



LEADING CONSCIOUSLY

A Pilgrimage Toward Self-Mastery

DEBASHIS CHATTERJEE
Foreword by Peter M. Senge

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Dedication

I truly believe that fire will be discovered for the second time in the history of human civilization. Only this time the spark will come from within the Self.

Conscious leaders of the new millenium will be the harbingers of this inner spark. To them I owe this labor of love.

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Foreword

It has been almost two years since a thoughtful young professor of management from India visited me at MIT and commented, "What is oldest is often most valuable. When an idea has persisted for thousands of years, we can have some confidence in its truth."

That thoughtful young man, Debashis Chatterjee, has now completed a book, and it is a very great privilege to be able to introduce it.

In this book, Debashis Chatterjee presents and explains diverse threads of ancient wisdom teachings, relating these insights to the challenges of leading contemporary organizations. He does so with remarkable clarity, simplicity, and persuasiveness. Ideas that might otherwise be regarded as hopelessly esoteric or impractical emerge as bedrock notions of what it means to lead and to work together effectively. Time honored philosophic perspectives illuminate why work in one setting evokes passion, imagination, and genuine commitment, while all three are absent in another.

In so doing, I find that this book speaks more directly to the crucial problems which afflict contemporary organizations than most "how to" management nostrums.

"If a person rises to a level of authority that exceeds his virtue, all will suffer," wrote Guanzi, a predecessor of Confucius,

2500 years ago. Is there any reason to think this advice less relevant today than when it was written, especially in era of enterprises which influence the lives of people around the world? How many suffer, both inside organizations and beyond, from abuse of power, from leadership lacking wisdom and deep understanding, from decisions based on shallow, frenzied thinking which nonetheless affect thousands? Was this only a problem of 2500 years ago? Or, are we, if anything, more in need now than ever before of a set of guiding precepts to aid in the formation of leaders, so that power would be in balance with virtue?

If so, why is this problem virtually ignored in all the attention paid to high performance, world-class competition, and leading global enterprises?

I think there are two reasons. First, it is not actually the vision we are following. Balancing power with virtue actually runs counter to our more accepted assumptions that people rise to positions of authority because of their competence, their technical skill, or their proven ability to produce results. In fact, this itself is a rather rosy picture. In point of fact, many rise to positions of power because that is their ambition, because they know how to make impressions, because they are masters at the internal political game playing that dominates most large enterprises. Second, even if we did embrace the vision that power and virtue should go together, we have little idea how to pursue such a vision. We have no agreed upon set of guiding ideas as to what constitutes virtue. We have no shared understanding of how virtue and wisdom develop in a person throughout their life. We all recognize the difference between espousing laudable values and practicing those values. But we have little shared understanding of why one person has developed integrity and another has not.

The result is that many in positions of authority lack the capabilities to truly lead. They are not credible. They do not command genuine respect. They are not committed to serve. They are not continually learning and growing. They are not wise.

As Debashis Chatterjee shows, ancient traditions like those of India and China have something important to contribute to

understanding true leadership development. The cultivation of virtue, they believed, followed from the development of consciousness. *Development*, Chatterjee points out, has the same root as *envelope*. Development literally mean “de-enveloping” or opening up. As the human being opens up, their awareness expands to embrace more and more of the complexities of life, the realities of their organization, and the principles of nature. Higher virtues are, at some elemental level, nothing more or less than deeply appreciating laws of nature that enable harmony and functioning of life: see reality as it is (commitment to the truth), take no more than you need (waste not, want not), do not control unnecessarily (hierarchical power should be used only when local solutions are not possible, what 17th Century philosophers called the principle of “subsidiarity”), and balance action with non-action (the power of presence, true listening, and non-intervention).

Internalizing such virtues that does not come from “the outside in,” taught to us as moral codes that must be followed blindly. These are virtues that we experience and follow naturally as our consciousness opens up, de-envelops. This constitutes a very different approach to leadership development than practiced in most contemporary organizations. It is neither quick nor simple. It demands deep commitment and disciplined practice. It is no “flavor of the month” management fad, its merits have been proven, literally, over thousands of years.

The implications of this book stretch beyond development of hierarchical leaders. Successful enterprises of the coming millennium may find that leadership is too important to be reserved for a few. Leadership comes in many shapes and sizes, only one type of which concerns people in positions of authority. It is not hyperbole to think of “leadership organizations,” organizations of leaders. For the principles and practices of de-enveloping apply to all people.

As more and more managers come to understand the importance of growing people in order to grow an enterprise, there will be increasing interest in more powerful theory and

method for developing people. Rather than being a peripheral “HR issue,” growing people and aligning their creative capacities is now a strategic imperative, perhaps *the* strategic imperative, for many enterprises. No matter what is done in enterprises it is done by people. The maturity and happiness of those people set the tone and determine the capabilities or limitations of that enterprise. We are leaving an era where great strides were made through developing and applying advanced knowledge in manufacturing, marketing, and finance.

These are now the price of admission to global markets. They no longer afford competitive advantage. We are entering an era, I believe, where world class enterprises will build comparable sophistication in understanding and tapping the intelligence and spirit of human beings. This is why I expect this book to be a landmark in the journey toward cultivating the human side of enterprise. In the increasingly global business environment, it is just a matter of time before Western managers recognize the unique storehouse of practical knowledge about consciousness that resides in eastern cultures, and before their Eastern counterparts rediscover it. Debashis Chatterjee’s vision of offering ancient insights in a way that makes them understandable to contemporary managers could not be more timely.

In an era entranced by “the new,” our greatest hope ironically my lie in rediscovering “the old.” No one has yet been able to improve upon love, nor found a technological substitute for joy, or for serenity. It is not that ancient wisdom is sacrosanct, nor that all answers to life’s mysteries were revealed by India’s vedic sages. Rather, I see Debashis’ most central message as really an invitation. Do we wish to rejoin an ancient line of inquiry? Do we wish to once again focus our energies on understanding what it means to be alive, to be aware, to understand the sources of health and well being, of generativeness, of happiness? If the answer is yes, then it would be foolhardy indeed to ignore the foundations we might build on. They are present in all the great spiritual traditions of the world. But they are in many ways especially accessible in those settings, like India and

China, where there has been some continuity of development, some preservation of not only the articulations of spiritual insight but of the practices as well.

This is a precious book. I hope finds its way into the hands of readers who are as committed to the future as is its author.

Peter M. Senge
Cambridge, Massachusetts
September, 1997

Prelude

This book is not mine. It just came through me. I started writing it one spring morning on the bank of the Mississippi in St. Paul, Minnesota. The first few pages were written in a state of trance. It was as though I was possessed by the spring itself. The words blossomed spontaneously; the script flowed effortlessly like the course of the river through a labyrinth of ideas. And then the writing stopped for a while. The words became frozen. I struggled and gave up, waiting for the next burst of inspiration to come to me. It did come, this time in the middle of summer in the foothills of the Himalayas in India. To the river and to the mountain I owe my journey as a writer.

This book is truly an adventure of consciousness. I would therefore suggest that you read it in the same way that it was written: in silence and in solitude. It contains a rich storehouse of wisdom from the important spiritual traditions of the world. A certain receptivity and quietness of mind is required to come to terms with what the great masters of antiquity and the present are trying to convey to us through their lived lives and their spoken words.

Words are metaphors for real experience. By themselves words mean nothing, but if you can connect your words to your experience, they can set you on course toward a transformational

journey. In this journey, words become live channels for the transfer of experience. They serve as spiritual guides for the growth of our consciousness. I recommend that you read the words in this book in the light of your own experience. Perhaps only then will you see how the metaphors trigger a metamorphosis in your consciousness.

I must make it clear that this work is not meant to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of scholars of philosophy, religion, or management. It is a source book for practice. I believe that a principle, however exalted it may be, is as good as dead if it is not proved in practice. The world of consciousness that I am talking about is not a theoretical world of abstract ideas. It is as real a world as anything that you may have encountered so far.

For those of us who are looking for a deeper connectedness with ourselves in life or at work, this book will be of value. I have tried to incorporate my firsthand experience with what I call *actionable spirituality*. In many places around the world where I have spoken about consciousness, people have asked me, is this New Age wisdom? In reply, I have always said, "No, what you hear is on the cutting edge of old age." Never before has the wisdom of the ancients become so relevant as it is today.

We all live in a world of time where the mind finds comfort in pigeonholing experiences into new and old. Let us for once experience that which is timeless; all questions relating to chronology will then disappear. What will remain is the experience.

This book is an invitation to a pilgrimage of self-mastery. I sincerely believe that the self is the beginning and the end of all our journeys, all our experiences. Can we imagine one single moment in our lives in which our self was not with us? Great men and women of great civilizations have undertaken the same journey on which you and I find ourselves. They have left their footprints, memorable milestones of thoughts and actions, to help us travel along. All I have done for you is to collect those timeless footprints from the sands of time.

Leadership is not a privilege of a handful of the high and mighty. It is a state of relationship between the leader and the

led. A relationship cannot be possessed by a person; it ceases to be a relationship then. We would recognize that in each follower there is an emerging leader, and leaders can lead because they are connected by this subtle but emergent quality of followership that exists in all of us. Here I have tried to give you, not one model of leadership, but several dimensions of followership that constitute a leader.

Each one of us, consciously or unconsciously, has led in some field or another: as parents, teachers, managers, doctors, athletes, entrepreneurs, or even as students. In all these roles we learn valuable lessons in leadership. I have as well. I remember one of India's greatest men, Rabindranath Tagore, saying that each one of us is the supreme leader in his or her own kingdom. Leadership is not a science or an art, it is a state of consciousness in which we discover the path to our own kingdoms. It is in Tagore's words that I have discovered the highest expression of my pilgrimage toward leadership:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; Where words come out from the depth of truth; Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; Where the mind is led forward into ever-widening thought and action.

May these lines be your stepping stone as you undertake this pilgrimage toward self-mastery. This journey of many miles does indeed begin with a single step.

Acknowledgments

Knowledge is finite. What is infinite is ignorance. After writing this book, I realized how much I did not know about my own self. If I have anything in common with you it is this ignorance. We all share the anatomy of ignorance in some way or the other. Even the wisest of human beings has not been afraid to say, "I do not know."

So I acknowledge, with humility, the many known and unknown sources of the knowledge contained in this book. My parents, my grandmother, my schoolteachers, my spiritual mentors, the sacred soil of India where I grew up, unknown co-travelers on my journeys around the world have all contributed to the unseen dimensions of this book.

First I would like to thank Dr. Peter Senge of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who enabled me to dream of this book during my first conversation with him at his learning organization seminar in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This work is an attempt to repay a part of my debt to Peter for all his acts of kindness that opened up a new chapter in my life. What started as a dream turned to reality when Karen Speerstra took me to lunch in a restaurant in Boston to discuss the proposal for this book, which was then cooking in my mind. I wish to thank Karen for her very generous gesture and her patience in supporting this

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Finally, Aditi and Shristi, I am lucky to have had you around while this book was being written. This work would be incomplete without you.

His own Self must be conquered by the king for all time; then only are his enemies to be conquered.

...RISHI VYASA, *The Mahabharata*, 1000 B.C.

1

Leadership and Personal Mastery

THE ART OF SEEING

Personal mastery is a function of the quality of our seeing. Great masters in ancient civilizations were known as seers. Those great seers saw nothing magical. The uniqueness of their vision was that they possessed not only sight but also insight. The masters saw the world around them perceptively, not passively. Most of us would look at a falling apple and soon forget about it. It takes a Newton's insight to see through the event and discover the force of gravity. We all see suffering all around us. Yet it takes the insight of a Buddha to go to the root cause of human suffering and identify it as desire.

We are visual ragpickers. In the ordinary state of consciousness, we passively pick up fragmented visual impressions of objects or events. This is a low-energy activity like mechanical picking up of bits and pieces from our environment. High-energy seeing involves not accumulating objects or events but

something more. It involves the discipline of seeing through events to the invisible processes that shape those events.

Three Zen masters are walking across a field. The youngest among them notices a flag tied to a pole. He draws the attention of his two companions and says, "Look, how the flag moves." The middle-aged master pats the younger one on the back and says, "My boy, can't you see it is not the flag that moves, it is the wind that moves." The old master who had been listening to the other two in silence softly says, "If you have insight, you will see that it is neither the flag nor the wind that moves, it is the mind that moves."

True seeing is not merely glancing the visible surface of objective reality. True seeing involves perceptive vision of the invisible potential of objective reality.

An ordinary salesperson visits an island where nobody wears shoes and says, "You can't sell shoes here. Nobody wears shoes on this island." This is low-energy seeing. Compare this with the high-energy seeing of a market leader who goes to the same island and exclaims: "Look at that! Nobody wears shoes here. What a potential market to get these people to start wearing shoes."

Seers are therefore not only mystics and sages. They abound in all walks of life—business, politics, science, and sports as well as in religious institutions. Learning to see is the foundation of all disciplines. In India, which is the cradle of the most enduring civilization of the world, the word for seeing is *darshan*. The Sanskrit word *darshan* has more than one meaning. It also means "world view" or "philosophy of life." *Darshan* captures the essence of seeing in its multiple meanings. It lends to the act of passive seeing a quality it lacks—a perspective. Sight as well as insight constitute a perspective. From a clear perspective we get clarity of vision. It is vision that provides guidelines for our actions as leaders.

To see is also to know and to understand with clarity. In the middle of a counseling meeting with a nonperforming employee, a team leader stops for a while and says to the employee, "Oh,

now I see your point.” In this “seeing” the leader begins truly to understand the follower. This kind of seeing has the same effect as a gentle human touch. High-energy seeing enables you to touch events or persons with the quality of awareness. In this act a certain energy or vitality works between the seer and the seen. There is a subtle communication, a communion between the seer and the seen. When a leader undergoes this communion with her followers, empathy is established. Empathy is the glue, the very substance that enables the leader and the follower to stay together on the same path.

Seeing is not only receiving images on the retina. It is an act of interpretation. Seeing is creative reconstruction of our universe. Leaders are not content with facts. They have immense energy to reorganize facts toward new ideals and newer visions of truth. In day to day life we do not understand the difference between facts and truth. Yet depending on the quality of our seeing, facts and truth emerge as different entities. Facts are frozen forms of truth in a certain space and time. Facts are not the whole truth, although they may contain certain elements of truth. You may take a photograph of the ocean and give us facts about the ocean. But can such a fact encompass the whole truth of the ocean?

Facts may resemble truth in a certain context, but when the context changes, facts also change to accommodate the truth. For example, most people at a certain time in our civilization believed that the earth was as flat as a pancake. Ancient mariners were afraid to sail too far because they feared their ships would topple over to an unknown underworld. This was so because the facts that they saw around them gave them an impression of the flatness of the earth. As soon as a leader was brave enough to take his ship over what was thought to be the edge of the earth, he saw new facts. These facts contradicted the earlier facts, and the earth came to be regarded as a solid round ball. Soon enough, new facts in the shape of photographs of the earth taken from space told us that the earth was not round but that its geometric shape was an oblate spheroid. This meant the

earth is less like a ball and more like an orange—slightly flattened at the poles and slightly swollen at the equator. But truth, which has new ways of slipping through our prison of facts, now gives us new facts about our earth. Today's new leader, the quantum physicist, will tell you, "You know, this earth is not solid at all. It is a huge energy soup rippling like a bubble in empty space."

We may therefore say that the quality of our seeing shapes our perspective of truth. When we see with uncreative, low-energy vision we see disconnected facts and often miss the truth. This is because our attention devoid of energy becomes frozen in the outer shell of facts, and truth passes us by. We do exert ourselves in our quest for the inner truth about our many assumptions about life. Most of us remain content with what appears obvious. Reality based on static models or established procedures gives us the security of being a part of the herd. But that reality is not what a conscious leader rests with. It is an insult to her intelligence if a leader is unable to process reality creatively to meet new challenges. As I was glancing through the 1991 annual report of the Coca-Cola Company, a couple of very insightful statements made by Roberto C. Goizueta, the chief executive officer, and Donald R. Keough, then president of the company came to my notice:

As an organization, we are not wasting our energy forecasting what the future of the soft drink industry will be like in the many countries around the world in which we operate. And neither are we spending our time forecasting what the future holds for this Company. We will use our resources to construct today the foundation of our future. . . . The future we are creating for ourselves . . . will be built.

We don't view the future as preordained, but as an infinite series of openings, of possibilities. What is required to succeed in the middle of this uncertainty is what the Greeks called "practical intelligence." Above all else, this "practical intelligence" forces adaptability and teaches constant preparedness. It acknowledges

that nothing succeeds quite as planned, and that the model is not the reality.

The Greek notion of practical intelligence comes from a certain depth of insight conveyed by the Indian word *darshan*. Practical intelligence is a function of integral vision—the ability to integrate sight with insight. *Darshan* penetrates the veil of static models of life and looks at the dynamism of life itself. *Darshan* is the awareness of the depth and magnificence of the moment. When we pay total attention to the reality of the moment, we become one with the moment. The wall between us and reality comes down. We become the reality itself. A great degree of energy is released as a result of our participation with reality. Personal mastery is the embodiment of the energy of this participation. The great Greek philosopher Archimedes expressed this energy as *eureka*, which signified the great triumph of a new discovery.

THE PLAY OF ENERGY

We understand, therefore, that personal mastery is an energy phenomenon. Every action of ours, every gesture, every thought, every intention, every emotion, and even the faintest flicker of our consciousness is a constant play of energy. Whereas the Statue of Liberty and the Taj Mahal are objective manifestations of creative energy, the general theory of relativity and *Paradise Lost* are subjective impressions of the same energy.

When we look at the source of this energy from the point of view of raw materialism, we find that the same molecule of sugar that released the energy for Einstein's conceptualization of the theory of relativity is responsible for Buddha's realization of nirvana as well as Hitler's aggression on the world. Yet we know that merely studying the structure of a sugar molecule will not yield to us the secret of an Einstein, a Buddha, or a Hitler. It is not mere energy but energy combined with awareness that gave birth to those figures of history. Personal mastery comes not from merely accumulating energy but through processing this energy in the light of our awareness. Personal mastery is the science and art of

channeling energy from that which we consider purposeless to that we hold as purposeful.

Mastery of our energy therefore lies in bringing the fullness of our being to our task. In simple words, it is the bringing together of the sum total of who we are to what we do. The classical Indian word for energy work is *tapas*. The Japanese have a similar word, *shugyo*. Both *tapas* and *shugyo* imply the discipline of self-mastery. Ancient civilizations understood the importance of cultivation of energy through rigorous discipline. This consisted of being aware of the nature of our energy body. It was the first step toward what the ancients called self-knowledge.

The source of our knowledge about our energy is our being or our self. If we pay attention to the state of our being from time to time, we experience that energy flows through us in a certain pattern. During sunrise the quality of our energy is different from that during sunset. In the morning our energy pushes us to action; in the evening the same energy mellows toward contemplation. We can sense the state of our energy merely by remembering ourselves as a regular discipline. If we practice the discipline of remembering ourselves, we will become amused witnesses to the folly of many of our actions.

A busy executive driving toward his office in the morning is caught in a traffic jam. His precious energy, ready to engage itself in the affairs of the work, is boiling over. He knows he cannot move ahead unless the jam eases. Yet the executive honks away like a man possessed. If he had remembered himself during his insane moments of honking, he would have known that he was wasting energy that could be used in productive thinking.

Many of us fritter away our energies in negative emotions. We become irritable. We are gripped by unpleasant emotions that cause undue tension in our muscles. All of these eat away our vitality. I have often observed people contort their faces and frown during brainstorming sessions. My knowledge about human anatomy tells me that our brains do not have muscles. Yet how much of our energy do we unnecessarily lock into our facial muscles as we “storm our brains”?