

The Business of Spirit
A Meditatio Forum

Enlightened leadership

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Sean Hagan and I are members of The World Community for Christian Meditation. This event is called a Meditatio forum. Meditatio is the outreach of our community through which we share the fruits of meditation with the wider world in responding to the problems and crises of our time.

We like to put before you the proposition that a regular practice of meditation can add considerable depth and meaning to our lives. It is the conviction of our community that a contemplative practice such as meditation is vital for the wholeness of the human person. As meditation transforms our being at the personal level, we can then contribute to a better world through our work and relationships. In this way, the practice of meditation will make for enlightened leadership.

I myself have been meditating for 23 years. My practice involves setting aside 25 minutes every morning and every evening for meditation. During these two periods of daily meditation, I sit still with my spine upright, and I try to bring the mind to stillness by the continuous and interior repetition of a prayer-word or a mantra. When the restless and distracted mind conjures up any thoughts, ideas, problems, plans or fantasies, I have been trained by the discipline to let them go, and the way to let go is to return repeatedly to the mantra, sounding the mantra and listening to it. So it is a radically simple practice, but simple does not mean

easy. In fact meditation will make considerable demands on you; considerable discipline, in the first place for us to make the time in a busy life style for the daily practice, and during the meditation itself to be content to say the mantra without ceasing.

I speak to you from the Christian contemplative tradition, drawing in particular from the teaching of the Benedictine monk John Main, the founder of our community. But meditation is a universal spiritual practice to be found in all the major world religions, and many people actually practise meditation in a secular context outside institutional religion. Because of its universality, meditation offers the potential to draw together people of different or no religious beliefs, and can enable all sincere seekers of peace to meet in silence on the common ground of humanity.

Changing Values

Our world is in great need of a transformation of consciousness. Our world is ravaged by ethnic conflict, violence and terrorism. Our natural environment is being desecrated. There is much human suffering arising from poverty, extreme income disparity and severe unemployment. The global economy is in a sorry state. We have not repaired the damage caused by the 2008 financial crisis, and already the global economy is teetering on the brink of another crisis. We are 20 million jobs short of restoring employment to 2008 levels, and this unemployment situation will worsen if the global economy relapses into recession. At a time when global problems of such seriousness require leadership of the highest order, we find that political leaders and policy makers are largely impotent. Political leaders lack the courage to put hard truths to their constituents and to eschew short-term politics for sensible long-term policies. On both sides of the Atlantic, political leaders persist in kicking the can down the road. No wonder there has been a collapse of confidence and a loss of faith in political leaders.

Our event here today at Georgetown University is a collaboration between the John Main Centre and the Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

This “Business of Spirit” seminar is an excellent follow-up to the university’s earlier initiative called Faith and the Global Agenda: Values for the Post-Crisis Economy. Faith and the Global Agenda sought to fundamentally rethink the moral framework that underpins our economy, politics and global interconnectedness. What emerged from Faith and the Global Agenda was a strong sense that a change of values was desperately needed, and that faith can play a key role in articulating those values. In talking about faith, we should realise that faith is not synonymous with religious belief. It is possible to create a community of faith among people of different faiths. The faith we are talking about is a faith in the intrinsic goodness of the human person. With this faith, we can develop a sense of community and solidarity so that self-interest and greed do not ride rough-shod over the common good.

But, for a change in values to happen, we need to go to the depth of the human person where one’s perception of the world is shaped and the motivation for action and external behaviour arises.

John Main points out that there is a principle of unity, of peace and harmony, in the centre of our being where our spirit is at one with the spirit of God. To meditate is to journey to the centre of our being and to live out of that centre of our being.

In the words of John Main:

“We live in a world that makes great demands on us and is continually threatening our ability to stay rooted in the centre of our being. Meditation is the way to rootedness in ourselves. If we live at the surface level of activities, our lives will degenerate into a search for security or ways of self-protection.” (1)

In considering the virtue of goodness, John Main said the following:

“Jesus tells us that only God is good. In other words, God is all goodness transcending all human ideas of the good. The wonder of prayer is that when we transcend ourselves, we enter God’s all-goodness and become good ourselves; not

through any kind of striving to be good but because we enter the radiance of the orbit of his goodness. That is the basis of all morality. Not that we try to imitate God, but that we participate in the goodness of God.” (2)

“Every time we sit down to meditate, we enter into a state of oneness where the whole of our life comes together in the presence of God. In the selfless attention of saying our mantra, we transcend ourselves and are entirely open to God. Everything in our life becomes aligned on God and everything falls into its proper place.

Our order of values is gradually changed. Instead of our value system being based on the ego, on personal success, self-promotion, self-preservation, our values system becomes based on God. We see the greater reality of other-centred values such as compassion, tolerance, forgiveness and justice. The change in us comes about because in meditation we encounter the power to make this change possible. All of us would presumably like to be more kind, more selfless, more compassionate and so on. But at the same time we recognise ourselves as weak, mortal, fallible human beings. This often induces us to protect our own vulnerability. In meditation, we discover the power source that enables us to live without the anxiety of having to protect ourselves.” (3)

The Challenge of the Ego

The ultimate goal of all religion is a re-linking, and the relinking is a relinking with our own centre. In our own centre, in the depths of our own spirit dwells the spirit of God. What has severed our link with the Spirit within us is our egoism – our self-preoccupation, our self-centredness. We are perennially thinking about our surface selves; we are locked into our egoistic self.

The domination of the ego poses the greatest challenge to us in coming to wholeness and to good management and leadership. Fear and greed are at the root of our present crisis, and they are the manifestations of an inflamed dysfunctional ego. The ego is part and parcel of being human. We all need the energy of the ego to propel us in action. We hope that our ego can develop in a

healthy way and that we can even transcend our ego so that our true self is not obscured by the false self that is the ego. To break out of the prison of our ego requires not force but gentleness. Therein lies the efficacy of the way of meditation which is a way of gentleness. John Main explains this phenomenon as follows:

“We cannot vanquish the ego by force. That would itself be egotistical. We cannot use force because force would be a self-directed exercise of the will. To escape from self-obsession, we have to change the direction of our attention. We have to turn the light around, away from ourselves. In other words, the only way to transcend the ego is to ignore it. (4)

The way of meditation is a way of dying and a way of living. While you are saying the mantra, you are dying to what is the most difficult thing in the world for us to die to. We die to our egoism, to our own self-centredness as we move beyond our self-consciousness. And the reason is that while you are saying the mantra, you are not thinking about yourself; you are attending to the mantra. As we die to the ego, we rise to a way of life that astonishes us with its infinite richness. Meditation is a healing process. What is healed is the wound of our divided self that separates us from others, from God and so from our own full potential.” (5)

The world is in need of enlightened leadership. Enlightenment is one of the words often used to describe meditation. We meditate to become enlightened. There is much darkness in our world. We hear every day of terrible injustices, of violence, of hatred, of feuds, of greed and insane destructiveness. This happens at both the personal and political level. Not so many of us are aware that we do have a dark side. Meditation is the process whereby we come into the light.

The Indwelling Spirit as Agent of Change

The purpose of the coming of Christ is described in the Gospel of John as being to banish the darkness. Christ’s personal light is so great that the darkness cannot overcome it. Jesus tells us that the power that enlightens us is the power of love. In the Christian vision of life, the potential for the development of our

human consciousness has been radically transformed by the Incarnation – the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus and by his sending His Spirit to dwell in our hearts. By the Indwelling of his spirit within us, Jesus has brought the divine within the ambiance of every man and woman alive. The Incarnation has made possible the potential divinisation of the human being.

Mahatma Gandhi saw the Jesus event as a universal truth when he said:

“Because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith or worship a God inherited from their ancestors.” (6)

In the Christian vision, the Indwelling Holy Spirit is thus the agent of change for our troubled world. Because it is present in the heart of every human being, this agent is capable of transforming the hearts of man, individually, and collectively. The question is: how do we access the consciousness of Jesus present within us? In meditation, we move from theory to practice, from theology to experience. What cuts us off from the consciousness of the presence of the spirit within us is our egoism. We are perennially thinking about our surface selves; we are locked into our egoistic self. In meditating, we begin the process of dismantling the ego and its persistent attempt to occupy centre stage. This we do by our selfless attention to the faithful saying of the mantra, letting go of our thoughts, worries, problems, anxieties, goals and fantasies. We accept these distracting thoughts as normal and to be expected, but we let them go by the gentle return to the mantra. Meditation is thus a central onslaught on the ego.

Enlightened Leadership

Let us return to the theme of enlightened leadership. It seems to me that the transcending of the ego is the link between meditation and enlightened leadership. We are all familiar with what are commonly regarded as the attributes of good leadership. Let me review with you five of these qualities and their relationship to meditation.

The first attribute of leadership is the will to lead. This is positively manifested when the leader views leadership as the acceptance of responsibility and not simply the exercise of power. When the will to lead degenerates, the leader operates from an egocentric need for self-glorification and self-enrichment. How does meditation help in this? In meditation, we cultivate the discipline of selfless attention in which our focus is directed away from self to the other.

The second attribute of leadership is clarity of mind. This is not to be confused with intelligence because something more than IQ is needed. That something is sound judgment which requires emotional awareness and emotional control. Clarity is the ability to simplify the complicated, to be able to reduce abstruse problems to the basic and communicable essentials. A critical part of clarity is the recognition of uncertainty and the admission of ignorance. Meditation enables us to see more clearly with the eye of the heart to look into what is essential and enduring, unclouded by the illusion of the ego.

The third attribute of leadership is the humility and ability to learn. The ability to learn enables the leader to expand his perception beyond past positions and to adapt to changing circumstances. Some leaders stop learning when they become over-confident as a result of success or the admiration or flattery from others. Obsolescence then sets in along with decline of expertise. The leader must learn from his experience and the most effective source of learning is from errors. Learning is inhibited when the leader fears making errors, or worse still, denies his errors. Self-knowledge and true humility is needed for true learning. When we meditate, only a little experience with our distracted mind should be cause for humility, but then the faithful return to the mantra in the face of distractions, builds up our endurance to persevere in our learning to be attentive.

The fourth attribute is the leader's insight that his leadership role requires a certain measure of solitude and aloneness. While he must share and respect the core values and cherished aspirations of the group, sometimes he also has to be an agent of change. There comes a time when he has to lead the people along a new path and has to make hard decisions that are not popular but necessary for

group progress. Meditation is the practice of solitude in which the experience of our uniqueness within the cosmic plan prepares us better for contributing in our particular way to community.

The fifth attribute is the wise deployment of energy. This refers to the regulation of one's energy, the economy of energy, the direction of energy and the impact of the dynamic leader on the energies of his followers. We are all mindful of how the pressure of time and an unrelenting pace of work can cause stress and friction at work and at home. Wise leaders operate with the optimum deployment of energy, their own and their followers. In meditation, we put the priority of being over action so that right action can proceed from the goodness to be found in pure being. I myself have found that the twice daily meditation periods are essential to a sense of well-being and balanced growth. For me, the two meditation periods reset the interior balance particularly on very busy days.

To summarise, meditation is the work of selfless attention. In the turning from self to the other, from self- preoccupation to other-centredness, the enlightened leader sees the exercise of leadership as not about himself but for the common good of others. Keeping this balance between individual and common good was once the job of society and religion. Today, it must be underpinned by a personal practice, conscience and the sense of community which meditation nurtures.

If meditation has the potential to transform the human being, we should ask, "Should this life-skill not be taught in schools and universities?" If meditation can make a difference to the quality of leadership, should this discipline not be offered in the curriculum of business schools? In teaching the science and art of management, should we not be concerned as well with the "management of self"?

It seems far-fetched to propose that a discipline as simple as meditation can make a significant contribution to the practice of leadership. I speak from my own experience, and it has been my experience that meditation is possibly the kindest thing that we should do for ourselves. The paradox is that it is also the kindest thing we can do for others.

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