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# HOW CAN STRIVING LEADERS BE STILL?

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Michael Jordan’s real edge over all his competitors, claims one of his biographers in the final episode of “The Last Dance”, amounts to him being more present than any of them. “People spend twenty years in an ashram trying to get as present as he was before and during a game”, he argues. In this long insider documentary which nursed many of us through the pandemic, we get up close to Jordan’s awe-inspiring talent, his punishing work ethic, his ultra-competitiveness and his prickly relatedness – yet this informed observer nominates Jordan’s presence as the secret differentiator.

There is a question which first hooked me on the practice of mindfulness. Can you just do the dishes when you are doing the dishes, without it being a chore, or without longing for the dessert which

comes next? It is one that the Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh would ask his American guests whenever they offered to do his dishes. He was stranded in the US having travelled there to lobby Americans to halt their horrific war in his native Vietnam, only to find himself barred from returning by the victorious Communists. Thich Nhat Hanh influenced Martin Luther King's decision to risk diluting his civil rights campaign by publicly opposing the war, and in turn, King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. If you could just do the dishes when you were doing the dishes, then Thich Nhat Hanh also would accept your courteous offer to do his dishes. Can you just play a basketball game when you are Michael Jordan and it is your last dance, your team's second-best player is carrying a back injury, and a record-breaking sixth NBA championship is on the line? It is the same question as the dishes!

This article is not just for people who have a dishes' fetish. It is for folks who are interested in what Eastern thinking and practices can contribute to a better life and successful leadership. To be honest, it will be just a small sample of Eastern thinking which we will be exploring. Confucianism and Hinduism will not be covered. Our guides will be two sets of refugees – Thich Nhat Hanh who was exited inhospitably from Vietnam, and the Buddhist diaspora who fled Tibet when China re-asserted its historical rule over their mountainous homeland. Very sad events for all of them, but it was very fortunate for us in the West. “Immigrants get the job done”, is a celebrated line from the fabulous musical “Hamilton”. Refugees will do it for us here.

So, is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? Despite all the rituals, statues and devotion, most religions shun Buddhism because it lacks

the basic ingredient of a God. Western philosophers generally discount it as a philosophy too, a view strongly shared by Thich Nhat Hanh given that his goal is to go beyond thinking and concepts. For Buddhists it does involve a set of teachings known as the Dharma, but for outsiders like me it is primarily the Practice of Mindfulness and a Way of Being. For us, this is not based on any belief, but on guided practice and direct experience. There is no requirement to sign up to anything. Millions of people, of course, have signed up and identify themselves as Buddhists, but more than a few have probably ignored the refreshing warning from their founder not to take his words simply at face-value, but to discover things for yourself.

Although the cast of characters we will meet in this article have been very generous in sharing their insights and methods, they are not a particularly missionary lot. The Dalai Lama advises folks not to change your religion for Buddhism, and for the rest of us to develop a universal set of secular ethics since the influence of religion is waning (see his *Beyond Religion*). He may have overlooked the Islamists and the Evangelicals. The attraction for individualistic Westerners is that the Dalai Lama, with amazing non-attachment, also advises us to pick and choose what works for us. If like me, traditional notions of reincarnation, karma and even institutional religion, don't make much sense to you, then just give them a wide berth. The Dalai Lama asserts that the purpose and possibility of life is to be happy: not a flimsy mood or selfish impulse, but; a definite acceptance of pain, disappointment and loss, and; a deep satisfaction, joy and contentment. Some pitch!

What is Thich Nhat Hanh's point about doing the dishes when you do the dishes? Pretty simple really – he reckons most of the time we don't. And it is not just dishes. It is intimate relationships, executive meetings, talking to customers, holidays, the children, you name it. We are absent for a lot of things. Our attention is often scattered like a piece of paper in the breeze, or it is captured by thoughts, projects, regrets, worries or fantasies. Occasionally we will grace the here and now with our presence. What is wrong with an active mental life and imagination, you may ask? Firstly, we miss out on a lot of actual life; secondly, we lose effectiveness and efficiency by not being focused; thirdly, if our attention is captured easily and not open, we are slow to respond or adapt to signals, new developments and other humans; fourthly, we deprive ourselves of fulfilment. What is the solution? Thich Nhat Hanh suggests we deliberately practice mindfulness, and practice meditation regularly to develop a familiarity with and facility for being mindful.

I hate weeding my garden. I rarely do it, and I wait until there is a prospect that my street will organize a working bee, before I get cracking. Within minutes of starting the chore, my mood will sour and plummet to some really charcoal depths. One day I noticed something truly remarkable. It wasn't the weeding that blackened my day. I was getting irritable from all the old stories and complaining which I engaged in to distract myself while I was weeding. As long as I stayed focused on the weeding itself, and did not entertain the distractions, it wasn't too bad at all, the time passed a lot quicker, and the weeding got done more efficiently. I promise it was a dodgy back that eventually led me to my second breakthrough idea. Get a gardener!

Thich Nhat Hanh has written a large number of wonderful books to help us to be mindful. They are as simple, direct and profound as his calligraphy, and they have titles such as *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, *Peace of Mind*, *True Love and Silence*. If you read just a few paragraphs of anything he has written you will believe he is sitting in the room alongside you, and that you have your own teacher who is addressing you personally. Unlike me, Thich Nhat Hanh is also a very enthusiastic gardener. I try valiantly to let his style influence my own approach to leading, teaching and writing. If you are interested, you can find a ten-week Podcast Course by me on “Mindfulness, Meditation and Reflection for Leaders”, at [www.searleburke.com/podcast/](http://www.searleburke.com/podcast/).

Waiters and bakery shops featured in my last article on existentialism, and now I am exulting dishes and weeding. But remember the premise of my opening: if you can just do the dishes when you are doing the dishes, you will be as good as Michael Jordan at playing basketball. Actually, that is untrue and a bad faith promotional effort by me to keep you tuned for the next part of this article, where we will uncover family feuds, scandalous preachers, and some really useful ideas.

Mathieu Ricard was a young French scientist when he decided to change careers and become a Buddhist monk. He has worked as a translator for the Dalai Lama, and written a range of terrific books including *The Art of Happiness*, *The Art of Meditation*, and *Altruism*. At one stage and to his own embarrassment, he was dubbed the happiest man alive, because he happened to be one of the first subjects where MRI Scanning indicated favourable alterations in his brain structure as a result of a life-time of meditating. Mathieu has a famous French

philosopher as a father, and they were somewhat estranged because the father disapproved of his choices. On the other hand, his mother proceeded to become a Buddhist nun. Just your typical suburban family! The father and son have engaged in a series of dialogues and produced a book to air their intellectual differences, which is titled *The Monk and the Philosopher*. Spoiler alert here because it has a happy ending – the father mumbles that he is proud of his son and always has been. No such luck with their intellectual differences, however. Their views remain as distant as Paris and the foothills of Dharamshala.

Their dialogue covers a large range of topics, but I will try to capture the flavour of it here. The father is dismayed that his scientific son has got himself caught up in something entirely subjective. He is particularly concerned that a focus on the internal self leads to being passive. He argues: “When I say that the West’s been a civilization of action, I’m thinking of the transformation of the world by knowledge of its laws. I’m thinking of technological invention, I’m thinking of the invention of the steam engine, the use of electricity ... acting on the world isn’t just a matter of having some spiritual influence on people like oneself, but of a real change in the very substance of the world we live in ... These are tools that have radically changed human life ... it was never something that Buddhist societies developed.”

I must admit that I have some sympathy for his argument. Thich Nhat Hanh had to insert the word “Engaged” in front of his approach to Buddhism, because he was frustrated by his teachers who tried to stop his peace efforts and social programs. I had an intense Catholic upbringing, and although I am not religious anymore, I still retain some

of the values I was taught. My upbringing was stronger on the need for social action, and on asserting that it is not only individuals who need to be kind to each other, but that we have a collective obligation to pursue social justice. It is a shame that the Church strays from that mission so often. Jean-Francois is making an interesting point to his son here – if I myself was given a choice between electricity and eternal life, I would want to know if there was electricity in eternal life!

Mathieu does get some decent jabs in about Western philosophy becoming so arid that it has little advice to offer people on how to live. He is dismayed at his father's dismissal of any subjective approach, which he considers has its own validity and subtlety, and can match the scientific method which he also loves. He argues: "Buddhism offers us a science of the mind, a contemplative science more in tune with our times than ever, and one that will always be so – since it deals with the most basic mechanisms of happiness and suffering... it is the mind that counts, for the mind plays the essential role in satisfaction and dissatisfaction, happiness and suffering, fulfilment and failure. The mind is behind every experience in life. It is also what determines how we see the world... it only takes the slightest change in our minds for that world to be turned completely upside-down."

It seems to me that there is a lot of merit in starting with the individual and contemplation, as long as it doesn't stop there. My experience is that leaders cannot really offer what they themselves don't already have. It is hard for a leader to build collaboration if you are not collaborative yourself. It is hard for a leader to request responsibility and loyalty, if you lack those virtues yourself. It is hard to build a culture

of trust if you the leader don't trust people. In my twenties, I was involved in a lot of community activism, but I was a bit of an angry young man and although this drove me, it also regularly undercut my effectiveness. To quote the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Buddhist monk Shantideva, who is one of the Dalai Lama's favourite teachers, and an originator of pithy sayings: "Where would I find enough leather with which to cover the surface of the earth? Yet wearing leather just on the soles of my shoes is equivalent to covering the earth with it."

I have a lot of sympathy for Mathieu Richard's views. Why did folks need Magnetic Resonance Imagery, before they would listen to very intelligent and very impressive people who were sharing and exhibiting all the benefits of the practices of mindfulness and meditation? Is there any wonder that some people feel justified in rejecting the alarming science on climate change, when renowned scientists like Richard Dawkins roam the world on some peculiar crusade to convert the supposedly superstitious to his atheism? It is not just born-again-atheists engaging in overreach – evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright, titled his recent book: *Why Buddhism Is True*. The missionary position makes a comeback!

This seems the perfect moment to introduce the issue of ego. Ego needs no real introduction to any of us. We are greeted each morning by the story of me, my, and mine. It may be an understandable perspective, but it is too narrow to achieve anything of great value. The Buddhist philosopher Han de Wit argues: "We create the illusion of being separate from the world, hoping thereby to avert suffering". Ego can provide some useful drive for leaders, but if it is not restrained it



will interfere with the core role of contributing to others. Ego is not just boastful - it is excessively needy. We have seen plenty of that on the world stage recently. My advice to leaders is to let go of ego whenever you can. Thich Nhat Hanh is a strong advocate for letting go. The ability to let go comes from being mindful, and is a major asset for leaders. See my article "Mindfulness and Letting Go". Not only does it help you to disentangle from your ego and emotions, but you can forcefully pursue your commitments, without being derailed by attachment. Letting go also plays an important role in assisting teams to get beyond all the judgementalism, and to be more creative and high-performing.

Ego probably caused the scandal coming up next. Sogyal Rinpoche was one of the Tibetan Buddhist diaspora, he was educated at Cambridge University, was one of the most eloquent representatives of the group, and was a frequent teacher in Australia. He died from illness last year, but not before he was outed by a large group of his senior followers for sexual and physical abuse. He caused a lot of damage to his victims and he abused the trust of many people. Sogyal justified his actions by arguing that his approach was consistent with the spiritual practices of his lineage of teachers. The Dalai Lama, who was close to him, publicly criticized such "medieval practices" from Tibet. It demonstrates that not all traditions are worth saving, and for me it highlights the dangers of the Guru system. Several decades earlier, Sogyal Rinpoche had written *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, which is still a classic account of the wisdom traditions from his homeland. I learnt a lot from the approach to Living, a definite priority of mine, but I couldn't comprehend large chunks of the section on Dying.

Finality brings us to our last question: Why all this fuss about Stillness? People are drawn to mindfulness because of its well-documented benefits for stress reduction and well-being. For others, it also is the possibility of being present in their daily life and work, in order to improve effectiveness and fulfillment. Beyond these motives lies the possibility of stillness. Stillness is readily accessible through the practice of meditation. It involves quietening all the thinking and concepts. It involves switching attention from thoughts to the background silence - the analogy often used is switching attention from the transient clouds to the blue sky itself. Many business leaders who I work with are surprised to learn that being swamped by thoughts is not inevitable.

Buddhists have some very major insights which they claim emerge from this stillness, such as no-self and nirvana, but these are way beyond my capability to explain or verify. I can report what leaders on our mindfulness courses share when they are introduced to stillness through meditation. Some say that they feel a great peace; others say that they have this sense of coming home; some mention that time seems to slow down; others talk about experiencing a sense of belonging, and; some report that they have a sense of oneness with others and the world. None of that sounds too bad to me! Certainly, the ability to be still is important in developing our leadership presence, and you can read more about this in my article “How Do Leaders Develop Greater Presence?”.

The interesting question for leaders is whether it is possible to experience stillness-in-action? Was that what Michael Jordan was exhibiting on the court, or was it just the slow-motion cameras?