



VIPASSANA MEDITATION

The Path to Better Servant-Leadership

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Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity.

—Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*

In 1970, Robert Greenleaf was so inspired by the role of Leo in Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East* that he initiated a movement to change the landscape of organizational management. He coined the term *servant-leadership*, challenging leaders to serve others *first* (Greenleaf, 2002). Greenleaf (2002) proposed that the first step to becoming a servant-leader requires developing a deep-rooted sense of self-awareness. Larry C. Spears (Spears & Lawrence, 2002), a primary contributor to servant-leadership, augmented Greenleaf's work by adding that "servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in essence, a way of being—that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society" (p. 4). He, too, prescribed self-awareness as the principal building block of leadership development.

Coincidentally, in 1969, thousands of miles and an ocean away, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, with the help of S. N. Goenka, aimed to revivify what is said to be one of the oldest traditions of Buddhist meditations—Vipassana meditation (Glickman, 2002). Translated, Vipassana means "seeing into reality as it is" (Goenka, 2002, p. 11) and is about transforming oneself through self-observation (Glickman, 2002). Just as in servant-leadership, self-awareness is the nucleus of Vipassana meditation.



With that coincidence in mind, this article will review the history, philosophy, effectiveness, and challenges of servant-leadership. A review of the literature will reveal that self-awareness is an indispensable and necessary characteristic of servant-leadership and posit Vipassana meditation as a viable strategic means to heightening and sustaining self-awareness in the servant-leader.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

History

Robert Greenleaf spent the first half of his career working for AT&T in the organization's management, research and development, and education divisions. In addition, he held a position of visiting lecturer at MIT's Sloan School of Management and Harvard Business School and taught at Dartmouth and University of Virginia. Following his retirement from AT&T in 1964 he founded the Center for Applied Ethics, later renamed the Robert K. Greenleaf center for Servant-Leadership, and embarked on a second career as a consultant, speaker, and writer (Greenleaf, Beazley, Beggs, & Spears, 2003). It was in this second phase of his career that he developed the concept of servant-leadership and initiated the servant-leadership movement. He spent the remainder of his life sharing and exploring the theme of servant-leadership, "to stimulate thought and action for building a better, more caring society" (p. vii), in books, essays, and videotapes. Greenleaf died in 1990 but his legacy remains.

While Greenleaf is considered to be the pioneer of servant-leadership, Larry C. Spears spearheaded the movement. Spears became familiar with Greenleaf's work in the 1980s while on staff at the Quaker-based publication, Philadelphia's *Friends Journal*. He served as president and CEO of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership from 1990–2007 and established the Larry C. Spears Center for Servant-Leadership, Inc. where he currently serves as president and CEO (<http://www.spearscenter.org/>). Though he has made many notable contributions to servant-leadership, he is most recognized for augmenting Greenleaf's work by identifying the following ten characteristics of servant-leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Greenleaf et al., 2003). His supplementations to Greenleaf's work provide a



more operational definition of servant-leadership, outlining its constructs (Rennaker & Novak, 2007).

Philosophy

Servant and leader—can these two roles be fused in one real person, in all levels or status of calling?

—Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*

Greenleaf (2002) describes the specific incident that forced him to consider the question, Can a leader be a servant?

The servant-leader concept emerged after a deep involvement with colleges and universities during the period of campus turmoil in the late 1960's and early 1970's. It was a searing experience to watch distinguished institutions show their fragility and crumble, to search for an understanding of what happened to them (and never be satisfied that I knew), and to try to help heal their wounds. (p. 17)

Sensing a leadership crisis, Greenleaf felt obligated to do something about it. Reflecting on a novel he read a decade earlier, *Journey to the East*, he again considered the tale of Leo. Leo banded together with members of an organization called The League and joined them on their mysterious journey to the East. He accepted the position of servant and was responsible for attending to the menial chores of the group as they embarked on their pilgrimage. All went well on the journey for the men until one autumn morning when Leo mysteriously disappeared. With his disappearance, the group fell apart and the voyage was abandoned. Many years later, when the storyteller reunites with Leo, he realizes that Leo was actually the honorable leader of the group (Hesse, 1956).

Like the narrator, many years passed before Greenleaf apprehended the critical role of Leo. With this in mind he reflected, “*the great leader is seen as servant first*, and that simple fact is key to *his* greatness (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 21). Expounding on this idea and answering the question, “Who is servant-leader?” Greenleaf (2002) declared the following:

Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first,



perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or acquire material possessions. For such, it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. (p. 27)

The servant-leader is willing to step out in front and lead the way, especially in times of turmoil or adversity. Yet, servant-leaders are humble and do not need to be in the spotlight. They recognize the unique qualities of their followers (Beazley et al., 2003) and do not wish to dominate or control others. Additionally, servant-leaders work to develop a heightened sense of self-awareness, one that will aid them in healing both themselves and others (Ferch, 2005).

Challenges

As in all models of leadership, servant-leaders face many challenges. Looking back, Greenleaf described those who tend to lead *first*, rather than serve *first*, as typically trying to satisfy their drive for power. Deepak Chopra (2010), a renowned author and authority in mind-body healing says that while power is a fundamental part of leadership it also can be very destructive. Accordingly, as people accumulate power they tend to desire more power. Expanded awareness helps one become realistic about how power works and enables them to “renounce personal power for transpersonal power. ..based on empathy, compassion, detachment, and beyond ego” (p. 70).

Furthermore, people tend to have a dark side, what Chopra (2010) refers to as a shadow. The shadow is “the hidden area of the psyche where anger, fear, greed, envy and violence are kept out of sight” (p. 76). The shadow is a compilation of lifelong beliefs, experiences, guilt, self-judgments, and shame and it can be very damaging and limit one's ability to be openhearted and clear-headed. Until leaders become conscious of their shadow, disassemble it, and “defuse” (p. 79) it they will be limited in their ability to serve others. Vipassana is an effective method for bringing awareness to these mind states. In doing so, one is able to “examine them and learn from them about the sources of actions on ourselves and on others, and experiment with the possibility of letting these very mind states become our meditation teachers and show us how to live” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 104).



Effectiveness

To date, little research has been conducted measuring the effectiveness of servant-leadership. However, a review of the many companies practicing servant-leadership and their continued success, particularly during these difficult economic times, supports servant-leadership as an effective business model. For example, many of the companies listed on *Fortune Magazine's* 100 Best Companies to Work For list are servant-led organization. SAS, Google, REI, AFLAC, The Container Store, and Starbucks, to name a few, all have repeatedly appeared on the prestigious list. TDIIndustries, making the list for the fourteenth consecutive year, is one of the first said companies to adopt servant-leadership.

Jack Lowe Sr., the founder of TDIIndustries, happened upon Greenleaf's work in 1971 and was intrigued by the concept. Coincidentally, he and his staff had been reevaluating the organization's model of leadership training and realized that their supervisors had received very little, if any, training in effective leadership practices (Spears, 1998). Upon completing *The Servant as Leader* Lowe challenged his employees to also read the book and engaged them in a debate on the effectiveness of servant-leadership (Gavin & Mason, 2004). Consequently, servant-leadership is now the bed-rock of TDI's leadership philosophy. Every TDI partner is issued a copy of Greenleaf's *The Servant as Leader* and completes the organization's Basic Servant Leadership training. The company is a revered leader in the industry and has enjoyed year-by-year profit gains, low turnover, and high employee satisfaction. TDI attributes their success to their servant-leadership practices (2004).

Hal Adler (www.leadershiplanding.com), former president of the Great Place to Work Institute and founder of Leadership Landing, conducted extensive research into what made these companies so unique. What he discovered was that the great leaders of these organizations and others on the list shared five common characteristics—self-awareness, bravery, kindness, innovation, and inspiration. Self-awareness, according to Adler,

is the cornerstone of great leadership. A leader that exhibits self-awareness displays a clear sense of identity, a sense of purpose, and a distinct, consistent way of interacting with others. Without self-awareness, characteristics such as bravery or kindness, while valuable, are ultimately stripped of their power. Self-awareness allows one to be directed. More often than not leaders who exhibit a keen self-awareness, working within



an organization that allows them to implement their vision to create a positive working environment, can drive performance and employee engagement to greater degrees. (www.leadershiplanding.com)

Adler proposes that the first step to developing self-awareness is to take a deep breath and focus on the present moment—meditation, in other words.

VIPASSANA

History

Vipassana meditation is considered one of the most ancient traditions of meditation and is said to be the technique utilized and taught by the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (Chiesa, 2010). Gautama, a prominent prince born into the Shakya clan between 566 BCE. and 366 BCE., grew up in a wealthy family (Goldstein, 2002). All of the extravagances, however, did not satisfy his desire to understand where freedom and happiness could be found. Leaving home at the age of twenty-nine, Gautama began a crusade seeking not “philosophical answers, but transformative understandings of the heart” (p. 16). Six years later, after experimenting with numerous “austerities and ascetic disciplines” (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 81), Gautama was still not satisfied that he understood the root cause of and end to suffering or the “path to freedom” (p. 81). So he abandoned the traditions taught by his ancestors and set out on his own to search for answers. He sat under a Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya and resolved not to get up until

[h]e had experienced for himself the deepest and most liberating truth. Through the three watches of the night he saw with increasingly refined vision his own past lives, the birth and death of beings according to their karma and the liberating insight into how suffering in our lives is born from ignorance and ends through wisdom. At the moment the morning star appeared...in that moment of liberation he became the Buddha, the Awakened One. (p. 16)

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha wished to share what he had learned and felt called upon to help others understand the true nature of reality. He trusted that some of the fellow ascetics he had practiced with prior to venturing off on his own would receive his message with an open heart and, in turn, would help him spread the teachings of meditation as he himself had discovered it (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). In a speech



to the first of his disciples the Buddha urged, “Go forth, O monks, for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of people” (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 84). Thousands of years before Greenleaf, the Buddha understood that serving others is an all-important ingredient for finding true happiness. He devoted the remainder of his life to teaching others the path of *bhavana*, the Sanskrit word for meditation, meaning “mental development or mental culture” (Glickman, 2002, p. 69). Greenleaf’s (1977) test of servant-leadership asks, “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived” (p. 27). It is evident that Gautama was a servant-leader of his time.

Philosophy

Those who have a feeling of gratitude and a wish to serve others without expecting anything are very rare people.

—The Buddha

Vipassana meditation is a nonsectarian practice (Goenka, 2002). It is not associated with any religious organizations; however, that is not to say that it “cannot occur within a religious framework” (Shapiro & Walsh, 1984, p. 6). It can. But, one does not have to subscribe to a particular religious organization to practice and benefit from Vipassana meditation. In fact, when the Buddha set out on his mission centuries ago it was not to preach religion but rather to teach people the practice of meditation so that they, too, might discover “the Dharma...the truth or natural way of things” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 6). The Dharma is achieved by turning attention inward and developing a consistent practice of “self-observation, self-inquiry, and mindful action” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, in its purest form the ultimate aim of meditation is to “enable its practitioners to attain control of their minds” (Shapiro & Walsh, 1984, p. 6) and “develop levels of psychological well-being and states of consciousness beyond those recognized in the traditional psychological models” (p. 24). With that in mind, the Vipassana methodology



focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the body, and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind. It is this observation-based self-exploratory journey to the common root of the mind and body that dissolves mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion. (<http://www.dhamma.org>)

Students of Vipassana undertake the role of observer to their thoughts and sensations; in doing so they naturally become less judgmental (Chiesa, 2010) because Vipassana provides insight into the root causes of suffering and teaches one to recognize how the body manifests the emotions that accompany negative thoughts (Goenka, 2002). It brings one to realize their true nature and teaches one to experience reality as it is, in the moment. Kabat-Zinn summed it up best when he said, “Meditation is about being yourself and knowing something about who that is” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. xvi).

Accordingly, the entire framework of Vipassana is built upon the interaction of mind and body. It is grounded in the theory that whenever any impurity arises in the mind creating negativity two things happen: first, the rhythm of the natural breath changes and, on a subtler level, a sensation manifests within the framework of the body (Goenka, 2002). Unconsciously, we react to the emotion or feeling. Consequently,

By diverting the attention you push the negativity deep into the unconscious, and there you continue to generate and multiply the same defilement. On the surface there is a layer of peace and harmony, but in the depths of the mind there is a sleeping volcano of suppressed negativity. (<http://www.dhamma.org>)

Recent research supports the interconnection of mind and body. In a groundbreaking study Pert (2002) demonstrated that the neuropeptides, the molecules responsible for emotions, “provide the physiological basis for emotion” (p. 13). She confirms that mind and body are interconnected and emotions are “manifested throughout the body” (2002, p. 30). Furthermore, she says the brain cells that are responsible for processing and taking in emotional signals are also present “throughout the body” (2004, p. 13), and that sometimes the body will respond to the manufacturing of the emotional chemicals *before* the brain processes the problem. Vipassana brings one to experience the emotions as they arise and interrupts the unconscious habit of reacting to the sensations. Vipassana introduces one to the nature of the inner self.



Practice

Goenka (2002) professes that in order to learn Vipassana properly one must attend a course offered at any one of the numerous centers throughout the world. He explains,

I would very much like it if people could just listen to a few words about the technique, which is so simple. But we have tried this and it doesn't work. Because from birth, when we first opened our eyes and started looking outside, we have been giving all importance to the things *outside*. Our whole life we have been extroverted. Now all of a sudden we want to change that habit and experience things *inside*. Just *saying* that doesn't work. We have to practice. One wishing to practice must be under a proper guide, who has he practiced properly, and who can guide properly. And must be in an environment where there is least disturbance. Once you have learned then, yes, you go to live in the world outside, with all its distractions, and yet you can practice. But for learning the first time, the proper environment is essential. (p. 22)

With that in mind, the following is a brief description of the course and what it entails. Students attending agree to abide by the five moral precepts outlined by the Buddha. According to the Buddha, these five areas “of basic morality lead to a conscious life” (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 7) and, as such, were established as guiding principles meant to help us live a more peaceful life. The precepts are, “do not kill, steal, commit sexual misconduct, speak lies, and refrain from intoxicants” (<http://www.dhamma.org>). In addition, students resolve to remain on-site for the entire ten days, observe noble silence—that is, cease any communication with fellow participants and silence the body and mind—and refrain from participating in any other activities such as yoga, reading, journaling, etc. Students meditate approximately ten hours per day. The regimented schedule is deliberate and intended to provide every opportunity for students to develop a thorough understanding of Vipassana.

During the first three days of the course students learn to develop concentration of the mind by focusing on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, or *anapana*. On the fourth day and throughout the remainder of the training the attention shifts toward developing awareness and equanimity of the sensations being experienced throughout the body and the student is “shown how to penetrate his entire physical and mental makeup with the clarity of insight (Vipassana)” (<http://www.vridhamma.org/Home.aspx>).



At the end of each day students attend an hour-long discourse that explains the day's progress; Goenka communicates the training via a video recording. The closing of the ten-day program ends with students learning "the practice of loving kindness meditation (metta bhavna), the sharing of the purity developed during the course with all beings" (<http://www.vridhamma.org/Home.aspx>). Finally, noble silence is abolished early on the final day of the course.

The technique is taught over a ten-day residential stay and courses are provided free of charge; food and lodging are also provided at no cost. An all-volunteer staff administers the courses, prepares and serves the meals, and maintains the facilities. Donations are the lifeblood of the centers and are only accepted from people who have completed a ten-day course (Goenka, 2002).

Like the body, the mind must be exercised to remain healthy. Vipassana is a mental exercise that requires daily practice and dedication if one wants to achieve awareness. Goenka (2002) emphasizes that one should devote one hour each morning and evening to meditating and, if possible, attend an annual retreat in order to realize the benefits. Servant-leaders who wish to evolve as such have little to lose in attending a Vipassana retreat and regularly practicing meditation, and the potential gains are indispensable.

AWARENESS

What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

—R. W. Emerson

Contributors of both practices emphasize that self-awareness is the primary ingredient of servant-leadership and meditation. So, what is self-awareness? Greenleaf (2002) suggested that awareness establishes the framework for servant-leadership and is necessary to strengthen a leader's effectiveness. He defined it this way:

It is value building and value clarifying, and it armors one to meet the stress of life by helping build serenity in the face of stress and uncertainty. The cultivation of awareness gives one the basis for detachment, the ability to stand aside and see oneself in perspective in the context of one's own experience. (p. 41)



Awareness brings one to realize who they truly are based on a thorough examination of their internal self. Van Dierendonck and Heeren (2006) assert that one cannot be servant-leader without first developing self-awareness.

In servant-leadership and Vipassana alike, self-awareness aids in bringing about “purposeful de-habitation: to face the bare facts of experience, seeing each event as though occurring for the first time” (Goleman, 1984, p. 333). In this state, one is able to observe situations in the first phase of perception, the *receptive* rather than the reactive state (1984). Goleman (1984) also surmises “the natural tendency is to ‘habituate’ to the world surrounding one, to substitute abstract cognitive patterns or perceptual preconceptions for the raw sensory experiences” (p. 333). In other words, we are a compilation of our feelings and we react based on those feelings. As an example, think about a child being scolded and how being scolded might make them *feel*, that child will react based on what they *feel*. As the child grows older, whenever a situation arises that triggers those same *feelings* they will repeat the cycle of reacting according to the *feelings* they are experiencing. Unconsciously, the reaction is perpetuated each time we experience the *feeling*. Through awareness one is able to break the cycle of reacting and live in the direct moment of the experience (Goldstein, 2002).

Restated, self-awareness serves three particular functions in meditation. First, it allows us to see what is happening in the moment just as it is without judgments, aversions, or reactions. Second, as mindfulness ripens, it is accompanied by peacefulness, level-headedness, and equanimity. It enhances attention in all areas of life and “serves as a reference and protection for us and keeps us from being too caught up in the changing circumstances of life” (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 63). And, lastly, it develops balance of mind. When an emotion arises within us, mindfulness equips us with the knowledge to see it clearly for what it is and view it objectively (1987).

Scientists have established that the frontal and prefrontal lobes of the brain are responsible for our emotional expression, primarily avoidance and approach (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Regions on the left side of the brain “tend to be associated with the expression of positive emotions such as happiness, joy, high energy, and alertness. In contrast, activity in similar regions on the right side seems to be activated in the expression of difficult and disturbing emotions, such as fear and sadness (p. 370). So then, when the right side of these regions is activated (the shadow), the response is generally avoidance, whereas the left side generates approach. Kabat-Zinn (2005) goes on to say that approach and avoidance are



among our most deeply defining features...[and] are also strongly conditioned through experience and social norms. Therefore, we can easily get caught up and even hijacked by our habitual and unconscious emotional reactions to various events in our lives, depending on how we interpret the things that happen to us. (p. 370)

In a study conducted by Kabat-Zinn (2005), initial measurements of brain activity between meditators and non-meditators yielded no distinguishable differences. Following eight weeks of insight training, however, “the mediators as a group showed a significant shift to a higher ratio of the left—compared to the right—sided activation in certain regions” (p. 372). This study implies that meditation stimulates and regulates the regions of the brain responsible for positive emotions and attentiveness and that mindfulness enhances equanimity, peace of the mind, “greater emotional intelligence” (p. 375), and joy. In the words of Deepak Chopra (2010), “Awareness is the birthplace of possibility” (p. 42).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Vipassana meditation and servant-leadership are two seemingly different practices. Yet, this article yokes the two traditions together by recognizing the necessity of self-awareness in servant-leaders and meditators alike. Experts recognize self-awareness as a mandatory characteristic of servant-leadership and maintain that one cannot effectively serve others if one does not develop awareness.

Vipassana is awareness. Through meditation, one learns to turn one’s attention inward and become aware of what they are experiencing moment to moment. Evidence presented in this article illustrates that practitioners of meditation enhance the regions of their brain associated with positive emotions as they develop self-awareness. With that in mind, I submit that the practice of Vipassana meditation can serve as a conduit that will aid servant-leaders in the development of the primary characteristic of their praxis. In order for servant-leaders to become masters of their craft they must first become masters of themselves.

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