

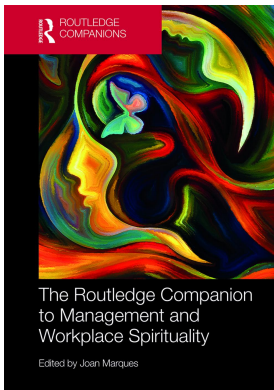
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Satinder Dhiman

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2

OPERATING FROM OUR AUTHENTIC SELF

Understanding Who We Truly Are

Satinder Dhiman

Introduction

“Leadership’s First Commandment: *Know Thyself* ... No tool can help a leader who lacks self-knowledge” (*Harvard Business Review* editorial, December, 2001).

This chapter explores the role of Self-knowledge in life and leadership. Self-awareness is now considered to be a foundational leadership competency (Goleman, 2004). Self-knowledge is the hallmark of all authentic leaders (Bennis, 2009; George, 2015), since it helps those in leadership positions to lead from their true self. In its wake, it bestows the gift of genuine humility, paving the way for selfless service and, finally, for servant leadership. The chapter underscores the value of humility as a prerequisite to, and consequence of, Self-knowledge. As leaders, when we are in touch with our deeper authentic self, we are also able to connect with the authentic self of others. In the final reckoning, Self-knowledge is the harbinger of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good in our life and work—the hallmarks of fulfillment and flourishing.

Self-knowledge deals with who and what we truly are. It is the ever-present awareness of our own being. Self-knowledge is not a journey of *becoming*; it is a state of *being*. It is a journey from unreal “me” to the real “I.” The chapter briefly introduces the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, as enunciated in the earliest Indian wisdom texts called Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā. Using teaching stories and illustrative vignettes, this chapter provides clear pointers to the present day leaders in their quest for personal and organizational wellbeing.

This chapter takes as axiomatic that leadership is voyage of *inner discovery* and that Self-knowledge is the key to leading from *within*. This journey begins with *knowing* oneself and culminates in *living* one’s deepest values at the personal, team, and organizational level (Dhiman, 2015, 2017). As the following story (as narrated by Wallace, 2005) illustrates, without Self-knowledge one can overlook one’s essential reality, even when completely *immersed* in it.

What the Hell Is Water?

There were these two young fishes swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, guys, how’s the water?”

And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, “What the hell is water?”

It is said that physical pain in life is unavoidable while much emotional suffering is optional. This chapter makes the felicitous assumption that true Self-knowledge can ameliorate most of our optional suffering and pave the way to lasting fulfillment. Therefore, it makes the plea that one needs to know oneself.

The Bhagavad Gītā and Upaniṣads: The Earliest Sources of Self-Knowledge

The Bhagavad Gītā holds a special place in the world's sacred and philosophical literature and has wielded an enduring influence on the spirit of humankind. According to a preeminent modern Sanskrit scholar, J. A. B. van Buitenen, "No other Sanskrit text approaches the Bhagavad Gītā in the influence it has exerted in the West." L. Basham (cited in Bolle, 1979, p. 224) and other Sanskrit scholars agree that the significance of the Bhagavad Gītā in India is comparable to that of the New Testament in Western civilization. Noting its widespread appeal and popularity, Minor (1986, p. 5), a modern exegetical commentator, states that the Bhagavad Gītā has become "the most translated text after the Bible." Count Hermann Keyserling (cited in Durant, 1930, p. 6), a German philosopher, hailed it as "perhaps the most beautiful work of the literature of the world." Steve Jobs' credo "Actualize yourself" seems to have come directly from the Bhagavad Gītā's philosophy of Self-realization. Peter Senge, one of the preeminent management thinkers of our time, has quoted the Gītā in two of his celebrated books, *The Fifth Discipline* and *Presence*. Gandhi regarded the Gītā as his "spiritual dictionary" and referred to it daily for seeking advice on life and leadership (Dhiman, 2015).

Although there are 108 Upaniṣads that are extant, out of these 10 Upaniṣads are considered more important because the great commentator, Ādi Śaṅkara, wrote elaborate commentaries on these: Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad; Chāndogya Upaniṣad; Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad; Kena Upaniṣad; Kaṭha Upaniṣad; Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad; Aitareya Upaniṣad; Taittirīya Upaniṣad; Praśna Upaniṣad; and Īśa Upaniṣad (see Gambhirananda, 1991). Once a seeker, so the story goes (Tejomayananda, n.d.), approached a Mahātmā ("a great soul") and asked: "Revered Sir, how many Upaniṣads do I have to study to know myself?" The Mahātmā replied with a question: "How many mirrors do you need to look at yourself?!"

The Need and Importance of Self-Knowledge

The importance of Self-knowledge can hardly be overemphasized. All wisdom traditions of the world have upheld the importance of Self-knowledge as a prelude to every pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. Its need has been rightly extolled in various wisdom texts of the world. It is said that, "one who knows oneself knows God" (see the Islamic *Hadīth*: "man 'arafa naḥsahu faqad 'arafa Rabbahu"). "Know yourself and you shall then know God," says a modern Indian saint, Śrī Ramakrishna (cited in Satprakashananda, 1964, p. 232). An important Indian wisdom text, Muṇḍakan Upaniṣad 3.2.9 (Gambhirananda, 1991), goes a step further: "Who knows Brahman becomes Brahman" (ब्रह्म वेद ब्रह्मैव भवति: *brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati!*)

The Bhagavad Gītā, the Hindu wisdom text par excellence, describes it as "That which is to be known and by knowing which immortality is reached" (... *yaj jñātvāmṛtam āsnute ... यत् ज्ञात्वामृतम् अश्नुते* BG 13.12; see Gambhirananda, 2001). In order to retain some flavor of the original, the chapter presents some Sanskrit terms and phrases in transliteration, using diacritics according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) convention. For example, a small bar drawn over a word (e.g., "ā") indicates elongated sound: as "a" in the word "park." All translations are the author's, unless otherwise stated.

The Upaniṣads (Gambhirananda, 1991), the primary Hindu treatises on Self-knowledge, extol that “there is nothing higher than the attainment of the Self” (*ātmalābhānna paraṁ vidyate*: आत्मलाभान्न परं विद्यते); that “the knower of Self reaches the Supreme Felicity” (*Brahmavidāpnoti param* || ब्रह्मविदाप्नोति परम्: || Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1); that “Self-knowledge is the harbinger of liberation while living” (Brahma-Sūtra Bhashya 1.1.12; see Panoli, 2011); and that “the knower of Self crosses over sorrow” (*Tarati śokam ātmavit*: तरति शोकम् आत्मवित्: Chāndogya Upaniṣad 7.1.3). The Kena Upaniṣad warns, “By not knowing the True Self, one is at a great loss” (*na cedihāvedīnmahatī vinaṣṭ*: न चेदिहावेदीन्महती विनष्टि: Kena Upaniṣad 2.5).

Similarly, in the Greek wisdom tradition, Socrates succinctly framed it as the highest principle of wisdom to “Know Thyself.” *Gnōthi seautón* (“Know Thyself”) is an ancient Greek aphorism and one of the two most famous Delphic maxims, the other being “nothing in excess.” He did not mince words when he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, *Apology*, 38a; see Cooper & Grube, 2002). However, Socrates has left no self-help manual for us beyond such pithy dicta. His student, Plato, points out that “the essence of knowledge is Self-knowledge” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230a; see Cooper & Grube, 2002).

The following story demonstrates the power of knowledge (Paramarthananda, n.d.):

A certain billboard pictured a dog and a cat looking at each other.

The ferocious dog was trying to pounce at the cat, yet the cat seemed unperturbed and even amused, sitting quietly in front of the dog.

The caption simply read: The Power of Knowledge!

The dog was on a leash. The cat was aware of this fact.

This knowledge gave the cat the freedom to enjoy the moment with great peace of mind.

Such is the power of knowledge! If mere knowledge of our surroundings confers such security, imagine what level of security Self-knowledge can engender. This, then, is the true fulfillment of the Delphic Oracle (*gnōthi seauton*): get to know yourself!

The following tale (cited in Bowling, 2000, p. 91; see Cashman, 2001, p. 31) further illustrates this point succinctly:

Just as the Great Revolution was getting under way in Russia, a rabbi on his way to the synagogue was stopped at gunpoint by a soldier. With his rifle pointed directly at the rabbi, the soldier said in a gruff voice, “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

The rabbi replied with a question of his own: “How much do they pay you for doing this job?”

The soldier replied, “Twenty kopecks.

Then the rabbi said, “I will pay you twenty-five kopecks if every day you stop me right here and ask me those two questions.”

If a leader knows the answer to those two questions, “Who are you?” and “What are you doing here?” all else will follow in good time and good measure. These two fundamental questions capture the essence of Self-knowledge and personal meaning and mastery and furnish the necessary foundation for the development of purpose-driven leadership. It must be noted that discovering one’s highest purpose in life presupposes Self-knowledge and self-understanding.

Bennis (2009, p. 52), a noted leadership expert, provides the following four lessons/rules for facilitating Self-knowledge: “One: You are your own best teacher. Two: Accept responsibility. Blame no one. Three: You can learn anything you want to learn. Four: True understanding comes from reflecting on your experiences.” Self-knowledge is not a matter of knowing something new; it is a matter of removing false notions about the self. It is a matter of *re*-cognition of who we truly are. *Self-knowledge is not a journey; it is a home-coming*. Socrates, however, did not care to elaborate precisely on how to go about this search. One common pitfall here is to take Socrates’ injunction to know thyself to mean to know oneself intellectually or emotionally. The quest for Self-knowledge, however, has nothing to do with what is popularly known as self-improvement or spiritual betterment. As Krishnamurti (1954) eloquently puts it: “We are talking of something entirely different, not of self-improvement, but cessation of the [separate] self.”

Those in the know have repeatedly pointed out that one has to know oneself in the very depth of one’s being, exactly as one really is, with diligence and without any masks whatsoever. And this requires some serious work on oneself that calls for self-insight, sincerity, courage, patience, and discernment. It seems that the faculty of self-awareness serves as both the cause and effect of Self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is born of self-reflection and blossoms as a certain unmistakable quality of self-awareness that accompanies and pervades everything one does—a sort of glow that illuminates all our activities. This condition is often referred to as the faculty of mindfulness.

Seeker Is the Sought

“What you seek is so near you that there is no place for a way” (Nisargadatta Maharaj; cited in Frydman, 2012, p. 196).

While what we seek keeps on changing, the seeker in us continues to be the same. Self-knowledge reveals the radical fact that the *seeker is the sought*. One sage says, “What one is searching *for* is what one is searching *with*.” The following traditional tale (cited in Mādhavānanda, 1934/2008, pp. 83–84) illustrates the point splendidly by highlighting both the predicament of self-ignorance and a way to end it.

The Missing Tenth Man

Ten monks crossed a river, and one of them counted their number to see if everyone had safely crossed. To their dismay, one was found missing. Then everyone took their turn at counting, but the result was the same. So they began to lament, when a kind passer-by inquired what it was all about.

On being told what had happened, he readily understood the situation, and asked one of them to count again. When he stopped at nine, the passer-by said to him, “You are the tenth man.” This he repeated with the rest of them. Then they saw their mistake and went away happy. Everyone had left himself out in the counting!

This story highlights that the uniqueness of Self-knowledge lies in the fact that, unlike all other forms of knowledge, it does not entail any new acquisition of information. It only involves freedom from Self-ignorance. Like the tenth man in the story, gaining the essential Self means *realizing* our mistake of self-forgetfulness or Self-ignorance. The Self, like the tenth man in the

story, appears initially to be not known through ignorance, but subsequently becomes known through knowledge. From an absolute standpoint, again—like the tenth man in the story—the essential Self was never lost to begin with and is ever-attained.

Sri Ramana Maharshi underscores this point succinctly in the following important passage (cited in Rajeswarananda, 2000, p. 111; Venkataramiah, 2013, p. 134):

There is no greater mystery than this, that we keep seeking reality though in fact we are reality. We think that there is something hiding reality and that this must be destroyed before reality is gained. How ridiculous! A day will dawn when you will laugh at all your past efforts. That which will be the day you laugh is also here and now.

Strictly speaking, we cannot objectively *know* our Self because we *are* the Self. *The seeker is already the sought!* We are the knowing self—the pure awareness—the subject; and the knowing *subject*, by definition, can never become the *object* of knowledge. Wheeler (2012) clarifies this important point that “you *are* what you are seeking,” succinctly:

Trying to focus on your true nature is something like looking for your eyes, when the whole time you are looking through them. If you try to focus on your being or aware presence, you will be trying to turn it into an object. Since you are not an object, you will be looking in vain. Just see this point and pause. Being-awareness is here in all of its immediacy and clarity. *That* is it. Why should you try to focus on it, when you *are* it? See the false concept and the error contained in it. Your being is not to be obtained. It is pointed to as a present fact.

(p. 31, *emphasis in the original*)

The Self seems *as though* veiled currently due to certain inhibiting factors, primarily, ignorance. This ignorance does not denote any lack of information or knowledge in any general sense. The ignorance that is referred to here is actually Self-ignorance, the ignorance or unawareness of our essential nature. The entire quest of fulfillment therefore is of the nature of awakening, a journey of recognition without distance from *here* to *here*. The following story (a traditional Sufi tale, transcribed by the author) splendidly underscores the paradox of missing our reality, while riding on it, metaphorically speaking.

Lost Donkey?

A man bought four donkeys and rode home on one of them.

When he reached home, his wife came out to greet him.

While sitting on one donkey, he started counting and found he had only three donkeys.

He said to his wife that he was missing one donkey!

His wife asked him, “How many donkeys did you buy?”

He said, “I bought four, but now I only see three.”

His wife smiled and said: “I see five!”

The man in the story is Mulla Nasruddin Hodja, a populist philosopher, and a consummate jester. He is known to poke fun at our common incongruities, using himself as an example. Our

search for the Self may be “likened” to looking for the fourth donkey in the story: We have been at it all along, so to speak, yet failing to recognize it while comfortably riding on it! Paradoxically, avers De Mello (1988, p. 97), “Wisdom tends to grow in proportion to one’s awareness of one’s ignorance.”

Attainment of the ever-attained Self, therefore, essentially means letting go of our false notions about what we take ourselves to be; that is, a limited body–mind–senses complex subject to mortality and unhappiness. It is about chipping away, so to speak, the fabricated edifice of the false “I,” the imposter ego, posing itself to be the real Self. This special understanding requires subtle discernment to reclaim our true heritage. And this requires *knowledge*, not any special effort or *action*. We just have to *know* ourselves as we truly are.

Self-Knowledge: An Already Accomplished Fact

The only thing that is self-evident and ever-present is the Self—the *felt* awareness of our *being* or *presence*. Everything else becomes evident through the Self which is of the nature of pure awareness or Consciousness. Sri Ramana Maharshi explains succinctly:

“I exist” is the only permanent, self-evident experience of everyone. Nothing else is so self-evident (*pratyaksha*) as “I am”. What people call “self-evident” *viz.*, the experience they get through the senses, is far from self-evident. The Self alone is that. *Pratyaksha* is another name for the Self. So, to do Self-analysis and be “I am” is the only thing to do. “*I am*” is reality. I am *this* or *that* is unreal.

(Cited in Mudaliar, 2000, p. 182, *emphasis added*)

Our whole existential experience can be reduced to two basic entities: “I” and “not-I.” There is this “I” and everything else is “not-I.” “I” refers to “I-am,” the conscious principle, the “locus” of all experience and every emotion and thought. When Moses saw the blazing light of God on Mount Sinai, and, in awe, asked for God’s name, we are told, the Light responded: “YHWH”—“I am That I am.” Sri Ramana Maharshi used to say that the whole Vedānta is contained in the two Biblical statements: “I am that I AM” and “Be still and know that I am God” (see Venkataramiah, 2013, p. 320; Frydman, 2003). “I am” remains the most unique, the most exclusive, singular epithet to refer to oneself, as if partaking the Divine Reality.

This is also evident how pronouns work in all languages. The second and third person pronouns, You, They, He, She, It can be used to refer to any person or thing. But the first person pronoun, “I” can only be used to refer to one and only one person—namely, “you.” Sri Ramana Maharshi has frequently emphasized this point in his writings: “It is only after the first personal pronoun arises that the second and third personal pronouns appear. Without the first person, the second and third persons cannot exist” (Godman, n.d.). There is only one person that is referred to when anyone refers to himself or herself as “I am.” There is only one person in the whole creation that is like you, and that is you. You are the sole actor/director of your life’s drama. It is a one act play, a monolog. And it is so for every single person! It has been rightly observed: “Remember, you are a completely unique and distinct person. Just like everyone else.”

Little wonder, we have transitioned from a “me-culture” to “*selfie*-culture.” Ever wonder about the secret of Apple’s success. Apple Inc. chose their logo very well, all the way: first at the dawn of creation, it was the apple that was offered by Eve to Adam. Perhaps the same apple fell on Newton’s head, knocking out all knowledge so that gravity can get in. And we are told that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Apple Inc. names its products ingeniously: *imac*, *ipod*, *iphone*, *ipad*. Notice the prominence given to the “I.” Hence, their success.

If Self-knowledge is a self-evident fact, how come we are told, as in the opening quote, that to know one's own self is the most difficult thing? How do we reconcile these two divergent viewpoints—that Self-knowledge is the most difficult thing and that Self-knowledge is the most naturally self-evident and an already accomplished fact? If Self-knowledge is an already accomplished fact, we may ask, why do we need all these reminders such as “Know Thyself” (Socrates)? If by its very nature the Self is the most self-evident fact, why do we need any teaching at all to know ourselves? The sages point out that although we know ourselves in a general way—we are *conscious* that we exist—we do not know our true nature.

It can be explained in this manner: “I am” is a self-evident fact. “Who am I” is a *discovery*. And this discovery needs a specialized means to proceed. It is because even if we have eyes, we still need a mirror to see our face. Vedānta—the science of truth about our existence—acts as a mirror to reveal “who am I.” I know *I am*, but I do not know that *I am Brahman*. Vedānta says you are not the limited “body–mind–senses” complex that you take yourself to be. You are whole, limitless Consciousness. Know yourself to be so and be happy. Whenever we feel sorrowful, we are missing something; for, all sorrow is born of some sense of limitation—physical or psychological. All seeking essentially involves a desire to be free from limitations. We are all seeking *purāṇatvam*, the fullness of our being. Vedānta says you are already *purāṇa*, whole and complete: reclaim your true status—as limitless Consciousness—and be free.

Self-Knowledge Is Self-Realization

In the Vedāntic scheme of things, there is no difference between Self-knowledge and Self-Realization, for, to *know* the Self is to *realize* the Self. As Afdal al-Din Kashani (c. CE 12th century) puts it succinctly, “To know oneself is to know the everlasting reality that is Consciousness, and to *know* it is to *be* it” (cited in Chittick, 1988, p. 288). When one *knows* that the fire burns, one does not have to put one's hand in the fire to *realize* this fact. Put differently, in the realm of Self-knowledge, *knowing is being and being is knowing*. Unlike things that are separated from us by time and space—for which we have to do something to attain them—Self-knowledge does not involve doing something new or attaining something afresh. It is only a matter of re-cognizing, re-discovering an already existing fact: “the achievement of that which is already achieved, *prāpatasya prāpati*” (Dayananda, 2009, p. 39).

In Indian philosophy, enlightenment is spoken of as Self-Realization, the attainment of the Supreme Self. However, it is important to understand the exact sense in which the word “realization” is used. Sri Ramana Maharshi (cited in Mudaliar, 2000, p. 181), the great Indian sage, clarifies (emphasis added):

We loosely talk of Self-Realization, for lack of a better term. But how can one realize or make real that which alone is real? All we need to do is to give up our habit of regarding as real that which is unreal. All religious practices are meant solely to help us do this. *When we stop regarding the unreal as real, then reality alone will remain, and we will be that.*

Vedānta takes it as axiomatic that “the highest aim of religion is ... Self-knowledge” (Giri, 1984, p. 6). It is a science of reality and that the knowledge of the Self and the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality are identical (Iyer, 1930/1991, 1969/2006; Kulkarni, 1990). Ādī Śaṅkara, the great Advaita philosopher, urges that “you must realize absolutely that the *Ātman* [the Self] is Brahman [the All-Self]” (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1975, p. 70). In Indian philosophy, Self-knowledge signifies the knowledge that our true Self and the true nature of Reality are identical. This understanding first requires knowing what is real. Vedānta defines reality as that which does not change.

Vedānta states that the Witnessing Consciousness, which lies within everyone that perceives all changing phenomena, is the only unchanging reality (Satchidanandendra, 1989; Iyer, 1930/1991; Kulkarni, 1990; Schepetin, 2018). Everything else that is constantly changing is a mere appearance in Pure Consciousness. This Pure Consciousness is the *observer* of all that is changing. The Observer is the inmost Self (*pratyagātmā*) of all beings. Vedānta declares that You *are* the Self (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7; Gambhirananda, 1991)—the unchanging Witnessing Consciousness that perceives the changes in the body–mind–senses, the three states (waking, dream, and deep sleep), and the phenomenal world. This is the Self or Ātman of Vedānta. Śrī Śaṅkara in his commentary to Brahma-Sutra 1.1.6 states that “what is meant by the word ‘Self’ is one’s own nature” (Panoli, 2011, p. 75).

This unchanging pervasive Consciousness is the Absolute Reality and is called Brahman in its universal aspect. The same universal Consciousness is experienced as the Self in all beings and is called Ātman. There is an absolute identity of Brahman and Ātman, for Reality is One, without a second (Gambhirananda, 1991; Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.2.1).

Parking the Ego at the Door: Key to Authentic Leadership

Self-knowledge helps us to be humble by highlighting the oneness and interdependence of all life. One of the most important pre-conditions for the spiritual quest is humility. Only humble leaders can serve a cause higher than themselves. Defining the process of becoming a leader in terms of authenticity and self-mastery, Bennis (2011) equates it with becoming yourself, which is not as simple as it sounds. He provides a succinct characterization of exemplary leadership in an interview to *Fast Company*:

The process of becoming a leader is, if not identical, certainly similar to the process of becoming a fully integrated human being. It’s got to do with authenticity, it’s got to do with candor, it’s got to do with the fact that one cannot truly lead unless one is an expert in self-management.

Leadership qualities, Bennis maintains, can only emerge from an “integrated self.” Howard Schultz, the founder and chairman of the Starbucks chain of coffee shops, says that Bennis once told him that to become a great leader you have to develop “your ability to leave your own ego at the door, and to recognize the skills and traits that you need in order to build a world-class organization” (cited in Hindle, 2008, p. 218).

This goes on to show that humility is an essential ingredient of effective leadership. Jim Collins, the author of *Good to Great*, fully concurs and regards *compelling humility* to be one of the two hallmarks of level 5 leaders, the other being *fierce professional will* (Collins, 2001).

Bill George, the exemplary former head of Medtronic, who popularized the concept of authentic leadership, includes humility along with purpose, transparency, and integrity to define authentic leaders (George, 2015). Humility is also a pre-condition for serving others for without it, even service could be but an inflation of ego. Therefore, in learning as in leading, humility constitutes the key ingredient of living a profoundly significant life.

A story is told about Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect, who was once testifying in court for his friend. While taking oath, he is reported to have said, “My name is Frank Lloyd Wright, the greatest architect on the planet!” Later when his friend questioned him about his exaggerated sense of self-importance, Frank Lloyd Wright maintained, “I was under oath to tell the truth!” The human ego is always good at finding new avenues of manifesting itself, especially under the covert cover of humility. Such are the ways of the master magician—“our skin-encapsulated ego”—the socially induced hallucination of a separate self, to use a phrase coined by Aldous Huxley. Huxley

(cited in Horowitz & Palmer, 1999, p. 291) calls self-centeredness “the fundamental human disability.” Without fully overcoming this pervasive disability, there is no “psychological freedom” and the progress on the path of authentic life and leadership is at best doubtful.

What is Humility?

Most people often tend to confuse humility with false modesty. We all have been guilty of this at one time or another. We have a tendency to devalue what we have done under the pretense of humility. In fact, refusing to accept genuine appreciation is often a cover for seeking more praise from others. That is perhaps why true humility is very hard to come by.

Humility does not necessarily mean to think of oneself as insignificant, timid, or worthless. As someone rightly observed, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.” (This quote is often misattributed to C. S. Lewis. According to the C. S. Lewis foundation, this quote belongs to the category of misattributed quotes and is *not* by C. S. Lewis. See www.cslewis.org/aboutus/faq/quotes-misattributed/.) In fact, humility signifies utter sincerity with oneself, requiring one to think of one’s abilities as no greater, and no lesser, than they really are. Humble people know what they can and cannot do. They take note of both their gifts and their limitations in a realistic manner. True humility is definitely not about self-deprecation.

We are taught to think of pride is a good thing, whereas humility is the absence of pride. Pride has meaning only when comparing others to yourself. By comparing ourselves to others, we learn to play the ubiquitous game of “one-upmanship.” A humble person does not base his or her self-worth on how s/he stacks up to others. She is content to make her honest contribution without raising a flag. Thus, such a person feels no need to play the game of one-upmanship.

No Humility: Only Different Shades of Pride!

Many wiser souls, somewhat jaded with cynicism, have pointed out that there is no humility; only, different shades of pride. We recall an interesting remark by a colleague: “Enough of me talking about myself. Tell me what you think of me!” Real humility is very hard virtue to cultivate. More often than not, humility may be a cover for subtle pride. In his classic *Autobiography*, Ben Franklin tells us how he embarked upon a rather ambitious regimen of cultivating various life virtues such as temperance, silence, order, frugality, sincerity, justice, and humility. He has noted that although a seemingly simple quality, humility is the most difficult virtue to cultivate because by the time one gets to master it, one becomes proud of it!

The following Sufi story highlights the dangers of self-conceit and the need to stay humble in all pursuits. The Sufi—one who is *not*—narrates the story as follows:

... and my third Master was a small child. I entered into a town once and a small child was bringing a candle, a lit candle, hiding it in his hands. He was going to the mosque to put the candle there. In the lighter vein, I asked the boy, “Have you lit the candle yourself?” He said, “Yes, sir.” And I asked, jokingly, “Since you saw the light coming when you lit the candle, can you tell me from where the light came?” The boy became serious first and then laughed and blew out the candle, and said, “Now you have seen the light going, where has it gone? You tell me!” My ego was crushed, and my whole knowledge was shattered. And that moment I felt my own foolhardiness. Since then I dropped all pretense to knowledgeability.

(A traditional Sufi tale, author unknown)

The teachings about compassion and humility find their closest parallel in the naturalistic philosophy of Taoism. Lao Tzu calls them “three treasures.” They first occur in Chapter 67, which is also entitled “Three Treasures,” of Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching* which Lin Yutang says contains “*Laotse’s most beautiful teachings*” (Yutang, 1946/1976, p. 292, emphasis added). In Lao Tzu’s view, nature arms with humility those it would not see destroyed: an axe first falls on the tallest tree. There is a poem by Chuang Tzu transliterated by Thomas Merton which beautifully underscores the value of the virtue of humility as follows:

If a man is crossing a river and an empty boat collides with his own skiff, even though he be a bad-tempered man he will not become very angry. But if he sees a man in the boat, he will shout at him to steer clear.

If the shout is not heard, he will shout again, and yet again, and begin cursing. And all because there is somebody in the boat.

Yet if the boat were empty, he would not be shouting, and not angry. If you can empty your own boat crossing the river of the world, no one will oppose you, no one will seek to harm you ...

... Such is the perfect man:

... His boat is empty.

(Merton, 1965, pp. 114–115)

Spiritual Costs of Selfishness?

The psychological costs of self-centeredness are well documented in positive psychology literature, such as greater psychological distress (anxiety and depression), poor physical health (lower immune system and increased risk of cardiovascular diseases) and compromised personal and social relationship, and lack of emotional clarity. The biggest cost of selfishness, from a spiritual standpoint, is that it prevents the development of a subtle sense of discrimination and thus forestalls our growth on the path of Self-knowledge and spirituality. Being self-centered, the selfish person is not able to “perceive” the universal dimension of reality. If one is preoccupied with the small “s” of the “self” in oneself, one is not able to see the big “S” of the “Self” in all, which is the goal of all true spirituality. That is why all spiritual traditions enjoin performing selfless service and giving to charity to purify the mind and to heal the body and spirit.

A Case in Point: A Rare Story!

Last year, this author spent some time in an *āshram* (monastery) in the state of Gujarat, India. A gentleman came to visit us, who happened to be an architect by profession. He narrated a story about a wealthy person as told by one of his Indian friends who is now a famous cardiologist in Bombay. During his medical studies in the US, this cardiologist was working with another eminent US cardiologist. This US cardiologist was famous for having a very high success rate with his heart patients. Almost all the patients he would treat would get better, except in the case of a certain wealthy businessman.

The businessman did not get better at all after the prescribed treatment. This puzzled the US cardiologist. He thought long and hard about the case and could not find any loophole in his treatment. Something was interfering in the path of recovery and this famous US cardiologist could not figure out what it was.

Wanting to give it a last try, he asked the rich businessman if he could send a team of two doctors to stay at his home for the next three weeks to observe his lifestyle. They wanted to rule out all possibilities of what might be interfering with the cure. The rich businessman readily agreed. After all, he wanted to get better.

So, two young medical doctors were sent to this person's home to observe him 24×7. The now famous cardiologist from Bombay, who is narrating his firsthand experience to his architect friend, was one of the two doctors that was sent to the rich person's home to observe his living habits.

They observed and observed but could not find any unusual behavior on the part of the rich man that could be the contributing factor to the heart disease or preventing the cure. One day, they noticed something that strange about this businessman. He was talking to someone on the phone and whenever the question of money came up, he got very agitated. He was very very rich and getting more or less money would not have affected his wealth at all. Yet anytime he talked to someone about money, he got very agitated. Bingo! That was perhaps the clue they were looking for.

The two medical doctors reported it back to the main cardiologist who was attending the case. A meeting was arranged with the rich person and he was counseled not to get agitated about money since the amount of money he already had was so much that having more money or less money would make absolutely no difference to him. The businessman saw the value of the diagnosis.

In order to counter his habit of stinginess, the doctor prescribed him to give certain compulsory donations to the charities of his choice every week. After 3 months of this treatment consisting of giving mandatory donations, the businessman was 75% cured!

The cardiologist still wondered why the businessman was not cured 100%. Did they overlook something? Therefore, the same team of young doctors was sent back to the rich person's home for further observation. The prescription of mandatory donations continued. Since the donation treatment benefitted the patient, its frequency was increased. Now the businessman was to give compulsory donations every other day.

This time, the doctors noticed something else that was interesting. Every time this businessman gave donations, he felt a high sense of pride and superiority. This was reported back to the main cardiologist.

This behavior was analyzed and it was determined that this attitude of haughtiness was what was interfering with the complete cure.

It was recommended that the business person should feel himself lucky while giving the donations. In all true charity, it is the giver that should be humbled. After all, there are no sacrifices, only opportunities to serve.

The businessman followed the treatment for the next 3 months and was completely cured!

There are many morals to this story. For one, our health is not a mere physical phenomenon; it has a psychological and spiritual basis. If we want to heal the patient—not just the disease—we should look at the totality of the circumstances attending the case. Second, self-centeredness is the cause of much of our stress and suffering.

Humility: The Touchstone of Great Leadership

Humility is the cause and consequence of true learning, for nothing can go in a full vessel. Humility is indeed the touchstone of great leadership. A tree with fruits bends. Humility is also a precondition for serving others for without it, even service could be but an inflation of ego. Lack of humility leads to cluelessness and cluelessness quickly leads to a leader's derailment and

demise. Humble leaders are great contributors. True humility is more like self-forgetfulness than false modesty—it means *emptying* ourselves of the false pride and pretense.

It has been said that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers. What is the alchemy of producing more leaders? Most of the time, it is about leading from behind. In his autobiography entitled *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela equated a great leader to a shepherd: “A leader ... is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind” (1995, p. 22).

Elsewhere Mandela (cited in Lizza, 2011) states that “It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership.” Within the short compass of these two quotes, Mandela encapsulates the leadership lessons he learnt having spent 10,000 days in jail over a period of 50 years of struggle (1944–1994) for ending bondage. Leading from behind is a leadership style whose time has come. It is style which puts followers in the forefront of leadership line. However, it requires supreme humility.

Does humility mean low self-regard? To be humble does not mean to have a low opinion of oneself, it is to have an accurate opinion of oneself, says the psychologist Robert Emmons. Emmons (2009, p. 171) describes humility as the “realistic appraisal of one’s strengths and weaknesses—neither overestimating them nor underestimating them.” True humility is a matter of right perspective.

Is humility the most important quality to cultivate in life and leadership? Humility is unquestionably the most essential requirement when it comes to learning: without being humble, one cannot learn at all. And both history and current research testify that the best leaders are humble. In their *Harvard Business Review* study, Prime and Salib (2014) clarify that humble leaders should not be mistaken for weak ones for it takes tremendous courage to practice humility. These authors cite Google’s SVP of People Operations, Lazlo Bock, who says humility is one of the traits he’s looking for in new hires. Based on their current research and ongoing study of leadership development practices at Rockwell Automation, Prime and Salib (2014) share the following practices to garner a humble, inclusive leadership style:

- *Engage in dialogue, not debates.* Engaging in dialogue is good way to practice humility. When people debate to sway others to win them to their viewpoint, they miss out on the opportunity to learn about *other* points of view. When leaders are humble enough to suspend their own agendas and beliefs, they are not only enhance their own learning but they validate followers’ unique perspectives.
- *Embrace uncertainty.* When leaders humbly admit that they don’t have all the answers, they create space for others to step forward and offer solutions. They also engender a sense of interdependence. Followers understand that the best bet is to rely on each other to work through complex, ill-defined problems.
- *Role model being a “follower.”* Inclusive leaders empower *others* to lead. By reversing roles, leaders not only facilitate employees’ development but they model the act of taking a different perspective, something that is so critical to working effectively in diverse teams.

Inclusive leaders are humble enough to admit that they do not have all the answers and that the present day problems are too complex for any one person to tackle them single-handedly. Doing so, they garner the wisdom of the followers and allow them to come up with shared solutions. Humble leaders have the humility and wisdom to learn from those who have less power than them. Dan Cable in his April 2018 *Harvard Business Review* article entitled,

“How Humble Leadership Really Works,” underscores the value of humility in servant leadership as follows:

To put it bluntly, servant-leaders have the humility, courage, and insight to admit that they can benefit from the expertise of others who have less power than them. They actively seek the ideas and unique contributions of the employees that they serve. This is how servant leaders create a culture of learning, and an atmosphere that encourages followers to become the very best they can.

Concluding Thoughts

“It is enigmatic that man with all his pretensions to knowledge does not know himself. Nay, he knows himself wrong” (Satprakashananda, 1964, p. 232).

When asked what was the most difficult thing, Thales, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, mathematician, replied, “*To know thyself.*” There is no wealth equal to Self-knowledge in the whole creation. Its glory is such that it makes people walk away from the much coveted kingdoms. The Buddha is a case in point. He was a prince. He gave it up all to discover the truth of his existence. Today he is revered not because he was a *king-to-be*, but because he renounced the transient kingdom *without* and discovered the eternal kingdom *within*. What he found has inspired billions ever since.

To know the Self is to realize that there is nothing “personal” about it—in the sense of “myself” or “yourself.” Since the true Self is at-one-with the Absolute Reality, to know the Self is to realize our oneness with all that is. Self-knowledge confers upon us the wisdom to see all existence as the expression of our very own Self and spontaneously act for the well-being of all beings. Selfless love and compassion naturally flow out of this understanding of unity and oneness of all life. This is the flowering of Self-knowledge in life and leadership.

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