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## **“Letting go of the raft” – The art of spiritual leadership in contemporary organizations from a Buddhist perspective using skillful means**

### **Abstract**

Organizations are diverse workplaces where various beliefs, values and perceptions are shared to varying extents. How can spiritual leadership induce altruistic love and intrinsic motivation among diverse members within the organization and without being regarded as really yet another covert, sophisticated form of corporate exploitation of human vulnerability reflective of the ‘dark side’ of organizations and leadership?

This paper explores an approach to spiritual leadership from a Buddhist perspective focusing on the power of skillful means to tackle such concerns. In organizations pursuits such as appearance, reputation, fame, power, recognition and even leader-follower relationships are associated mostly with objectives and expectations, known in Buddhism as ‘attachment’. In Buddhism, however, any kind of attachment may be a source of suffering that eventually leads to negative consequences. In reviewing the dark side of spiritual leadership practices and how Buddhism is commoditized for organizational purposes, we reaffirm on the importance of the notion of non-attachment in Buddhism. We unpack the application of the Buddhist metaphor of ‘the raft’, non-attachment and other Buddhist stories of skillful means in spiritual leadership and their contribution to leadership studies.

### **Keywords**

Spiritual leadership, workplace spirituality, Buddhism, skillful means, non-attachment

## **Introduction**

Leadership failures are often associated with excessive narcissism, grandiosity, ego-centric portrayal, and self-aggrandizement (Brown, 1997; Maccoby, 2000). The concept of spirituality seeks to promote a sense of meaning, purpose, belongingness and altruistic love (Fry, 2003; Gill, 2014, 2016; Hicks, 2002; Mitroff and Denton, 1999) and meaningful approaches to work and authenticity in leadership (Benefiel, 2005; Cavanagh, 2003). Spirituality, however, does not necessarily create an “everyone wins” culture: it is potentially ‘a negative force for hegemony and misuse... and subjugation’ – and... it has negative side (Lips-Wiersma et al, 2009). Spirituality may be ‘hijacked’ by management for purposes seen by employees as nefarious, such as to increase power and control over them or to increase profits and shareholder value at their expense, like so many management and leadership initiatives in the past, for example job enrichment, quality circles, empowerment and, more recently, mindfulness (Gill, 2014). Indeed, Gill argues, ‘capital’ – investors and their managers – and those who are managed – ‘wage-labour’ – may have different agenda in the workplace: different purposes, objectives and values.

Associated with this issue of organizational agenda is the question of leader agency. To what extent are leaders in the workplace able, even if they wish, to act ‘spiritually’ and exercise spiritual leadership when, for example, the overriding purpose of the organization is to make money and maximise shareholder value? And how sustainable is a listed company that consistently fails to meet stock-market expectations, even if its customers and employees are happy?

Spirituality is in some organizations seen as a management fad, a religious language for commercial gain (Bass, 2008), or a source of coercion and favouritism (Cavanagh, 1999). Some have referred to spirituality as an attempt to manipulate employees, placing the needs of the organization above employees’ needs (Krishnakumar et al, 2015) and a source of employer domination and control (Tourish, 2013) because, once employees rationally choose spirituality, they might become vulnerable to manipulation (English et al, 2005). Spirituality may, therefore, either be misused as managerial control (Bell and Taylor, 2004; Driver, 2008) or be used as an instrument for pursuing honourable corporate goals (Benefiel, 2003; Lips-Wiersma and Nilakant, 2008). Furthermore, Holland and colleagues (2016: 19) point out the challenge implicit in imparting spiritual meaning without imposing one’s own religious beliefs on others. These issues require an ethical response.

In responding to Holland's and colleagues' (2016) concern, we argue that good intentions of introducing spirituality into organizations have been overridden by excessive attachment to organizational 'end' purposes. Likewise, failed managerial and leadership practices in general and spiritual leadership in particular and corporate practice in performative terms (Case and Gosling, 2010) are mostly associated with extreme attachment to either individuals' or organizational purposes. In diminishing excessive attachment, we introduce the concept of skillful means. Though the term 'skillful means' is specified in Buddhism, it also exists in the language and practice of major religions, e.g. as "religious language and symbols of all kinds" (Pye, 1990: 19). We focus on Buddhist interpretation because skillful means in Buddhism emphasizes compassion derived from states of non-attachment. This entails promoting compassionate leadership and addressing well-being of employees alongside less attachment to extreme corporate ends and desires.

Our article addresses how excessive attachment shapes the dark side of spiritual leadership and creates challenges, and we demonstrate how the notion of non-attachment in skillful means may contribute to ethical spiritual leadership agency and practices. Our objective is therefore four-fold: (1) to highlight the relationship between attachment and leadership and particularly spiritual leadership; (2) to introduce the Buddhist concepts of skillful means and non-attachment; (3) to demonstrate ethical spiritual leadership as skillful means, and (4) to make theoretical and practical contributions to leadership and organizational studies.

### **Attachment and leadership**

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory states that an infant has a natural inborn biological need for bonding with its mother or other carer. This develops through responsiveness by the latter and is important for normal development. A child who is securely attached through responsive caregiving, love and attention would reflect these in all relationships, while an insecurely attached child would most likely be more cautious and risk-averse and show low levels of self-efficacy (Holmes, 1993). Similarly, attachment in marriage provides a feeling of security and protection in times of need.

These viewpoints on attachment can be – and are – applied in the organizational workplace. In the workplace, cultivating attachment is seen as positive. For example, work needs to satisfy a search for purpose, meaning, belongingness and value or worth other than satisfying basic financial needs often through drudgery from Monday to Friday (Terkel, 1995; Gill, 2014). Pfeffer's (2003)

fundamental aspects of what people seek also demonstrate attachment at workplace, namely a feeling of purpose through meaningful work, a sense of connection and social relations with co-workers, and the ability to live an integrated life.

Leadership is associated with attachment. Most studies linking leadership with attachment show how securely attached leaders tend to be more effective and transformational and display higher level of self-confidence (Popper et al, 2000; Manning, 2003). Secure attachment can be considered as the foundation both for relationship competence, open-mindedness and cross-cultural competence and for transformational leadership (Manning, 2003: 24). Leaders' secure-attachment orientations demonstrate significantly supportive and encouraging outcomes, such as performance effectiveness, leadership potential emergence, transformational leadership, delegation, followers' mental health, turnover intentions, job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviour (Game, 2011; Harms, 2011). Attachment is especially strong in leader-follower relationships where there are high levels of interdependence and commitment (Thomas et al, 2013). Leaders and followers depend on each other for various resources such as services, goods, money, information, status and affiliation (Wilson et al, 2010).

Attachment exists in leader-follower relationships (Thomas et al, 2013). Attachment models show how attachment-related behaviours such as communication, support seeking and giving, and conflict resolution have a significant impact on the outcome and quality of relationships and information processing (Simpson and Rholes, 2012). From an attachment perspective, the functioning of a relationship reflects the attachment styles of those involved (Collins and Feeney, 2000; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Leader-follower attachment may also be both context and relationship specific because followers may have a particular attachment to, or preference towards, a particular leader (Game, 2008). Leaders can be considered as attachment figures who provide support, comfort, a safe haven, opportunities for followers for skill acquisition, and personal development and exploration in their profession (Popper and Mayseless, 2003). However, Simpson and Rholes (2012) also argue that not all leaders are attachment figures: some leaders do not exhibit attachment-related behaviour because of their personal characteristics, such as experience, status or expertise. Studies show that attachment on the whole has a significant positive impact on leadership behaviour and relationships.

But what happens when leaders show excessive attachment to personal or organizational pursuits and followers become too dependent on their relationship with leaders? Attachment to pursuits such as appearance, fame, power, rewards and recognition can mislead people in ways that harm them eventually. Attachment is a continuous state, even if one achieves what one wishes for: there are always other attachments to cling to. Moreover, attachment to expectations can easily – and often does – result in discouragement or in other negative outcomes if they are not being met. For instance, attachment insecurity in leader-follower relationships (Brennan, Clark and Shaver, 1998), especially attachment anxiety and the fear of being abandoned or unloved can have negative impact on proactive work behaviour (Wu and Parker, 2017). Attachment to a presumed ideal identity, a single form of authenticity or a definite leadership style may prevent leadership flexibility and adaptability (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010) and context-sensitive, multiple-leadership identity (Brown, 2015; Evans and Sinclair, 2016) and authenticity (Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014) that are much needed in contemporary leadership.

### **Attachment in spiritual leadership**

While empirical leadership research in the past has largely focused on the power, behaviour, traits and skills of individual leaders, leadership has increasingly also been recognized as the manifestation of a leader's 'spiritual core' (Fairholm, 1998) and concerned with valuing and appreciating both the individuals and the community involved with leaders (Eggert, 1998) and, indeed, more recently with followership (Riggio et al, 2008; Kellerman, 2008). Ohmann claimed as long ago as 1955 that people had lost faith in the basic values of society and that a spiritual rebirth was needed for industrial leadership, raising questions of the nature of business in relation to human values:

*“Production for what? Do we use people for production or production for people? How can production be justified if it destroys both personality and human values both in the process of its manufacture and by its end use?”*

(Ohmann, 1955: 37)

The concept of *spiritual leadership* has introduced new themes such as spirit and soul (Conger, 1994), purpose and meaning (Wong and Fry, 1998), inner life (Roof, 1999), management values (Pfeffer, 2003) and spiritual consciousness (Mayer, 2000). Fry's theory of spiritual leadership (2003) has been validated extensively in many organizations with its positive results for both

people and profit: employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, productivity, sales and growth (Fry and Matherly 2006; Fry and Slocum 2008).

However, in promoting workplace spirituality, leaders and managers face various difficulties and challenges in addition to lack of agency such as fear and hesitancy regarding possible offence taken by peers and managers in spiritual expression (Mitroff and Denton, 1999), conflicts that arise from the impression that “spirituality unites, but religion divides” (Bailey, 2001: 267) and failure to address the importance of cultural norms (Lewis and Geroy, 2000) and religious diversity (Hicks, 2002). These issues raise concerns about “holistic personal expression” and “spirit-free” zones (Lewis and Geroy, 2000). These concerns are shaped by attachment to goodwill but in excessive and context-insensitive forms are heavily dependent on personal ideology (Thiemann, 1996) rather than context-sensitive will. It is individuals’ judgements, not differences that divide people (Wheatley, 2002). In fact, neither religion nor spirituality is immune from other forms of conflict and, therefore, open dialogue to share ideas rather than coercion is needed (Hicks, 2002), based on personal ideology, to explore how conflicts may lead to opportunities for self-growth and development.

In exploring spiritual leadership from a Buddhist perspective, Kriger’s and Seng’s (2005) contingency approach covers a number of Buddhist concepts in leadership including non-self. However, they do not highlight the assumption underlying the concept of non-self, which is non-attachment. Kriger and Seng (2005) conceptualize leadership from a Buddhist perspective using the fundamental Buddhist concepts of impermanence, “non-self”, and the effects of the “comparing mind” – “the cognitive tendency to see differences and distinctions and, as a result, to make excessive comparisons and judgments about who is superior and who is inferior in relationships and who is better”. This in one sense is broadly compatible with the concept of distributed or multiple leadership (Gronn, 2002), in which any organizational members exercise leadership. In other words, leaders, in the Buddhist worldview, do not place importance on “self” and “ego” because doing this leads to desires and attempts to satisfy them that cause suffering.

Studies of leadership from a Buddhist viewpoint in non-Western contexts (Fernando and Jackson, 2006; Fernando et al, 2008) show that incorporating Buddhist principles such as the five precepts has a significant impact in forming the ‘right view’ of leaders in decision making. Ironically for interconnectedness in Buddhism, in facing the dilemmas entailed in having to meet the

expectations of both shareholders and other stakeholders, spiritually motivated leaders may have to prioritize cognitive factors at the expense of affective and conative ones (Fernando and Jackson, 2006; Shakun, 2001) – a potential hazard of leaders’ religion-based spirituality (Fernando and Nilakant, 2008). Endless causal networks challenge the practicability of spiritual leadership. Therefore, too much attachment to stakeholders’ expectations may lead to all kinds of management fads (Fernando et al, 2008).

Excessive attachment therefore can trap leaders in a gilded-cage that limits the positive side of leadership practices in general and spiritual leadership in particular. We therefore now highlight the concepts of non-attachment and skillful means to demonstrate how they may promote ethical spiritual leadership practices and flexible leadership.

### **The concept of non-attachment in Buddhism**

While there is nothing wrong with the view that meaningfulness is associated with the expectation that workplaces are means by which people can fulfil themselves, these concepts differ from a Buddhist perspective. In Buddhism, it is the *pursuit* of expectations and *attachment* to them that create suffering. These are means to ends, not ends in themselves.

In the Buddhist Four Noble Truths attachment is strongly associated with desire. These truths are acknowledged in various Buddhist schools of thought and are not regarded as mystical or inaccessible (Batchelor, 1997):

1. Life is full of dissatisfaction and suffering (*dukkha*).
2. Dissatisfaction is a result (*samudāya*) of desire and cravings (*tanhā*) that may be transformed into three forms: “the three poisons” of greed, hatred and ignorance or delusion
3. Desire and suffering can be terminated by overcoming attachment and ignorance (*nirodha*).
4. The Noble Eight-Fold Path of righteous action (*magga*) is the solution to curing suffering

Buddhist principles of impermanence and emptiness highlight the importance of acknowledging the present moment without attachment. Emptiness is the principle that all phenomena – including the self – are empty of intrinsic existence, a principle that is receiving increasing scientific interest (Van Gordon, Shonin and Griffiths, 2016). Impermanence is a state of moment-to-moment experience (Gunaratana, 2002), an appreciation of the moment and acknowledging that nothing is permanent and everything changes at some point, a phenomenon without inherent worth or



meaning (Baer, 2003). Impermanence can be interpreted as insecure, fearful or even a fragile state (Bodhi, 2000). Thus there may be a tendency to “cling to positive feelings, rejecting negative ones, and ignoring neutral tones” (Weick and Putnam, 2006). Attachment to things causes suffering when they disappear: if one becomes attached and holds on to things that will change or inevitably disappear, one is bound to suffer (Gethin, 1998). Attachment and cravings can lead to emotionally-loaded thoughts beset by fear, apprehension, distress, delusions and excitability, which in turn may result in distorted perceptions, misjudgements and even wrongful behaviour (Chan, 2008).

What we can learn from this is that attachment should not be extreme. Suffering arises if one clings to things possessively or passionately. But if, through inner freedom and love, one avoids unwholesome obsession with desired results or outcomes, suffering can be diminished (Govinda, 1991). On the one hand, pursuits with determination attached to desirable outcomes might bring suffering eventually if desires are not satisfied. On the other hand, learning to enjoy the *process* of personal pursuit as part of personal self-development rather than attachment to the final outcome may avoid or mitigate suffering.

Change and contextualization are both inevitable in contemporary organizations. Therefore, in Buddhism attachment to them is de-emphasized and not extreme. Buddhism places importance in the leader-follower relationship on the practice of the Middle Way<sup>1</sup> enabling both the leader and the follower(s) to be conscious of any attachment or choices they make in the relationship to avoid or mitigate any cause for ‘suffering’.

The central tenet of non-attachment of Buddhism has been borrowed in various ways in studies in psychology (Sahdra and Shaver, 2013; Van Gordon et al, 2016), social studies (Tideman, 2016), organizational studies (Daniels, 2007; Prayukvong and Rees, 2010) and economics (Schumacher, 1973). For instance, the non-extreme position in the Middle Way facilitates sustainable economic development by moderating consumption, material and energy throughput, and environmental exploitation (Daniels, 2017). Therefore, Buddhism and its notion of non-attachment are not merely

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<sup>1</sup> The Buddha teaches the Middle Way to avoid extremes of self-mortification and indulgence (Schroeder, 2004: 13). This also “avoids the extremes of nihilism (which says that all entities are non-existent in reality) and eternalism (which says that some or all entities in reality have existence independent of conditions) (Burton, 2001). The Middle Way is a morally appropriate response to the situation – giving “full moral weight to the conflicting ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ values, accepting the demands of both but acknowledging that any practical resolution of the dilemma will entail that one of the conflicting moral claims will perforce lose” (Perrett, 2000).

theological concepts but part of an ethical system and epistemological way of thinking (Marques, 2010).

We now turn to ways of practising non-attachment, with examples from the Buddha's leadership, and the concept of skillful means as a context-sensitive means based on non-attachment.

### **Skillful means and non-attachment**

Skillful means is a technique that the Buddha used to deliver his teachings to his followers. The Buddha realized the need to respond to the world in various ways with a variety of philosophical and religious views that suited his audience and the context (Pye, 1978; Schroeder, 2000, 2004, 2011; Federman, 2009). Skillful means entails that no single teaching or practice is sufficient to deal with the various karmic<sup>2</sup> differences in the world. Skillful means does not limit any knowledge: it is more about *how* knowledge is taught rather than the content of the teaching itself.

The Buddha used various forms of karmic reasoning as skillful means (Kern, 1989; Lindtner, 1986). For some, advice was offered. Others received philosophical explanations of reality or reprimands. And there were occasions when the Buddha himself merely demonstrated a 'noble silence' because of the specific contextual needs and backgrounds of his audience (see Buddhist stories below) (Federman, 2009; Schroeder, 2004). Such a teaching approach was appropriate given that the Buddha's audiences came from different backgrounds – some with different religious beliefs, others with a deeper understanding of Buddhism. One single way of teaching or leading, therefore, may otherwise have been interpreted differently by different audiences and would not have been effective or powerful. Skillful means is considered to be the root of Buddhist wisdom in the Lotus Sutra<sup>3</sup> (Schroeder, 2011).

Skillful means is based on non-attachment. A well-known metaphor for using skillful means is 'letting go of the raft'. Buddhism presents a story of a man who wanted to cross a river and had to build a raft from sticks, grass and branches. The idea here is that, once the raft has been useful in crossing over safely, there is no value to clinging onto it as he will continue his journey on land,

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<sup>2</sup> Karma in Buddhism and Hinduism is the teaching that there is a close relationship between what one chooses to do and who or what that person becomes over time. Moral errors contain their own penalties as natural consequences, and every virtue encompasses its own reward (Wright, 2005: 79). Karmic differences refer to the different consequences (punishments), either good or bad associated with different actions of different individuals (Schroeder, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> A Mahayana Buddhist text dating from about two thousand years ago explaining how the Buddha himself used 'innumerable devices' to lead living beings and separate them from their attachments (Pye, 2003: 2).

where the raft will no longer be needed. Skillful means is the ‘raft’ – nothing more than a device that is needed in a particular situation.

The fundamental principle of skillful means is based on the practice of non-attachment and compassion. The power of skillful means can be maintained and reinforced, therefore, only if it is practised flexibly and compassionately according to the context. If skillful means is attached to personal preference, ironically it may again become just another form of suffering and ignorance. For example, leadership practices that embrace criticality may work in Western cultures but may not be effective in some Eastern high-context cultures where there are face-saving concerns.

The Lotus Sutra emphasizes ‘skill-in-means’ as the Buddha’s teaching and leadership which should not be channelled into any single religious practice or philosophical view. Skillful means represents a flexible way of practising Buddhism:

- (i) Many leadership and organizational issues come from attachment to either individual or organizational desires that, in Buddhism, create suffering;
- (ii) Most studies incorporating leadership and leader-follower relationships with attachment theory focus on secure attachment (Popper and Maysel, 2003; Wu and Parker, 2017), which, ironically, is considered as a potential cause of suffering in Buddhism;
- (iii) Non-attachment embraces flexibility in response to scholarly calls for leadership approaches that enable leadership adaptability (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010), leadership responses to challenging contexts (Braun et al, 2016), proactive behaviour in bringing change in uncertain contexts (Griffin et al, 2007) and exploring possibilities and mastering unfamiliar environments and contexts (Frese and Fay, 2001);
- (iv) Sensitivity to the context of the audience in skillful means co-exists well with spiritual diversity and conflicts between spiritual beliefs and values.

Skillful means is not without controversy. Debates about whether skillful means is nothing more than the Buddha’s tricks highlight the importance of acquiring appropriate knowledge and wisdom for the right interpretation of skillful means without clinging to any specific context or view. Means are no longer skillful if they lose their sensitivity and flexibility to respond to different contexts. This notion applies equally to contemporary leadership practice.

## **Enacting ethical spiritual leadership as skillful means**

The need for spiritual leadership in contemporary organizations can be strongly argued. We revisit here the concept of spiritual leadership as skillful means as part of the contemporary dialogue on spiritual diversity, spiritual conflict and criticisms of workplace spirituality. The practicability and application of skillful means in spiritual leadership is illustrated by Buddhist stories.

### ***Spiritual diversity***

Buddhist stories about skillful means helpfully address spiritual and religious diversity. For example, in the *Brahmā Vihāra* (Rhys-Davids, 1899), the Buddha encounters two young Brahmins who are confused about their Hindu teachings. The Buddha guides them on how to reunite with the Hindu god, Brahmā. This instruction apparently contradicts the Buddha's philosophy of "non-self", which includes the metaphysical being Brahmā (Schroeder, 2004). The inconsistency here refers not to the truth in abstract but to the response to manifestations of suffering. This skillful means refers to the Buddha's ability to shift viewpoints and wisdom unbounded by any single doctrine or practice. It exemplifies Buddhist compassion.

Another example of the Buddha's skillful means is his "noble silence". For instance, the Buddha refused to answer his disciple Malunkyaputta's questions on the origin of the universe because Malunkyaputta was in confusion (Warren, 1986). The Buddha's reaction takes into consideration the specific needs and problems of a particular person. Murti (1955: 45) explains that the Buddha's silence reflects a truth that is unhelpful to the person or inappropriate in his or her context, and sometimes a truth is "beyond the reach of verbal designation or thought construct" (Nagao, 1991, p.40). Though Western scholars might criticize such non-linguistic, non-conceptual and non-verified silence (Kalupahana, 1976), the Buddhist scholar Organ (1954) explains that the Buddha limited himself to revealing truths that he considered relevant or religiously significant. For the Buddha, his knowledge was either withheld or expressed to release human beings from suffering and to contribute to their salvation.

The lesson that we can draw from these stories for the workplace and leader agency – and perhaps for the contemporary debate on 'safe spaces' – is the use of skillful practices. Whether a leader or a manager allows free spiritual expression depends on understanding the context itself. Do members of an organization have any special attachment to extreme cultural norms? Do they possess strong "self-identity"? Context-sensitivity is crucial. If it was not because of compassion

and wisdom, how could the Buddha have understood and respected the two Brahmins' and Malunkyaputta's beliefs in Hindu teachings and practices and responded wisely without generating any more misunderstanding or suffering? Different religions and spirituality – and indeed humanism – may bring rich values to the organization; yet they need to include compassion to be fully understood and appreciated.

Leadership as skillful means also addresses dilemmas of connectedness identified by Fernando and Jackson (2006). While Buddhism promotes interconnectedness, in responding to expectations of various organizational players to create altruistic love, caring or membership, leaders may either feel a lack of connectedness or feel separated from the majority's pursuits. However, skillful means is not an 'umbrella term'; it represents not a universal practice but a contextually reflexive one. A leader, like many other Buddhist practitioners, undergoes an ongoing self-transformation process, in which the 'self' is trained, tested and challenged in contemporary contexts.

Cultivating connectedness within organizations is an ongoing process. At times a leader needs different, even mutually uncomfortable means to respond to different stakeholders. For instance, when a specific context requires adaptiveness, leaders need to let go of their 'egos' or espoused values. However, there are cases when certain decisions should be made for the common good, even if they contravene the expectations of some organizational players. Leadership is a learning process that needs to be consistent but also flexible in response to contextual changes. Likewise, the Buddha did not create a Buddhist community immediately, but through a long journey that involved both the promotion and the rejection of Buddhist teachings and the 'self'. The enactment of skillful means thus has its roots in the practice of compassion (Pye, 1978; Schroeder, 2004), in which leaders display multiple identities skilfully.

### ***Conflict in groups and organizations***

Buddhist perspectives on conflict provide insights on how spiritual conflicts may be positive. In Buddhism, "views" are not the cause of conflict: it is our attachment to them that causes misunderstanding and problems (Schroeder, 2004). In Buddhism, the 62 views<sup>4</sup> on paths to liberation raise conflicts and debate. They offer various meditation techniques and religious

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<sup>4</sup> The 62 philosophical positions on a coherent and systematic view of the world in Buddhism appear in the Brahmajāla-suttanta doctrine, in which the Buddha responds to such views that prevailed in India during his time. The Buddha claimed that many practitioners had been caught in the net of these sixty-two modes with extreme attachment to them that prevented them from true enlightenment (Schroeder, 2004: 19; Rhys-Davids, 1899: 54).

practices for liberating human beings. These views are considered as metaphysical problems heavily dependent on their conceptualization (Murti, 1955), and conflicts exist because of lack of empirical verification (Kalupahana, 1976). People are attached to these views, and they assume that their chosen paths are the only paths to liberation. However, the Buddha never wanted his teachings to become the object of attachment. Conflicts here are considered as suffering due to personal attachment.

The 62 views are means to liberation but, without the capability to skillfully apply them, they may become forms of attachment that lead to conflict and suffering. Rahula (1974:11) claims that “If you cling to it, if you fondle it, if you treasure it, if you are attached to it, then you do not understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over and not for getting hold of”. Skillful means is a Buddhist concept that applies equally to the Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana paths. All paths present different ways or skillful means of practising Buddhism for different audiences. However, like the 62 views themselves, disagreements and even criticism exist within these three paths, mainly because of attachment to individuals’ preferred, specific ‘skillful means’ to enlightenment. Ironically, such attachment contradicts the true nature of Buddhist skillful means. Whether it is the Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana path, each one should be interpreted as a valuable means suitable for specific contexts of different audiences.

The “raft” metaphor also applies to the practice of spiritual leadership. Being attached to a specific viewpoint that generates conflict becomes a hardship that prevents an objective and positive view. Conflicts can be used skillfully and proactively to reveal a situation, learn from it and articulate wisdom. Spiritual leadership can “filter and interpret the noise from within people’s own organizations and determine the salient points on which to act” (Malan and Kriger, 1998). Therefore, spiritual leadership as a skillful means acknowledges that conflict creates a learning opportunity and process that may foster people’s ability to gain knowledge and understanding.

### ***Spiritual leadership and compassion***

Controversies about the introduction of spirituality for questionable corporate purposes have presented challenges to spiritual leadership. Leaders will always be imperfect instantiations of wisdom (Baltes, 2004). However, effective leadership entails a learning process, and learning to be aware of the sensitivity of workplace spirituality and its potential dark side requires skillful means. This is the link between wisdom and compassion.

In the words of the Dalai Lama (1995):

*“Genuine compassion is based on a clear acceptance or recognition that others, like oneself, want happiness and have the right to overcome suffering. On that basis one develops concern about the welfare of others, irrespective of one’s attitude to oneself. That is compassion.”*

Compassion is crucial in spiritual leaders so that they may address contemporary workplace spirituality skilfully and effectively. Kanov et al (2004) say that compassion is a process of noticing others’ sufferings, feeling others’ pain, and responding to them, and is experienced and displayed both individually and collectively. According to Gill (2011: 322), feeling others’ pain is an example of empathy which is not necessary for compassion and, in fact, may be a hindrance. Feelings are shared through the process of “emotional contagion” – the phenomenon whereby one or more individuals’ feelings and behaviour trigger the same or similar feelings and behaviour in other people (Hatfield et al, 1994) – and social experience and expression (Kelly and Barsade, 2001), which can have a significant and positive impact on humaneness of an organization’s culture (Hochschild, 2003).

Spiritual leadership expressing altruistic love or compassion aims at being a sustained and practical effort to do everything in one’s power to help others alleviate their pain or suffering. In introducing workplace spirituality, spiritual leaders need to avoid artificial compassion and atomistic, individualistic, cynical and gainful commercialization. In Buddhism, compassion does not refer to the well-being of one individual in particular but to the well-being of all: corporate goals usually serve the well-being of only some particular individual players and should not be misunderstood as reflecting compassion generally. Enacting compassionate leadership as skillful means needs to be context-sensitive because too much compassion in certain contexts may be detrimental and counterproductive, indicating favouritism and partisanship, discouraging individual efforts (Kant, 1996; Simpson, 2014). Skillful means, therefore, serves to help leaders identify the ‘tipping point’ of compassion, which generates neither sentimentalism nor exploitation.

### **Responding to criticism of the dark side of leadership and organizational studies**

Skillful means may usefully address criticisms of practices associated with the dark side of leadership. There are a number of negative impacts from leadership that have been identified: an emphasis on extraversion over inner consciousness (Palmer, 1994), mirroring followers’ fantasies

and projections, leader narcissism, emotional illiteracy, fear of letting go (Kets de Vries, 1993), leadership branding and commodification (Sinclair, 2011), and identity production (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). These concerns all exist because of imbalance in the perception of leaders and their strong attachment to their images as leaders or to the power associated with leadership positions. For instance, in transformational leadership, leaders need to be free from excessive anxiety to gain followers' trust (Shamir et al, 1994) or to release attachment to independently determined goals or standards to adjust the psyche of their followers which may reflect authoritarian forms of organization (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). Excessive attachment to a particular leadership style can also prevent leadership flexibility in mixing task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviours needed in complex situations.

To overcome such drawbacks, leaders need to practise wise leadership based on their understanding of impermanence and the interconnectedness of organizational players. This enables them to accept and respond to unpredictable contextual changes while fully knowing that the formation and production of leadership identity is not in the sole possession of one individual (Hollander, 1993) but is a combination of various roles, including relationships with followers (Shamir and Eilam, 2005).

By introducing skillful means into spiritual leadership as one of its practices and the basic Buddhist principles of non-attachment and compassion, we respond to Linstead and colleagues' (2014) call for more understanding of the dark side of organizations. Linstead et al (2014: 178, 180) state that, in organizations, the dark side is not just dark from the outside: it can be found within "organizational boundaries and logics" and sometimes cannot be fully addressed by existing organizational theories. They say that it needs the importing of theory from various disciplines to fully understand new or neglected phenomena in existing organization theory by incorporating new analytical concepts. These authors also highlight that there is no specific method to study the dark side, and they emphasize the need for sensitivity to the context and for informal methods that are ethical and reflexive rather than scientific methods. The practice of skillful means offers flexibility and appreciation of context, along with a compassionate and mindful approach, to reveal hidden corners of the 'dark side' and to enhance organizational well-being as a whole.

We also acknowledge the possibility that Buddhism and skillful means may be commoditized in organizational and leadership discourse. A study by Fernando and Cohen (2013: 1034) in Sri



Lanka found that women enacted Buddhism in a very public and individualistic way so that they could buffer gender discrimination “when good Buddhist women were chosen for leadership positions reserved for male candidates since they were perceived as having the potential to pass on moral values to their subordinates”. Therefore Buddhism can be used as a gender management strategy (Powell et al, 2009) or to craft desirable work identities (Lynch, 1999; Radhakrishnan, 2009) to help not only followers but also leaders themselves (Kemavuthanon and Duberley, 2009). This highlights the importance of practising Buddhism or skillful means without neglecting its fundamental foundation, which is non-attachment. It includes the ability to know even when to let go of skillful means based on acknowledging and addressing individuals’ ethical drivers, contextual sensitivity to differences in philosophies, values, ethics, capacity and capabilities, and differences in cultural norms (Fernando et al, 2009).

We introduce a reflexive approach to leadership in which open responses that address social and moral issues are encouraged. The ability to let go of extremeness is crucial to promoting contextually sensitive leadership. “Pluralists argue that there is no one best form of management”, says Paul Edwards (2017: 2). Evidently there is also no one best form of leadership, including spiritual leadership.

### **Theoretical contributions**

The concept of skillful means can potentially yield theoretical contributions to various fields. We introduce spiritual leadership as an example of skillful means for organizations to adopt. For skillful means to be accepted and appreciated, it needs to be based on wisdom, compassion and the power to let go of attachments that might lead to unhealthy corporate desires and behaviour and ultimately to human suffering.

The Buddhist stories presented in this article serve several purposes: (1) to highlight the importance of contextualization and flexibility in applying various approaches; (2) to emphasize the power of compassion as the underlying principle for wise leadership behaviour; and (3) to foreground non-attachment as the heart of skillful means in avoiding extreme interpretations and responses in both organizational studies and praxis. The messages from the stories provide guidelines for spiritual leadership in responding to context (e.g. audience) and for spirituality practices that can be applied effectively in contemporary workplaces, contributing to

organizational studies and theories, and positioning the meaning of well-being and spiritual values where they belong.

Buddhist concepts can be applied to further develop leadership theories, but they must be interpreted in a context-relevant manner. For instance, the concepts of non-attachment and non-self can be applied to develop further studies of leadership identity, acknowledging others and the context while learning to let go of one's ego. The practice of non-attachment, however, remains the most difficult practice because it challenges human's habits. Kriger and Seng (2005), in their extended contingency leadership theory based on five religions, claim that leaders' behaviour, whether they are spiritual or not, is shaped by underlying values associated with their preferred worldviews. In Buddhism, Buddhism principles are not difficult to understand, but their practice is challenging. Therefore, in theory, the application of skillful means may contribute to resolving various leadership dilemmas. However, in practice, it begs for a reflexive, contextual and flexible adaptation that sometimes requires personal transformation and sacrifice without which the combination of wisdom and compassion can hardly be brought into practice effectively.

### **Practical Implications**

In response to criticisms of workplace spirituality as a mode of manipulation in organizations, spiritual leadership as skillful means addresses Lips-Wiersma and colleagues' (2009) criticisms of the spiritual impact of seduction, manipulation, evangelization and subjugation based on a high level of instrumentality and control (we identified earlier how much leaders need to respond to spiritual diversity and conflicts). With low levels of control over spiritual expression, leaders may have to face the impact of spiritual seduction and conflicts, while a high level of control over spiritual expression results in manipulation.

How much leaders consider spirituality or Buddhism as an instrument for personal and organizational purposes also brings consequences of evangelization, subjugation and dependency. Spiritual leaders therefore need to apply a combination of various skillful means to avoid the traps mentioned earlier. For example, contextual flexibility is needed to respond to the context of employees and the workplace. Compassion and non-attachment are important for leaders to acknowledge both possible positive and negative outcomes of spiritual diversity and to avoid extreme attachment to their personal ideology, perception and purpose that may lead to unexpected and unwanted outcomes of control, manipulation and instrumentality. Wisdom is crucial for

leaders to remain objective, with analytical, multi-perspective and unbiased views, to understand the underlying causes of conflicts: feasible, rational positive outcomes may arise from such conflicts and diversity in the form of wise decision-making.

Spiritual leadership faces challenges concerning not only spiritual diversity and conflict within organizations but also something more sinister. The dark side of workplace spirituality presents a significant challenge to spiritual leadership. Spiritual values need to be addressed and managed wisely without their becoming cynical tools and instruments for corporate greed and profit-making. Large companies like Apple, GlaxoSmithKline, the World Bank, McDonalds, Nike, Shell Oil and Ford have all embraced workplace spirituality as a competitive driver in corporate economic pursuits (Casey, 2002; Lips-Wiersma et al, 2009; Mitroff and Denton, 1999).

However, in practice, leaders are not the sole actors in organizational pursuits. Relevant stakeholders, including shareholders, all have roles in the decision-making process of an organization (Hasnas, 2013). Leaders are not necessarily free agents. There are structural, cultural, contextual and institutional constraints to leader agency, especially when “the conditions in the world are shaped by other properties beyond leadership” (Raelin, 2016: 132), such as changes in institutional law or policies. Therefore, it is worth acknowledging that rather than stressing the agency of leaders and assuming that leader agency is absolute, responsibility for organizational problems does not lie totally in the hands of formal and hierarchical leadership positions (Tourish, 2014). Likewise, leaders may not be the only ones responsible for the instrumentalisation of spirituality in organizations. And spiritual leaders with good intentions may not be able by themselves to fully address those concerns. A skillful means approach therefore would be helpful not just for leaders but also for other organizational players. This approach reflects context-sensitivity in organizations and the ‘depending arising’ nature of organizational members to respond to the identification function of agency (Gillespie, 2012) to react to situational demands skilfully as well as the notions of non-attachment and non-self in allowing reflexivity. Skillful means supports reflexive and context-sensitive collaborative agency (Raelin, 2016) in fostering the skillful collective leadership of all organizational actors rather than individual leaders in a “co-constructed phenomenon embedded in fluid social structures” (Tourish, 2014: 94).

Higher education and business schools in particular as places where teaching programmes educate and credentialize corporate executives have rightly been criticized for their ‘prevailing logic of

competition [that] leads to a vicious and paradoxical, self-defeating circle of “zero sum games”, encouraging all manner of pretension, narcissism and what [Mats Alvesson] calls “grandiosity” (Alvesson, 2013), even to their self-identification as ‘Masters of the Universe’. Damian O’Doherty (2016) suggests that this ultimately impoverishes human beings and is self-defeating. He also suggests that teaching followership in business schools may be an antidote to such grandiosity and its consequential impoverishment of the human condition. However, even this is questionable: what exactly do we mean by followership? Followers play multiple roles and engage in complex relationships with leaders, ranging from enforced subservience and isolation to deep engagement and commitment, either supportive or oppositional (Riggio et al, 2008; Kellerman, 2008).

We encourage further future empirical exploratory research that addresses leadership as reflexive skillful means, in particular:

- (1) How and to what extent using skillful means encourages multiple leadership identities?
- (2) To what extent styles of leadership attachment influence organizational conflict?
- (3) To what extent and how the use of skillful means promotes compassion in leadership practices?
- (4) How the use of skillful means influences followership and collective agency

Further studies examining skillful means in followership would be useful also in how followers can combat attachment to excessive faith in the wisdom of leaders. Such attachment can result in followers exchanging their senses of identity, tolerating ethical lapses and being manipulated by corporate cultism (Tourish and Vatcha, 2005).

### **Concluding reflections**

We introduced the concepts of non-attachment and skillful means in leadership through the demonstration of spiritual leadership as skillful means. Our approach encourages the letting go of extreme and self-indulged attachment to any specific leadership practice. It promotes flexibility and adaptability in leadership practices in responding to contextual challenges with wisdom and compassion and without discrimination. Our illustration of skillful means is not intended to reject the well-established mainstream thinking about leadership but to add something new in terms of behavioural skills and reflexive ways of thinking, bearing in mind that our approach is yet just another ‘means’ that itself is impermanent in nature.

Spiritual leadership can be an effective, ethical and powerful practice in contemporary organizations. However, like the implications of the Buddhist stories, it needs to be skillfully implemented according to the context. Yet such leadership still has to be based on wisdom and compassion to allow leaders to appreciate contextual differences and not to be trapped in, or attached to, leadership frameworks that may prevent them from enacting spiritual leadership using skillful means in an ethical manner. Our aim has been to respond to scholarly commentaries and criticisms about leadership in general and spiritual leadership in particular by introducing the concept of skillful means – knowing when and how to “let go of the raft” – as a flexible and reflexive practice in spiritual leadership. We hope our introduction to the conceptual relevance and practical applicability of skillful means in spiritual leadership may trigger further research and discussion in leadership and organizational studies and contribute to the effective and ethical practice of spiritual leadership.

*“In compassion lies the world’s true strength.” (Guatama Buddha)*

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