhist context because they reify the concept of “I” or personal self which they function in regard to. An individual relating to the external world specifically in reference to a self that is proven non-existent (Gyaltzen, 2004, pp.245-251) is engaged in delusional activity (Chaba Chökyi Senge, 2004 p.246). A core tenet of Buddhist thought is the selfless nature of the individual (Skt. *anatman*, Pāli. *anatta*). Any action arising from such a feeling is craving and thus the creation of new *karma* (volitional activity).

The highest degree of leadership in this Buddhist system is a leader who recognizes the process of *kleśa* arising from the innocuous forms to the highly destructive. The Buddhist call to action in this respect strikes considerably deeper than the creative, principled mindset promoted as leadership. The Buddhist leadership mindset

1. Mind can causally interact with matter, but not directly.

is grounded in the selfless mindset. Such a mindset is not imposed quickly, but must be necessarily cultivated, due to the deeply ingrained subtle propensities that are the root of the arising of afflicted states of mind, which thereby motivate unwholesome activity.

The karma originating from a mind under the influence of a *kleśa* is still indeterminate. For example, a person may be under the sway of intense anger and yet perform a virtuous deed. Still, from the Buddhist perspective even virtuous actions arisen from defiled states of mind perpetuate the condition of cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*). The ideal situation is where one acts organically and automatically, not from a sense of self, but skillfully and compassionately in response to the situation at hand, thereby not producing new karma. This significant distinction suggests that for the Buddhists, modern theories of leadership that emphasize changing the mindset are only addressing a superficial symptom while allowing the deeper problem to proliferate.

For most people there is a persistent tendency to latch on to the idea of self, obscuring the natural state of mind. The tendency is so strong that even when shown proof of its complete inability to be found, we still retain a naïve belief in it. In the process of cognition, feeling arises through the contact of a triad of sense faculty, a sense object, and the respective sense consciousness. This level of consciousness is non-conceptual. At that point there is still no mental proliferation of “I” off which to form an opinion of the relative value of the experience. This significant moment of personal experience is the foundation of the theory of Buddhist insight meditation. The meditator focuses equanimously on the arising of sensation and observes it non-judgmentally to allow dissipation without creating new karmic momentum. Through practice the mediator can become very effective at unburdening their continuum of karmic momentum.

To provide a little more theoretical context, even outside of formal mediation, in the Sautrāntika philosophical system, feeling or direct experience is the result of past volitional activity. As such, not only is feeling non-conceptual, it is also karmically neutral. In other words, feeling is a result and results do not create new karma (Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, 2016, pp.26-29). At the moment of

feeling, some previous karma is exhausted, never to ripen again. Although feeling is non-conceptual and in terms of karma neutral, it does not thereby negate the content of experience. Such a mistake can occur when one conflates feeling with emotion or assumes that there is anything in feeling that is inherently good or bad.

Value judgements actually require several additional moments of mind to form, despite their seeming simultaneity. There are positive, negative, and neutral feelings that are entirely non-conceptual. Still, at this initial point in the process of cognition there is no construct “I”, and as a result there can be no value judgment of the relative goodness or badness of the feeling. All of that valuation takes place in the following moments of consciousness, which is causally linked to this initially arisen feeling (Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, 2016, p.27). The Buddhist explanation is explicit that there is no positive or negative quality to the direct sense experience. They contend that all value judgments and concepts attached to the image, sound, smell, taste, or tangible sensation are in no way linked to the actual object in question.

2. FOCUS

Focus is a common theme of many of modern manuals addressing leadership. Having a vision, adjusting habitual patterns, and building systems to support the vision (Oakley and Krug, 1991, pp. 167-190). In contrast to the one-pointed concentration needed for Buddhist meditation, the focus of the leader is narrow. People do tend to move towards what we focus on. In that sense the prescription of modern leadership manuals to keep the big picture in mind, focus on the vision of the organization, and not lose goal-orientation are all valuable strategies for the Buddhist leader as well. Applying focus one-pointedly to bring the flurry of mind to rest, assessing the influence of kleśas for the person, and acting virtuously without contrivance, the Buddhist model simply asks for a higher degree of commitment.

There is a basic incongruence between the views of Sautrāntika Buddhists and these modern writers on leadership. For the Sautrāntika Buddhists, typical humans are not sufficiently realized to address the component of improper mental engagement with

respect to the causal process of the arising of a *kleśa*. The one place that the *kleśa* can be prevented from arising (at this early human stage) is through severing and curtailing the subtle propensities through analytical meditation as described in the previous section. The practical focus emphasized by leadership manuals in this Buddhist lens amounts to simply covering over the problem superficially while not addressing the underlying cause. To explain further we consider the verse from the eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé:

The subtle propensities have been abandoned
 An object [that accords with the subtle propensities] abides
 proximately,
 Mind engages improperly [with that object],
 This is the complete cause of a *kleśa*.⁽²⁾

As Mikyö Dorjé explained, for a *kleśa* to occur there are three necessary factors. First, the subtle propensities (Skt. *anuśaya*) are still present within the mind-stream of the individual. They have not yet been completely abandoned and are therefore liable to be activated. Next, there must be an observed object, which is to say that an appropriate object for the activation of a subtle propensity comes into contact with the sense media of the person. Last, the person has improper mental engagement (Tib. *tshul bshin ma yin yid byed*) with respect to that object. Those three together are the necessary elements for the arising of a *kleśa*.

It is tempting when confronted with this explanation to assume that one can simply override their natural improper mental engagements through brute force of focus. Unfortunately, such an opportunity is not available to people in this system of momentariness (Ronkin, 2018). First it is important to define what is meant by proper mental engagement as opposed to its opposite. Improper mental engagement is the tendency to engage

2. *Phra rgyas spangs pa ma yin dang/ /yul ni nye bar gnas pa dang/ / tsul bshin ma yin yid byed las/ /nyon mongs rgyu ni tshang ba yin/ /* from Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé's commentary on Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakāśa* called *chos mnong pa'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa rgyas par spros pa grub bde'i dpyid 'jo*

with the conception and imputed desirability or aversion of that object as though it is real and present within the object itself. As Dr. Stanley has stated: “Mind thinks we are seeing something that is not actually there, but then reacts to our own projection as if it is actually there” (Stanley, 2017). In the context of leadership this point is particularly potent. A leader with ingrained propensities can be highly reactive or impute general characteristics onto a diverse group of circumstances.

Through analytical meditation, one is able to address the *anuśayas* present in their individual mind stream. Improper mental engagement cannot be addressed until the path of seeing or above because such work requires the direct knowledge of selflessness. Analytical meditation addresses the *anuśayas* by demonstrating to the practitioner that as they engage with a phenomenon there is no intrinsic nature therein that causes a *kleśa* to arise. Calm abiding practices are understood as essential and efficacious as it allows for the practitioner to cultivate single-pointedness and non-reactivity to all stimuli, permitting feelings to arise without indulging in clinging activities. In addition to thereby building a pattern of non-reactivity, the focus of Buddhist meditation is then applied specifically to the practice of analytical meditation allowing old karma to ripen and dissolve without new karma taking its place. Meditation in the Buddhist view is a cause for celebration, because the practice analytical reflection literally loosens the bonds yoking each person to cyclic existence.

3. VISION AND WORKING WITH BIAS

A clear vision is important for any organization and the leadership therein. Oakley and Krug spend a significant amount of time discussing the importance of a shared vision and purpose at all levels of an organization (1991, pp. 167-190). The question then naturally arises, what is the shared vision? The individuals in the organization need to have a high degree of buy-in to the vision. Setting aside the many ways to motivate people such as through money, the abstract point of this facet of leadership is that the value of an organization to the lives of the participants is qualified by intangible currency, such as the manner that people

Even young children intuitively understand that the anger they experience at their parent or friend is not coming from that individual or their actions. There is a causal link, but it would be foolish to suggest that their anger or the direct cause of the child's emotion is that object. Again, as obvious as such admonitions are to children and adults, there is no question that in general we are quite capable of looking past such logic to cling to the understanding that our preconceived notions about ethnicities, places, or groups are valid and accurate. We allow ourselves to be willfully ignorant of the potential for misjudging a situation or group of people. The vision that people pursue is nothing other than self-indulgence, even if there is some virtue achieved through the activity.

Having perceived the individual that corresponds with a latent subtle propensity for stereotyping or emotion, the mind engages the phenomena first with a label. Having labeled the object in a manner that corresponds with the subtle propensities, the mind places the object, which is a non-existent concept within a narrative. The narrative then validates the *anuśaya* and further deepens its propensity to arise again in the future. People tend to trust their judgments and *anuśayas* regarding others because in general they serve a very specific and trustworthy function – or so it appears. In actuality however, there is very little correlation between our expectations regarding the nature of perceptual objects and their actual nature. It would be shocking, after all, if a consciousness under the delusion of a reified conception of self could ever really understand the unfindable nature of other objects.

Prejudiced people perceive the intrinsic correctness of their belief every bit as much as they perceive a distinct difference in color or shape. This is because they exclude all things that are different from their analysis of the basic similarity such as race or sexual orientation (Tillemans, 1999, pp. 209-211). The conclusions that are drawn from engaging in this manner with the object are inherently misleading. Taking one as many creates many problems by suppressing difference. We can generate endless isolates. Using a term to describe a generality is a suppression of difference and thus describes the double-edged sword of conceptuality. On the one hand concepts are incredibly useful, such as those that motivate you

not putting your hand on a recently used stovetop. Still, on the other hand, conceptuality, grouping things together and excluding all others from the category based on some superficial concept is how unwholesome things like prejudice arise (Tillemans, 1999, pp. 209-211). We need hardly mention that prejudice is an unwholesome character trait in a leader that is working for sustainable peace.

It seems that we intuitively already know what the Buddhist tradition is seeking to explain in a highly analytic and systematized manner. So then why are we so quick to write off such an explanation and conclude that it is simply more just too complicated? Consider the possibility that it is simply because we do not have a broader cultural narrative which frames these logical conclusions in the realm of the everyday and the mundane. Mere acknowledgment of this basic human tendency such as scolding a child that they mis-direct their frustration when they are at their most agitated encourages their dismissal. The fact that we apprehend something that is non-existent, impute qualities onto that abstraction, and then engage with those value judgments as though they are fundamentally part of the essential nature of the object, could offer each person and certainly leaders, valuable perspective. For these teachings to be useful at undercutting the unfortunate occurrence of prejudice and other potent *kleśas*, individuals need to be working with this understanding every day and with all objects of the senses.

If day-by-day, moments of life that are not overwhelmingly emotionally evocative are analyzed in this manner our habitual patterns can change. Individuals address underlying assumptions before discussion can be seriously had about leadership situations. So explains the Sautrāntika Buddhist psychological model. The habitual patterns of mind are not by their nature positive or negative, but in all cases, the one cannot simply resolve to ignore the impulse to indulge the pattern of reactivity. These patterns of reactivity are the first thing that the Buddhist model addresses in the transformative process. At a further stages of realization improper mental engagement is directly challenged and transformed.

Afflictions (*kleśa*) are defined as that which greatly disturbs the mind. The mind as was previously stated is by nature clear and aware. Thus an afflicted state is not desirable. Still, the nature

of the illusion in *saṃsāra* is that people are under the extremely strong impression that their habitual patterns of behavior, and the vivid and intense emotional states that they experience are acutely real. Further, they accept that those judgments and prejudices are completely righteous and even superior to the lack of experiencing them. The Sautrāntikas enumerate six root afflictions and twenty secondary afflictions from the fifty-one mental events. When a *kleśa* such as anger arises, the tendency of ego is to lean into that emotion and accept its' righteousness at face value. There is no question that from the perspective of ego that anger (or whatever *kleśa*) is not only appropriate, but that the object that was (improperly) engaged from which the *kleśa* arose, actually exists and that it is directly responsible for the defiled state of mind being experienced. For the Sautrāntika Buddhists all that appears in mind is an impression of sorts that mirrors the actual external object. Thus, in this model an afflicted individual is only fighting with their own mind and thereby reinforcing a negative pattern, like a snake swallowing it's own tail.

The tendency that people have to indulge their latent propensities through improper mental engagement can at the time feel like the most distinctly correct course of action. Some may rationalize it through the reasoning that they do no harm by allowing anger or prejudice to arise in the mind. As we have seen such an assertion is not accurate and in actuality much suffering is be produced by the indulgence of *kleśas* before they ever materialize as negative actions. Prejudice is by definition a negative state of mind characterized by ignorance. Individuals, as a result, may go to great lengths to avoid labeling themselves as prejudiced, asserting for example that the stereotype they hold to is not negative. The Buddhist response to such beliefs is not so generous. It is clear in the Buddhist context that the arising of any prejudicial concept is no more than the essence of delusional activity and leading to suffering.

Larger Buddhist cosmology plays a highly significant role in articulating why such states of consciousness are less than desirable. The enlightenment narrative that understands suffering (*duḥkha*) as an untenable state of being is an important qualifier to this discussion. By understanding suffering as a state that is inherently problematic changes the underlying assumptions held by many

people that suffering is simply an aspect of life that cannot be avoided. Buddhism articulates a worldview that asserts the opposite perspective and is an important element in helping individuals understand that their sufferings are not just something that must be endured, but as a manifestation of their lack of understanding. As it relates to leadership, a skillful leader reflects on these points again and again. Further, that leader will create conditions that support those they lead in realizing their own indulgence of subtle propensities. The good leader thus serves as a cause for creating many more genuine leaders in their image.

Finally, the Buddhist narrative of enlightenment furnishes the realization potent application beyond the mundane occurrences of daily life and its application therein such as in the case of leadership. If individuals hold to a doctrine of nihilism, there is simply no point in addressing the subtle propensities and improper mental engagement that are the core of the problem. In the Buddhist analysis, through the analysis of dependent origination, the enlightenment narrative is essential to derive some point of the practice. It is reasonable to suggest that the *kleśa*-imbued mind is suffering and that it would be more pleasant or less unpleasant to be without such mental defilements. In so far as that is the case, it is reasonable to conclude that for personal gratification and pleasure one should seek to eliminate the causes of suffering. Still, some people may not be convinced that the emotions and prejudice that they hold so dear are at all negative. They may well be very adamant in the righteousness of their attitude. The tradition suggests that with regard to people such as this, who are not interested in the teachings or find no value in them, those people should be treated with the most compassion.

One of the striking features about the Buddha's doctrine is that in the same vein as the Brahmanical traditional landscape of ancient India, there persisted a belief in past and future lives known as *samsāra* (Hirakawa, 1990). The understanding Buddha developed as the initial authoritative source is that through volitional activity an individual creates the causal factors that conduce to their arising in the next moment and so on in this life and the next. Cyclic existence is without beginning or end, but

karma is understood as the propelling factor therein and as an extension the *anuśaya*. Buddha explained how by means of karma beings re-become through nothing other than the simple workings of cause and effect. This tendency he presented as the fundamental problem. Continuing to suffer in cyclic existence perpetually for all time was un-tenable; the solution was the peace of nirvana free from all *kleśas* and karma.

4. CONCLUSION

This essay is an initial attempt to bring Buddhist thinking into dialogue with some dominant modern theories of leadership. Both bodies of knowledge offer a great deal to the leader attempting to meaningfully contribute to their organization. The Buddhist path is not exclusively a leadership model, but as we can see through this abbreviated analysis, there is a great deal that may be learned through applying some of the insights of Buddhist teachings to the cause of promoting healthy leadership.

Both the Buddhist path and the modern programs to develop effective leadership revolve around cultivating an adjustment of underlying reactivity. In the cause of running an organization, this leadership is conceived of as professional skillset that facilitates productive enterprise. While the Buddhist path of practice will naturally bring about the qualities that make one a highly effective business leader, the character development is not based in ambitious desire for success which is afflicted by its very nature. Buddhism as demonstrated here by the Sautrāntika view brings about positive results that align precisely with modern models of skillful leadership through addressing the individual's reactivity. This process begins by relaxing the conceptual mind and recognizing the distinction between direct perception and the subsequent emotive states that are generated through improper mental engagement with the object.

Further research and writings on this subject are seriously needed and this work alone is not sufficient. In particular contextualizing various levels of analysis in the dialogue will be very productive of continuing this dialogue. Likewise, it will be very helpful to future scholarship on the topic to anthropologically research the leadership practices of modern Buddhist organizations as well

as specifically the monastic discipline literature (*vinaya*) and its relationship to leadership. For now, this narrowly focused article can support a basic understanding of the contribution Sautrāntika philosophical thought makes to the articulation of Buddhist leadership principles.

Buddhist leadership can be clearly defined through the lens of the Sautrāntika presentation of the process of cognition, understanding how the wide variety of mental events arise and can afflict or support the individual leader. The most direct way that skillful leadership can be recognized is by the leader themselves reflecting on the degree to which their decision-making process is afflicted by a *kleśa*. Considering this process in terms of some of the dominant themes presented in modern theories of leadership adds a distinction of depth to the activity of leadership. The genuine leader in the Buddhist lens like the Chakravartin archetype is not afflicted by the variety of *kleśas* that we have explored in this analysis. They are not enlightened necessarily, but they are personally reflective about regarding the effects of their activity.

The variety of leadership that will support constructing a sustainable future is deeply rooted in egalitarian ethics. Such a leader has uprooted the root of prejudice and the arising of afflicted states of mind. The wide variety of *kleśas* such as prejudice are detrimental to effective leadership. Minds afflicted prejudicial conception and so forth with regard to situations or problems leads to impulsivity and inattention to detail. The effective leader does not simply apply a new set of guidelines or insist on a personal code of deep listening and contemplation prior to decision making. The Buddhist model demonstrates that without addressing the underlying causes of the afflicted behavior, one cannot act in a manner that is not tormented by those assumptions and implicit biases.

It is simply unreasonable to expect all leaders to be enlightened. Still, the point of the contrast between the intentional avoidance of afflicted and reactive behavior and the Buddhist call to uproot the cause of judgements before their conception is one of scale. The Buddhist leader maintains a work/life balance that is based in the basic comfort derived from transformative process of reflecting on the arising of all manner of *kleśas* and clearly delineating between

the direct perception of whoever or whatever and the mental proliferation that typically follows immediately and without recognition. The leader who engages in this degree of self-reflection and transformation is capable of supporting sustainable peace.

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