

Zen and the Art of Teaching Leadership

(Workshop presented at 2nd International Leadership Conference, Toronto, Canada, November 4, 2000)

(In the tradition of the 1960's classic, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, this paper uses the term "Zen" as a metaphor for Eastern traditions of mindful practice. My discussion of Zen is inescapably that of an outsider, neither Eastern nor Buddhist. I write with the respect I have gained from my personal study with print and my practice of the Japanese martial way of Aikido)

How much does our cultural conditioning and particularly our language shape our view of reality? Peter Senge related a story about his encounter in 1995 with a young Chinese woman who was attending one of his seminars. She commented that his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, had become a nonfiction bestseller in Asia because it was seen not as a business book but as a book for personal development. Readers in the United States and Europe view his ideas quite differently. Senge observed that Western readers struggle with his basic premise that significant organizational change relies on deep changes in how people think and interact (Bryner & Markova, 1996).

As the 21st century dawns, research in cybernetics, semantics and human performance technologies has shown the need for a more integrated, cross-cultural approach to learning and leadership. Recent texts like *An Unused Intelligence*, *Leadership Aikido*, and *Corporate Aikido* have recommended metaphors and activities crafted from traditional Eastern practices of mindfulness and the martial arts. Leadership is more than a title or position. Leadership is a complex interpersonal process. As a complex human activity understanding and practicing leadership demand a synthesis of relevant information and authentic performance... a form of "kinetic" intelligence (Bryner & Markova, 1996). Eastern metaphors have relevance for Western leadership education because they have traditionally been grounded in existential theory and practice. Western approaches to leadership studies can enhance individual development by utilizing Eastern human performance systems?

Leadership Studies

"The way you view it, is the way you pursue it." - Unknown



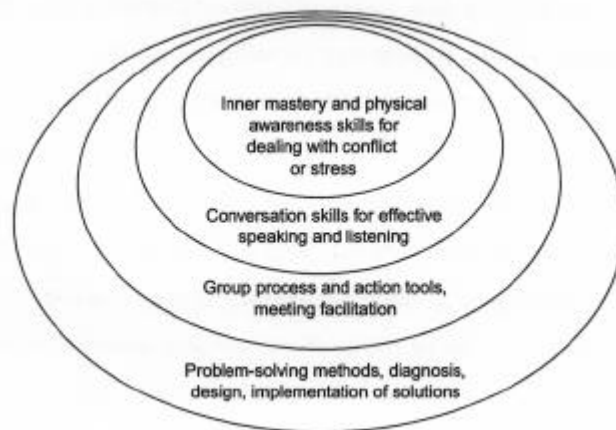
At each epoch in human history, the idea of leadership reflects the dominant paradigm. In 1978, James MacGregor Burns' classic definition of 'transforming leadership' set the stage for a new direction in leadership research and education. The theory drew from the innovative cognitive developmental theories of that period; however the underlying paradigms continued to be very much grounded in the "old dogmas and practices" of a dualistic Western cultural experience (Gyan, 1999).

Burns proposed that "Transforming leadership...occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality"(Burns, 1978, p.20). His terminology raised a debate that seems to continue to focus on understanding the meaning of 'transforming', and the importance of the issue of 'morality'. Meaning is "a relation between abstract symbols and states of affairs in the world". It is a "matter of human understanding. And understanding involves image-schemata and their metaphorical projections." Meaning and rationality are intimately connected to bodily experiences (Johnson,

1987; Damasco, 1994). Richard Couto (1997) used grammatical structure and social science conceptualizations, specifically, social capital, to explicate Burns' notion of 'transforming' leadership. What would 'transforming' mean using the scientific approaches of semiotics, kinesics and proxemics? Semiotics investigates symbolic forms of communication using cultural rituals, ceremonies and natural language; kinesics studies body language and proxemics explores the cultural use of space and movement (Hall, 1984; Grossman, 1998). All these scientific approaches rely heavily on the body as the context and central reference point for investigating symbolic communication.

In the *Leader's Companion* (1995), Wren stated that some contemporary leadership commentators advocated leadership approaches remarkably similar to the 2,500 year old Chinese Taoist, Lao-tzu. An interesting 1997 Jepson School Senior Project explored, for the first time, the conceptual relationship between Zen Buddhism and modern leadership theories and concluded that Burns' 'transforming leadership' showed the highest correlation with Zen principles of intellect, relationships, action, environments and ethics (Williams, 1997). A recently published manuscript *Cutting Edge: Leadership 2000* presented current thinking of a wide spectrum of contemporary leadership scholars. Words like "leader as artist, adaptive work, challenging the system, and staying alive" are major concepts that could very easily evoke an existential martial metaphor (Kellerman & Matusak, 1999).

In times of transition and change, when chaos, uncertainty and confusion reign, the warrior archetype seems to emerge. Multi-skilled in the practice of survival, concerned about self-development and educated in arts and sciences, the samurai (one who serves) appears well suited to leadership challenges. A growing number of researchers and practitioners (Crum, 1987; Mindell, 1992; Bryner & Markova, 1996; Clawson, 1996; O'Neil, 1997; and Pino, 1999) have recommended the metaphor of the Eastern martial arts and specifically, the Japanese art of Aikido as a more appropriate model for contemporary leadership training. Leadership and conflict management constructs share much common ground. (Mindell, 1992; Lewis, 1997) To perform at one's maximum potential an individual must learn to control both concentration and emotional arousal in chaotic and stressful interpersonal encounters. (Nideffer, 1993) Current leadership models often fail to address these central embodiment issues. As one solution, Jeff Dooley, a colleague of Senge at MIT and an Aikido practitioner, advocated a model that makes Eastern mindfulness concepts and methods the core competency for leadership development



(Dooley, 1999)

John O'Neil made the point quite eloquently:

"...aikido training and the reverential rituals... provide powerful expressions of what is missing in most contemporary organizations and in the lives of those who lead them. Current models of leadership, which emphasize rational thinking combined with action-first and purpose-later instincts, reward the smart-aggressive rather than those who are emotionally and spiritually mature. What lessons can we draw from all this? If the history of the past hundred years has taught us anything, it's that a confrontational, hard-edged, attack-oriented approach to coping with change and conflict usually causes more problems than it solves...we must devise new codes of ethics and healthy practices...We must seek and speak a new 'grammar' that can inform a culture of sustainable growth and cooperation. Any martial art is, first and foremost, a tool for self-discovery and personal development. Aikido - and the leadership practices congenial to its precepts - can promote lifelong learning, self-understanding, harmony of thoughts and deeds, and resolution of strife. These qualities are too seldom seen in today's leaders, but they are crucial to leaders of the future. (pp. 1-3)

Zen and the Martial Arts*

"Those who say don't know. Those who know don't say" - Lao-tzu



Zen is a uniquely Japanese branch of Buddhism. While adapted from the Chinese Ch'an sect, Zen in Japan became even more radical than its Chinese predecessor. It spoke out against religion based on canon and called for religion based on practice. The aim of Zen practice, or sitting meditation, is to cut through the illusions of culture and mind and achieve insight into the truth, or "Buddha nature."

During the Kamakura period of Japan's feudal era, Zen was adopted as the religion of choice by Japan's military rulers and warrior class (the samurai). Zen's appeal to these men of war was not only its preference for practice over intellectual learning, but also the genuine serenity and peace this practice induced. Zen taught that sitting the body could lead to sitting the mind, and that a seated mind—a mind at rest—approached the state of being that precedes life and death. And a warrior freed from fear for his own life and safety could approach battle with singular ferocity because he had nothing to lose.

The effect of Zen on the way of the sword was particularly profound. The sword proved the perfect metaphor for describing Buddhist perception that cuts through the world of illusion. To the swordsman, as to the Zen priest, life and death were always two sides of the single blade, and many of Japan's most remarkable swordsmen credited their mastery as much to the sitting practice of Zen as to their relentlessly rigorous training in the military arts.

Zen was also influential, in the 19th and 20th centuries, in the elevation of the martial arts from technical disciplines (*jutsu*) to paths of learning (*michi* or *do*, as in kendo, judo, and aikido). *Michi* and *do* are alternate readings of the same character, meaning path or way. Through its use in the disciplines of Zen, this character came to be associated with paths or ways of mental and spiritual development. As the practical efficacy of the traditional fighting arts were overshadowed by the advent of more modern means of self-defense and warfare, the emphasis in these arts began to shift away from practical use in battle to their efficacy as physical, mental, and spiritual disciplines.

Aikido is a relatively modern martial originated by Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969). Ueshiba mastered a number of the classical martial arts systems before he synthesized them and crystallized what he considered to be their essence into his own system. The result of that process

is a unique vision of the purpose and meaning of human conflict. Aikido has been called “the way of peace” and “the non-violent martial art” because it teaches conflict resolution rather than effective fighting tactics.

Aikido is an effective martial art and a practical system of personal development. It translates universal principles, such as balance, center, and energy, into physical applications. The name, Aikido, means literally, the way of living (*do*) in harmony (*ai*) with natural energy (*ki*). Aikido teaches how to control conflict with minimum use of strength by blending with an attack and seeking the path of least resistance. The practice of aikido fosters intuitive understanding of natural law and peace of mind within the context of action. Practitioners experience pronounced benefits in many areas of their lives.

The Art of Teaching Leadership

“The educational process must be based on the student’s individual activity, and the art of education should involve nothing more than guiding and monitoring this activity.” Lev Vygotsky



If Ron Heifetz is correct and leadership development must take place "below the neck and not just above the neck" (Kellerman & Matusak, 1999, p. 53) contemporary leadership scholars and practitioners must discover new ways to study and practice. Once we accept the importance of the body in the evolution of higher consciousness, we begin to understand the necessity of movement in all forms of education.

All learning is experience-based. What we do, we understand. All effective learning begins with concrete experience and ends in active experimentation (McCarthy, 1996). Learning to lead should involve that same cycle. This is what John O’Neil and others are referring to when they recommend the art of aikido as a metaphor and a model for the teaching of leadership. Art is about movement...the movement of one's body. And as we move our bodies, we craft the structures of our minds. The mind and body are intimately connected (Hall, 1984;Thayer, 1982).

From a bodymind perspective, Burns' 1978 definition of transforming leadership offers a new direction for existential theory and experiential learning. For Burns, transforming leadership is a process of engagement. The art of Aikido is a practice in engagement. In aikido, one partner joins/connects (*irimi*) and blends (*tenkan*) with the energy/force (*ki*) of the other so that the conflict is resolved with a minimum use of brute force. Aikido is based on paired movements in which two persons (*uke/nage*) initiate and respond to one other. This unique method of reciprocal cooperative practice establishes an ethical relationship on a somatic plane. Repetition of this relationship has been shown to foster higher levels of consciousness and moral sensibility (Ledyard, 1998). The practice of the this art helps to uncover the 'universal' principles of human relations and provides a remedy for what Burns called the ' leader-follower conundrum' (Burns, 1998).

As Burns states, “ultimately education and leadership shade into each other.”(p 448) True education, as the Latin root implies, must be a "process" of "leading out". Aikido practice provides a microcosm of life. The practice hall (*dojo*) represents a community of practice within which we explore the relationships of our body to mind and our bodymind to others within the practice roles of uke and nage. Aikido training is based on an apprentice model. The teacher master (*sensei/shihan*) leads the student though a series of skillful practices emanating from the

teacher's own life work. Both teacher and student learn together to rediscover their own unique natural "character". This is a central focus of all Zen disciplines. The major impact of even the most basic training in any eastern art form is a change in the way one looks at life. This "transforming" process appears to be facilitated the most by instructional programs that are based on high context, informal learning- "learning which depends on the use of models, practice, and demonstration... words are anathema... words distort "(Hall, 1984). As McCarthy contends, "Clearly, the dance itself is the thing." (McCarthy, 1996)

"DO"ing Leadership: Practice, Practice, Practice!

"Enlightenment is an accident, but practice makes you accident prone." **Rossi Richard Baker**



"Ideas do not influence [man] deeply when they are only taught as ideas and thoughts", said Eric Fromm (1981). "But, ideas do have an effect [on man] if the idea is lived by the one who teaches it; if it is personified by the teacher, if the idea appears in the flesh." Deep transforming wisdom comes not by 'empty' reasoning, but by gut (*hara*) wisdom through meditative practice. To be efficacious leadership educators must begin to attend to the contemporary physical practices of their students. While not many Westerners will sign up for aikido classes or begin the journey to become a Zen priest, Dr. Ginny Whitlaw, a former NASA scientist, black belt expert in aikido and a Zen priest believes that training programs could revolutionize the way we think and act if they were based more on in-the-body principles. Her Bodylearning program emphasizes three interrelated, essential, universal steps:

1. Develop breath and center.
2. Build a practice.
3. Grow the practice. (Whitlaw, 1998)

Our applications of aikido principles and practices in leadership seminars from elementary through post secondary education have substantiated the work of others in this field (<http://www.aiki-extensions.org>) and parallels Whitlaw's essential thesis. The following methods have proved effective in bringing an Eastern flavor to Western leadership training programs:

Large Group Keynote Presentations:

Using the artist (martial) as performance art in large group keynote events provides the audience with an authentic physical metaphor for analyzing personal definitions about Leadership. This pedagogical approach reinforces the need to acknowledge the wholistic inner and outer complementary capacities of any effective leadership model.

Introductory Workshop 1 - 3 hours (CST Seminars)

Once aspiring leaders are introduced to a demonstration of the art, they should be led through a series of movement activities modeled on the practice(s) of that art. Moving like the artist helps participants begin to understand the embodied knowledge and skillful capacities required of any complex human behavior especially one like leadership. In addition, participants might begin to explore their own body learning styles and begin to explore their own practice path.

Do Aikido (Clawson at UVA)

Immerse the students in the art. Experience the concepts and relationships viscerally. Begin to explore Center/Breath and discover the demands of designing and committing to a personal practice. Eastern arts are based on an apprenticeship model. As Clawson warns, this approach can only be effective if the Leadership educator is a practicing artist or employs the services of a arts practitioner. Don't do this on your own at home!

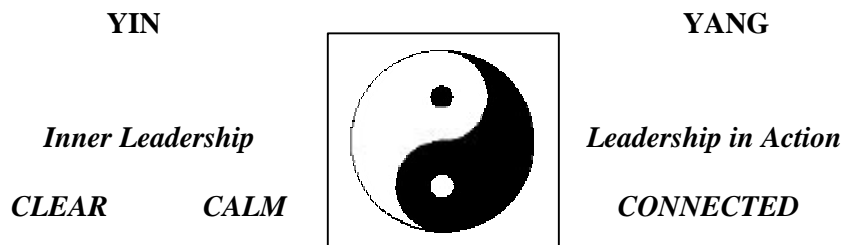
Summary "Leadership Bull"

The conceptual and moral issues that currently plague contemporary Western leadership scholarship and education might be remedied by viewing the leadership relationship through a different cultural lens. Asian cultural arts have historically blended consciousness, conscience and character in their meditative practices in order to foster individual and leadership development (Nelson, 1989). These arts involve direct encounter with the phenomenon and the self [Riding the Bull] (Powell, 1982; Austin, 1999). Rather than only thinking about an encounter or considering the possibility of future action, these innovative programs develop "adaptive" learners able to function in the absence of optimal conditions, in changing and unpredictable situations with improvisational inventiveness. Studying eastern art forms, like aikido, is "not something one 'adapts' to [his] life, but rather one adapts the life to the art" (Nelson, 1989, p.x). Leadership educators must create classroom environments that employ more innovative techniques that move beyond traditional lecture and discussion (Wren, 1998). Leadership educators who seek to perform on the 'cutting edge' might enrich their own study and that of their students by developing new metaphors and practices that assimilate "*much more*" of the wisdom of the East.

"Aikido begins with you ... Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner ... Foster peace in your own life and then apply the Art to all that you encounter."

- Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido

The WAY of LEADERSHIP



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Note *

Thanks to Steve Earle, my friend and training partner, for writing this section on Zen and the Martial Arts. Steve is the Head Instructor at Aikido in the Fan, Richmond, Virginia. He is a business consultant with World Access Corporation also based in Richmond, Virginia, specializing in Asian Markets. Steve has practiced Aikido since 1970. He studied in Japan for over 10 years and speaks fluent Japanese.

Bio

Jack Richford is a counselor with Chesterfield County School System. He has been in education for 18 years. He holds a black belt in Aikido and has been practicing for 10 years and teaching for 5 years. Mr. Richford has been involved in leadership education for most of his professional life. For the last 6 years he and his colleagues have presented leadership workshops that integrate the philosophy and practices of Aikido. In the Summer of 1998, Mr. Richford attended the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, University of Richmond, as a teacher-scholar. His graduate project, *Zen and the Art of Teaching Leadership*, proposed integrating traditional Eastern mindfulness and martial arts disciplines into short duration professional staff development models. In the Spring 2000 this workshop was presented for the College Park Scholars Program, James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, University of Maryland.

Semantic Metaphors and Meaning

The writing systems of China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan share a common origin. The ideographs were invented in China over 4,000 years ago are symbols (*graphs*) of thought (*ideo*). In Japan, these symbols are called Kanji.



Do (Japanese) *Tao* (Chinese) simply meant 'a course of action' possibly referring to military action. The character combines 'foot' or 'to follow' with 'neck' referring to the leader with a plummed helmet. To Confucius, *Tao* meant 'way'. Lao-tzu interpreted *Tao* as 'truth of the universe'.

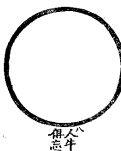


The first character in the kanji for Aikido is 'ai' and contains the radical for 'mouth' also means 'entrance'. The top half of the character represents a 'lid'. Together used as a verb or noun, it means 'to fit', 'encounter' or 'combining'.

The second character, 'ki', roughly translates as 'breath', 'spirit' or 'energy'. In Chinese, it is read 'chi'. The top of the radical represents 'air' and the bottom means 'rice' or more abstractly 'essence'.



The Traditional Zen story of **The Ten Bulls** is an allegory of the stages of gradual awakening or enlightenment. "*Riding the Bull Home*" is the **sixth stage**. At this stage the struggle with the self (The Bull) is over. Concern for success or failure has passed. The seeker follows the path with ease.



"*Both Bull and Self Transcended*" is **stage eight** in the ten step process. No separate things exist. All is one. The self that the seeker was seeking has dissolved into Oneness. Self is gone. The mind is clear of limitations - no duality.



Yin and Yang (Polarity and/or Duality) One can have oneness with the Tao only through balance. A better word to describe Yin/Yang would be polarity, since in polarity both opposites are from the same source. Yin Yang is the never ending cycle that is not only nature but is nature creating and destroying itself and all of existence as we know it and don't know.

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