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“To study the self is to forget the self”: Zen lessons on ego and leadership in higher education

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Presented at the Contemplative Practices for Higher Education Conference,

Roanoke, Virginia, March 5-7, 2020

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The author is grateful for the interview participants, Zen practitioners, and library colleagues who have contributed directly and indirectly to this paper.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, charismatic leadership, ego, followership, higher education, leadership, meditation, mindfulness, postsecondary education, self, servant leadership, zazen, Zen

Abstract

Theories of charismatic leadership present leadership as an influence process where part of the leader’s role is to attract followers through individual example and vision. Charismatic leadership acknowledges the potential dangers of narcissism in the leader and leader-obsession among their followers. Meanwhile, central tenets of Zen philosophy include that of non-attachment to self, interdependence of all beings, and impermanence. Interviews with four American Zen practitioner-leaders were analyzed for themes related to the influence of ego on leadership. This paper presents findings from the interviews, and discusses these along with observations from other Zen scholars and practitioners. The discussion is complemented by the author’s experiences in applying these principles to leadership practice in a higher education setting. The interviews illuminate several possible ways Zen philosophy and practice could inform leadership theory and practice, and vice versa. Readers are encouraged to consider their own sense of self and how it may influence their roles as leaders and followers.

### Introduction

I am a beginning Zen student. In about January of 2017 I typed “Harrisonburg Zen” into a search engine because I thought I might have some questions for a Buddhist monk. I’d been reading about the Dalai Lama and quantum physics. When I saw the zendo was open regularly for half-hour meditation sessions, I thought I’d try one out. For the first time I can remember, I experienced a moment where my mind wasn’t occupied—maybe even a *few* moments. I was tantalized by the thought that perhaps I could practice longer and longer periods of mental rest. I’ve continued my practice of Zen at home as well as at a few American Zen centers.

Zen is categorized by some scholarly encyclopedias as a religion, but the same sources also note the lack of a systematic doctrine. Across its hundreds of years of history, Zen developed a variety of flavors in different countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, and most recently, the United States. In America today, Zen is practiced by people from a variety of religions as well as by people with no religion. Across the diversity of practice, the general idea of Zen practice is to discover an “awareness of reality through an alteration of perception that includes the derailment of cognitive linear thought” (Cooper 2014). Three concepts central to Zen are also relevant to the present study:

- Emptiness, or the lack of an objective self
- Impermanence, or the state of constant change
- Interdependence, or our interconnectedness with all things (Hanh 2006).

Zen practice includes silent, sitting meditation (*zazen*), and may include chanting, koan study, dialogues with a teacher, and “moment-to-moment mindfulness during all daily activities” (Cooper 2014).

I have been studying leadership since about 2009. In my work at JMU Libraries, I was often taking a leadership role, and I wanted to do a good job for the people in those groups. I took many leadership and management workshops at JMU, and eventually entered a PhD program in strategic leadership that I finished in 2014 (three years before I began practicing Zen). Since 2016 I have served as a co-director for the Libraries’ technology department.

As I became more serious about Zen practice, and read more Buddhist philosophies, I began to be intrigued by the potential for Buddhist thought and Zen practice to illuminate leadership practice—particularly one of leadership’s classic challenges, ego involvement. One of my interview participants, let’s call him Noah, said, in order to achieve a fullness of mind, or mindfulness, “we also have to be willing to let go of the smallness of our egos.” Or as Zen master Dogen said in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self; to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the body and mind of others drop away. No trace of realization remains and this no trace continues endlessly” (c. 1247).

I’ll discuss leadership and ego more specifically in the literature review, but to close this introduction, I need to say that I feel pretty inadequate to this task—I have some leadership experience, and even a PhD. But I am a beginning Zen student and have only just begun to try to apply what I’ve learned from Zen to my leadership practice. I’m encouraged by Ruth King, who said she felt similarly about writing a book on mindfulness and race (despite decades of experience in the field). She wrote, “I have questioned myself, *Do I understand enough or know enough?* At some point I realized the answer was no—I didn’t understand enough or know enough, but I would have to go ahead and write the book anyway” (2018, 12). This encouraged me. And, one of my interview participants, let’s call him Liam, suggested that since we never

really know anything, our knowledge is always provisional anyway: “you yourself are accepting to some degree the provisional nature of your own conclusions. ... That’s not going to change. They’ll always be provisional, but you’ll get better at understanding how provisional they are.”

## **Literature Review**

### **Definitions**

For this paper, I will embrace a sociological model of leadership, where it is deemed “a function of the whole situation and not something that resides in a person” (Pierce & Newstrom 2008, 4). As part of this dynamic, followers influence leaders, leaders influence followers, and the situation affects all parties (6). Because of the paper’s focus on the leader’s ego, it will emphasize the leader’s role more than the follower’s or that of the situation.

In psychoanalytic theory, ego is said to be “that portion of the human personality which is experienced as the ‘self’ or ‘I’ and is in contact with the external world through perception” The ego is the part of us that “remembers, evaluates, plans, and in other ways is responsive to and acts in the surrounding physical and social world” (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2020).

Authors of popular books on Zen seem to define ego in similar ways, but expand the discussion to the phenomenon of ego-attachment. Thich Nhat Hanh explains the phenomenon as the *manas* part of our consciousness, or “the energy of ignorance, thirst, and craving,” grasping at our self-perception and enslaving our mind as it picks up and embraces this part of us as a “self” (2006, 93). *Manas*, Hanh teaches, constantly discriminates between ourselves and others (94). This is a problem because “the attachment of *manas* to a self is based on an image that it has created, just as we fall in love with our image of someone and not with the person herself” (94). *Zazen*, says Hanh, helps because “with mindfulness we can let the perceiver just be instead

of recognizing it as a ‘self’, and we can discern the object of our perception just as it is” (170).

With practice, Hanh says, we can even transform manas, just as compost can transform into flowers. “When [manas] has been transformed, it has the wonderful function called the understanding of equality, which means the ability to see the one in the all and the all in the one” (113).

Kosho Uchiyama had similar things to say in his introduction to zazen:

Ego-attachment is our clinging to ‘substance’ and calling it I, which in our ignorance we have falsely constructed in the constantly shifting world of interdependence. In other words, egocentricity lies at the basis of whatever we see and do. It tags along with us. Being dragged about by egocentric thought, our life cannot manifest directly and winds up pushed out of shape and disabled” (p. 103).

The practice of zazen, continues Uchiyama, “is a unique development for dismantling this lump of ignorant ego attachment. Zazen is the posture that throws away this ‘self’ composed of ignorance and no longer entertains the thoughts of ego-attachment that push up from within” (105).

### **Ego and Leadership**

Ideas about ego and leadership may be most prominent in the charismatic model of leadership, and Conger and Kanungo’s model is one of the best-known (1998). The model is useful for elucidating what behaviors might contribute to followers finding a certain leader “charismatic.” Examples of such behaviors include inspirational articulation of vision, concern for follower needs, showing confidence in followers, role modeling, and the use of unconventional tactics to transcend the existing order (68). The presence of ego in charismatic leadership is not seen as an inherent negative of the charismatic model; in fact, it is recognized as a healthy and normal aspect of humanity. But Conger and Kanungo devote an entire chapter to “the shadow side” of charismatic leadership and identify two fundamental processes at the heart

of the negative form of charismatic leadership: “follower dependence in the form of transference dynamics,” and “the leader’s own potential for narcissism” (1998, 215-216). Thus, the ego attachment of followers to leaders, and ego attachment of leaders to themselves, seem to be at the heart of the problem. Potential liabilities include poor management of people networks, the creation of in-groups and out-groups, creation of excessive dependence on the leader, and failure to develop successors (220). Zen practice, therefore, may offer a practical method for reducing the potential to fall into “the shadow side” of charismatic leadership through the cultivation of non-attachment. Zen philosophy may provide explanations for why and how the fall can happen.

Greenleaf’s model of servant leadership offers a contrast to charismatic leadership’s focus on the leader as an influencer of organizational members’ beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Central to Greenleaf’s definition of a leader is the idea that a leader is “one who ventures and takes the risks of going out ahead to show the way” (1998, 44). For Greenleaf, leadership “involves creative venture and risk” (1996, 54) but is “as free as humanly possible from any implication of coercion and manipulation: Both leader and follower respect the integrity and allow the autonomy of the other; and each encourages the other to find her or his own intuitive confirmation of the rightness of the belief or action” (1998, 85). Part of the problem in today’s world, he says, is that “we have mistakenly confused leadership with ego display, covert manipulation, and the overt use of coercive power” (1996, 97). He identifies many roles leaders play beyond headship, including mediator, consensus finder, critic, and process watcher, to name a few (1996, 97). Servant leadership may be a more harmonious model for Zen practitioners seeking to frame their leadership practice.

A third model relevant to this paper is Robert Kelley’s presentation of Followership (1992). Based on an initial research corpus of over 700 surveys and dialogues during thousands



of workshops, Kelley provided a needed critique of leadership studies by focusing on the roles followers may play as part of a successful leadership dynamic. He examined how followers can be contributors or detractors by their approach to two axes of behavior: independent, critical thinking, and active engagement (97). Kelley’s work is critical not only for highlighting how followers’ roles contribute to organizational success, but also for distinguishing highly effective followers from ineffective followers, and for distinguishing highly effective followers (who may look like leaders) from leaders themselves. Kelley noted many productive paths followers may wish to take instead of leadership including that of apprentice, comrade, and dreamer, that do not overlap well with most leadership roles (50). Without Kelley’s critique, the study of leadership can either be too leader-focused, or conversely, perhaps in a reaction against leader centrality, the term can become meaningless (i.e., “I think everyone is actually a leader in their own way”).

### **Zen and Leadership**

As discussed in Fagan (2019), there has been little academic research specifically focusing on Zen from a scholarly leadership perspective. Some works on the organization of Zen monasteries outline the structural roles of leaders in such settings (e.g. Buswell, 1992). Thanissaro (2018) provides a valuable literature review concerning how various leadership models may emerge differently in Southern, Northern, Eastern, and Western Buddhist traditions, with especial attention to differences between monastic and lay Buddhist leadership. There have also been a few books for practitioners, such as the Dalai Lama’s book *The Leaders’s Way* (2009) and *Seven Practices of a Mindful Leader* (Lesser, 2019), as well as books about the intersection of Zen and the workplace (Bing 2004; Kaye 1997; Whitelaw 2016).

From a textual analysis of several Zen leaders and teachers, Fagan (2019) found that “Zen seems well-aligned with transformational and charismatic leadership, but with less

emphasis on the leader’s special qualities, more focus on the present moment, avoidance of fixed views, and balance between interdependence and individual identities. Across these characteristics preside the Zen principle of non-attachment, either to one’s identity, to the past, or to the future” (24). The writers she analyzed urged followers not to become attached to leaders, and suggested that Zen leaders might “role model this non-attachment through their own focus on the interbeing of the organization, the importance of followers, and the importance of informal leadership roles” (25). She hypothesized that advantages of this non-attachment could include greater empowerment of followers, increased critical thinking of followers, organizational learning, and smoother leadership transitions (25).

Traditional charismatic leadership models are based on a psychology where people “imagine that a singular individual can play a heroic role in shaping the destiny of their organizations” (Conger & Kanungo 1998, 141). In contrast, Fagan (2019) noted that Zen leaders consistently urge others to “avoid identification and attachment with themselves” (7). For example, Shunryu Suzuki, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, wrote, “If you are attached to the teaching, or to the teacher, that is a big mistake. The moment you meet a teacher, you should leave the teacher, and you should be independent” (2011, 63). Unlike Conger & Kanungo’s charismatic leader who inspires through the display of personal risk and personal vision, Zen leaders “exalt the follower’s own discovery as greater than the leader’s example, and greater still than the leader’s words. As part of guiding followers to develop their own visions, they strive to de-associate themselves from an idealized vision” (Fagan, 2019, 7). The same investigation found that ego attachment can limit change in an organization because people identify themselves with their views of the organization. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Dogen wrote, “Flowers fall when *we cling* to them, and weeds only grow when *we dislike* them”

(emphasis mine, 1243, 32). When we become attached to “what we like,” we feel great loss when that changes. Meanwhile, we also have ideas about things we don’t like, and our tendency may be to perceive those things as never changing, which can lead to cynicism or defeatism (Fagan 2019, 17).

Zen leaders and teachers also write about what the identification struggle feels like internally. Concerning his early days as a Zen teacher, Norman Fischer (2019) wrote, “it took me years to feel comfortable in the teacher’s seat... For a while I was unconsciously caught by the idea that I was supposed to be someone that others expected me to be, and I couldn’t help but strain a bit to be that person.” The Dalai Lama repeatedly describes his self-concept as that of “an ordinary Buddhist monk” among other responsibilities (2005).

Despite some Zen teachers’ talk about not being attached to leaders, or to their own roles as leaders, the history of Zen in America contains some tragic episodes centered on the problem of leader attachment. Stuart Lachs has detailed how the idealization and uncritical acceptance of “Zen masters” in 20th century America led to power abuses in some prominent centers, including cases of sexual abuse. Lachs asserts that the problems grew out of structural elements: “Through the mechanisms of sectarian histories, ritual performance, a special language, koans, mondos, and most importantly through the ideas of Dharma transmission and Zen lineage, the supposedly enlightened Zen Master/ roshi is presented to the West as a person with superhuman qualities. This presentation, mostly idealistic, is meant to establish, maintain, and enhance the authority of the Zen Master” (1999). Lachs also notes the potential for Zen’s de-emphasis of the analytical mind to result in the potential to avoid critical thinking, and sometimes a mistrust of academic investigation of Zen from a historic and sociological perspective that might help people avoid an uncritical veneration of their Zen teachers (2002). Anyone who feels romantic notions

concerning Zen, especially of American Zen teachers, should familiarize themselves with Lachs’s work. Critique of leadership within Buddhism stretches well beyond American Zen, for example, in historical accounts such as Brian Victoria’s *Zen at War* (1996) and in Thanissaro’s literature review (2017).

In summary, leadership has been shown to be vulnerable to ego-attachment—in both followers and leaders, inside Zen and outside Zen. I think Zen could inform leaders and followers about how to deal with this potential problem, but also, I think scholars like Lachs and Thanissaro are needed to look at Zen with a critical eye, a historical, anthropological, and sociological eye, and point out problems related to leadership within Zen.

### **Methodology**

As part of the IRB-approved study “Zen, Leadership, and Mindfulness in Higher Education,” (IRB 19-0906), six Zen practitioners were interviewed. One withdrew from the study, and one interview was very short and did not contain comments concerning the present topic, meaning four interviews were included in this analysis, three men and one woman. Each interview was over an hour in duration, and three took place in a single session. The fourth interview took place over multiple conversations, by request of the participant. The interview protocol was shared with participants in advance; however, participants were encouraged to depart from the formal line of questions as much as they wished. While most topics were touched on in each conversation, the progression was nonlinear.

All four interviewees play leadership roles in various Zen communities and have engaged in leadership and/or teaching roles outside Zen communities as well, including the roles of college professor, conference chair, film director, and president of a non-profit business. They

have experience working in and out of leadership roles in agribusiness, education, non-profit, and government settings. Their names have been changed in this paper.

Comments relating to ego or self were extracted from the interview transcripts, and organized by theme. The researcher had anticipated searching for terms such as “emptiness,” “interdependence,” and “impermanence,” but interviewees tended not to use such “Zen jargon.” Instead, themes emerged from their personal experience, stories, and occasionally, koans.

## **Findings**

### **Inner conceptions of leadership**

As Buddhism is, in many ways, the study of the true nature of one’s self, I’m beginning with leaders’ comments about their inner conceptions of themselves as “leaders” and the leader’s role within the sociological leadership process. I think my participants would want me to tell you not to grasp on to any of their words—that’s common for Zen practitioners even when they are speaking in an area of their expertise—but in this case, most participants admitted they hadn’t thought very explicitly about leadership before. During interviews, they often said things like, “I’d have to think about that some more,” expressed statements with qualifiers like “I’m not sure, but ...,” and would rephrase things. Noah began by saying, “I just sort of do what I do. Um, so it’s a challenge for me to think about it.” I edited the quotes presented in this paper to enhance readability by removing most filler words (um, uh, ah), but all the participants used them frequently, and often paused to think as they explored ideas aloud during the interviews.

#### **Leadership as a role.**

All participants identified leadership as a role. Marcus compared leaders to the Wizard of Oz—the “man behind the curtain”: it’s interesting how you put on the costume of that role, and you fulfill it. ... [People] want you to take that role on or they expect it because of the way

you’re dressed or the atmosphere that you have.” Eva also talked about the role as something costume-like, using the word masks. Both Eva and Marcus warned of the dangers of conflating the role with the person. Marcus said, “I think one of the problems that Zen teachers have. ... if you try to fulfill that sense of who you are, you become pompous and a person that’s pretending—but behind it all know that you’re a sinner like everyone else.” Marcus followed up on this remark with the comment that the word for “sin” in Hebrew literally means “missing the target.” In America today, he said, we often think of a “sinner” as a “bad person” but if we conceptualize sin as missing the target, that’s much more helpful. We all miss the target, and we always will.

Eva noted that while it can feel reassuring for a person to put on a “leadership mask,” if people discover or sense this is happening, it can make them feel like they are being played with, or reduce the sense of authenticity for everyone: “I think [it’s] healthy in a way for the person wearing the mask, to be like, ‘this is a mask, this is not me.’ Like, ‘oh, I am going to the zendo, I shall put my mask on.’” But then in another way I want to be authentic, and part of that is the no bullshit so that other people can be authentic too.”

In a leadership training session at my institution, our university president was answering questions, and I find him to be a very authentic person. So I asked him about how he grappled with being a “real person” and also being a “political person.” He said he focuses on the setting and audience, and thinks about their needs. I reflected that if the others present are also needing to be political, it is caring—other-centered—to behave politically yourself. For myself, this is why I sometimes dress up a little nicer when I’ll be in charge of an event or meeting; it can help everyone feel like things are in order. My nice shirt does not have to be about self-importance.

Buswell's (1992) description of Korean monasteries described how monks tend to avoid leadership roles, as they prefer to spend their time in meditation. Similarly, Noah identified a reluctance to take leadership positions in the context of a Zen professional association. They were looking for someone to chair the next meeting, but no one wanted to do it, so he volunteered:

Sometimes I think leaders are people who take on roles that nobody else wants ... It was only my second meeting, but it was clear that [conference chair] was a role nobody particularly relished. But, um, all of a sudden I became the leader of the next meeting because I volunteered. So I think sometimes leadership is not always an honored situation, but it can be something that, uh, people find necessary and, and not always, uh, attractive.

Noah also observed that when he was part of a co-owned restaurant where everyone was paid equally no matter the job, everyone suddenly wanted to do the dishes!

The opportunity a roles-based perspective offers is that people other than the titular leader can perform leadership functions. Noah described his Zen center as follows: “I may have some overall oversight of what we do, but on a day to day basis, I may be in a situation where someone else is leading the practice and I'm just following along with what they establish. Those roles shift depending on the situation.” And Marcus described how in his Zen group, having each member lead dharma talks in a rotation supported an increased sense of democracy and shared ownership, which he thinks is important for American Zen.

**No gaining ideas; avoiding fixed views.**

A distinctive quality of zazen practice is the idea of not trying to get anything in particular out of the practice. As Shunryu Suzuki said, “When you practice zazen, just practice zazen. If enlightenment comes, it just comes. We should not attach to the attainment” (2011, 45). Noah compared zazen to a science experiment:

If you come into the Zen center with some sort of gaining idea of what you're going to get out of it, you're really distorting the results of the experiment. You've chosen a self-interested point of view that from the standpoint of science has to be let go of. You have to let go of that expectation of a result in order to see truly what your experiment is offering. And in the case of our Zen practice, it's our selves, our own experience that is the experiment. And if we, if we prejudice that with some idea of what the outcome will be, then it's a little bit like, uh, testing drugs and being paid by the drug company [laughter].

Liam talked about three statements that guided his work as a leader, and the first was, “Don't believe everything you think.” Central to the problem with this is one's self grasping on to a fixed view, when the reality of life is impermanence:

When you grasp on stuff, you always get it wrong. ... ‘Oh, yeah, I know. I get it. I understand that. I make this decision and I've got that opinion.’ All—or almost all—99%—of decisions and all views that you have, no matter how sure you are of them, are nonsense. And they will change right under you, \*for sure\*. I mean, it's gonna happen. No matter how sincere, no matter how deeply felt, no matter how important these beliefs, positions, opinions are not stable. They will change, For sure. Right? And the reason why it's important is because you try not to be so sure of yourself, don't grasp on this stuff, right? Because if you do, it just paralyzes you and it makes you less effective. ...For example, somebody brings you a situation. And you say, oh, okay, I recognize this. This is this, this is that. Okay, there's this solution going forward. Now that *could* be right. I'm not saying it's *wrong*, I'm just saying it's not *likely* to be right. But you think you've got it licked. Right? So there's a high chance that you're wrong. And since you're so sure of yourself, when you're wrong, the consequences are worse.

Both Noah's and Liam's comments resonate with Shunryu Suzuki's writings: “As long as we have some definite idea about or some hope in the future, we cannot really be serious with the moment that exists right now. ...there is no certain way that exists permanently. There is no way set up for us. Moment by moment we have to find our own way” (2011, 100). And Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “any view, no matter how noble or beautiful, even our belief in Buddhism, can be a trap” (2006, 111). This, he says, is due to our manas consciousness saying that the “self” it has created is the most important thing. (110).



**Leader improvement / self-acceptance.**

Although trying to avoid fixing their minds on their leadership as their identity, the interviewees did talk about examining their performance as leaders. For example at the very beginning of his interview, when asked if he considered himself a leader, among Noah’s first comments were, “I’m pretty self-critical of myself as a leader. I’m always struck by how much more I could be doing and how much better I could be doing.” Only after that did he say, “I guess, certainly there are situations where I’m perceived as a leader.” When pressed about the nature of his self-critique, he offered,

Sometimes I leave a situation to say, “oh, that was really stupid, what I just said.” [laughs]. I could have really said that much better than I did. Um, but then on reflection, I realize I have to let go of that and just move on. But there’s often a moment of first looking at what I’ve done and saying, ‘oh, that could have been much better.’ I think I go back and forth with that. It’s sort of inevitable that I see things that I aspire to do differently or to do better.

Marcus’s comments were briefer, but also suggested self-reflection and acceptance: “my personality has a lot of flaws and I have to work with them. But you know, to a certain extent you have to accept that as who you are.”

Three of the interview participants extemporaneously mentioned being distracted by thoughts about the extent to which the success of their zendo or Zen center was dependent on their leadership. Eva described weeks where she was frequently the only one in the zendo, “and at first I would be sort of like—oh, am I [doing something wrong]?” Her teacher reassured her by saying, “when I’m sitting alone in the zendo, ...I just picture all the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas sitting on the other cushions,” and Eva realized: “Aha! Sometimes [my teacher] is sitting alone!” But in another conversation she returned to the same concern: “... there’s a thousand people who come and are never back, and I have no way of knowing ...it’s very frustrating. I feel like there could be useful feedback for me... but it’s just you know, where to

find the statistical, you know, signal from the noise... It's hard.” Along the same lines, Noah reported that sometimes when he is alone at the Zen center he leads, he worries he didn't do enough outreach. “But then I also, in those moments, so I also try to make the most of the opportunity I have to sit and be quiet. ... At a certain point, you know, I think we're obliged to accept the fact that these things that are really outside our control, that there's, there are other factors that are determining whether people come or not that have nothing to do with me, nothing to do with how well I publicize things.” Marcus noted, “when you're running a Zen group, people drop in and then drop out constantly,” but he also reported some feeling of satisfaction with the current group: “this core that we have now ... I mean we've been sitting here, this is the oldest Zen group in the south, I'm sure. But this group now that we've developed is really remarkable—I mean, I'm sort of proud of it. It's tiny, you know, but it seems like to me very important.”

Liam talked about the dangers of positive feedback, because we tend to enjoy it, which can blind us to the situation:

You're just looking for approval. You're looking to ingratiate yourself and get, you know, “You're so great.” Yeah, I don't want to hear that. I mean really. I mean, I'm not going to say I don't want to hear it in the sense it wouldn't be pleasant, but it's not constructive. Right? Does it help you when somebody says, “oh Jody, you're so great?”

I recalled his words after giving a presentation to the Library's leadership group recently about our project with the Furious Flower Poetry Center, the first American center for Black poetry. I read a piece of Black poetry in a big meeting, and talked about how it made me uncomfortable. I wanted to demonstrate that our work as a predominantly white library with a Black poetry center might make us uncomfortable some times, but that was okay. I'd gone into this with a mindset of humility, but after receiving several compliments after the meeting, I noticed myself struggling to maintain the original selflessness I'd managed to find.

It is important for leaders to reflect, but not to dwell in self-critique. Liam recalled how in the story of Mara’s temptation of Buddha, it wasn’t pain, anger, or women that were the greatest challenge, it was self-doubt:

I mean, who do you think you are? Do you think you’re something special here? You think that you’re better than everybody? You know, what’s with \*you\*? Right? And you’ve heard that, right? And I’ve heard that and we all hear that. And that’s a really pregnant moment; that’s a moment where you can really make progress where you really sit. “Well, yeah. Just who the hell am I anyway?” Right? And it’s very uncomfortable, but that’s fine. And so, you know, for the Buddha himself, that was his last challenge before he became enlightened, which is a really interesting challenge.

Toward the end of his interview, Liam discussed the balance between self-doubt and self-confidence:

We do learn things... we do have more to go on...but keeping all that perspective is the important thing because we can easily become self deluded...Since you have some experience at meditation now, you realize how resistant your mind is to this. And that’s because, as you know, your mind wants to control you and it doesn’t want to be controlled. [But] as you meditate, you become more effective at it and in life as you live it, you can be more effective at it. But it’s hard. It takes work.

Similarly, Dogen acknowledged “differences between those who have been practicing over many years and those who have just begun, or between those gifted with great intelligence and those not so gifted” (c. 1237/2005, 15).

### **Doing leader behaviors instead of BEING a LEADER.**

Leadership has often been described as a set of behaviors by scholars (Yukl, Gordon, and Taber, 2002). Eva’s comments presented some benefits of focusing on leader behaviors rather than leader identity. As an example, she differentiated between acting in a way one thinks is correct versus proclaiming one’s identity with a label: “there’s this idea of like, don’t *be* a vegetarian. Probably better not to eat animals, but don’t BE A VEGETARIAN, and so there’s sanctimoniousness. In a way being like ‘I’m gonna be ego free ... is kind of just more ego, because it’s still about it says about you, not what you’re doing in the world.”

In the project I mentioned earlier with the Furious Flower Black Poetry Center, I know we will be working together with faculty across campus. Some faculty can have big egos, and especially for this project which focused on developing new collaborations, I felt myself becoming irritated in advance with “those other people who can’t check their egos at the door.” I realized in that moment that my own ego was re-asserting itself, distinguishing myself as someone who is (laudably) “ego free”—but ironically, was thus falling back into my ego. Based on my images of my self and of others, I was also mentally setting up a fixed view of the future, and letting that certainty support pre-judgments of what would happen.

Eva also noted that when she is working in a leadership position, “it makes it more tempting to ... get tangled up in me as representing things.” She also talked about how her former identity as a professor sometimes got in the way of facilitating a group dialogue: “Some of my reflexes tend to be unhelpful—there’s the thing where I am like, ‘I have taught this subject, I will tell you what you ought to be thinking.’” She identified not only the trap of speaking from a place of identity-attachment but on the other hand, the trap of not making a potentially valuable contribution due to overthinking one’s identity attachment.

### **What it looks like to others (the behaviors)**

The next section organizes the participants’ ideas concerning what their leadership might look like to others, or how it might be experienced by others. Thus, it begins to examine the broader dynamic of leadership as a sociological dynamic between leaders and followers within a given situation (Pierce & Newstrom, 2008, 6).

#### **Leadership as creating an environment where people can self-actualize.**

Every interview contained a theme of empowering others to find their own paths. Eva discussed leadership as a caretaking or tending activity:

It’s kind of like you have this area for which you’re responsible, and you don’t necessarily have to identify with that area, but like, this is your little patch of garden you are responsible for... A sort of model I’ve used sometimes is gardening, where it’s like, I will encourage you to do *this* and provide a good space for you to do this.

She went on to talk about how she characterizes her role in the zendo as “tending” the zendo, rather than “leading,” because “leading” implies a responsibility for other peoples’ practice, whereas in Zen, she went on to say, “you want the other person to be ... actively seeking out teaching.”

In colleges and universities as workplaces, we often emphasize professional development and provide travel funding. But I sometimes observe we may not help people in our area think through how they are going to make the time in a way that doesn’t just compress all their other responsibilities. As a supervisor I encourage my employees to completely block the day after vacations and conferences as a ‘catch up’ day to get reoriented. The day itself helps, but I also think repeating the question of “how can we set things up to be supportive?” is critical for shaping an environment where people have time to do their work.

Liam commented that the goal of leadership is not to influence people. “See, a lot of people, that’s their goal: I’m going to have this person do what I want, right? But that’s not our goal. Our goal is: I want to influence this person in a way that’s helpful so that they realize their *own* wisdom, enlightenment, and so forth.”

Marcus recalled a famous Zen story from the Blue Cliff Record, which I will first relate from that text here (rather than using Marcus’s shorthand summary):

“Huang Po, instructing the community, said, ‘Do you know that there are no teachers of [Zen] in all of China? At that time a monk came forward and said, ‘Then what about those in various places who order followers and lead communities?’ Huang Po said, I do not say that there is no [Zen]; it’s just that there are no teachers” (Cleary, 2005).

Marcus commented about this story,

That’s very important, to understand and to eventually, in your practice, to give some humanity to the teacher and recognize a teacher as a *person* rather than as some kind of deity. ...Again, back to the wizard of Oz, when the wizard is out there at the end and the lion and the straw man, and the tin man all are asking, he said, ‘well, here, I’ll just give you a diploma. And, that’s all you need.’ And they catch him behind [the curtain], manipulating the Wizard of Oz ... and little Toto goes over, and ... kind of pulls the curtain down... And they, all are disappointed with him... You know, and you accept him then. And those three characters, you realize they don’t need a diploma. They are in fact great people. And they have grown. They didn’t need anything.

With that respect for all in mind, Marcus advised sharing from one’s experience during dharma talks rather than preaching or lecturing: “if you feel that the person is up there and they’re struggling and you’re participating in their struggle to understand and to love—then you get something in the sermon.”

Something I am trying to get better at in my leadership practice—and I’m just a beginner at it—is to ask more questions than make statements, to help people explore. For example, “What options are you considering?” And if I do have ideas from my own experiences, to simply describe my scenario, instead of applying it to the other person’s. A constant refrain in my workplace is how busy people are, and often how that increases stress. I find myself saying, “When I feel overwhelmed, I put just a few things on a sticky note for that day.” If that idea doesn’t resonate with the person, they may just leave it alone, or, my idea might trigger an entirely different option that would work better for them.

**Giving feedback in a way that centers others / avoids it being about your ego.**

Perhaps one of the richest themes related to ego in these interviews was found in responses to the prompt concerning giving correction as a leader.<sup>1</sup> This was very interesting,

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<sup>1</sup> Prompt: “There’s a lot of research about how to motivate unproductive employees / team members or to correct problematic behavior. Have you had such occasion in your leadership roles? How might your Zen practice have influenced your thinking and behavior in response?”

because the question simply asked for advice in giving correction; the connection to people’s egos came up organically. Because Zen specifically urges teachers to encourage people to find their own way, correction is not about telling someone how to conduct their practice or do their job, but occurs when someone’s behavior is disruptive to the group, or counter to the group’s purpose.

When asked specifically about how to give correction, Noah had this to say:

If something is said that is simply a correction without any sort of loaded judgment attached to it, it’s just simply, you know, a correction, it doesn’t evoke any kind of opposition on my part. It’s only when a correction is loaded with some sort of judgmental quality to it that we tend to sort of rise up in a kind of defensiveness.

He went on to give some examples of when he had been corrected about appropriate zendo behavior, which evoked his own feelings of defensiveness in response, emotions he found interesting to inspect and to reflect on. That helped him realize the importance of where the correction comes from, and how if it doesn’t come from a place of ego:

I think everyone is very sensitive to rules or direction that’s coming from a place of, um, what do I want to say? A place of sort of ego advantage. I think of this as the essence of karma. My Zen teacher described karma as the activity of impermanence.... How can I say this? This is an evolving idea for me. But when we do something with sort of ego intention, it sets up — we set something up that is as if we’ve tried to establish something fixed. Something that is permanent and that ultimately encounters the inevitability of impermanence. So whatever we do with ego intention ... becomes illusory because, sooner or later, it encounters impermanence. This is a little too theoretical, but it’s the way in which those things that are sort of ego-driven carry with them a sense of something false, something deceptive, something that is untrue.

Eva talked about her teacher leading a party to craft meditation cushions for the zendo, and when he discovered flaws in the work, bringing them up gently. Her teacher said, “you know the Greek gods punished hubris. So it was important .... If you’re making a pot or something, to leave some flaw, so the gods won’t get jealous.” Her teacher would say, “Let’s check out this one... there’s this flaw, with this fabric, and this happens because [of this explanation], and oh

wow this one’s got a string hanging out, but the gods will accept it, good job.” She also observed sometimes he would just talk out loud about things. For example, once when she was stacking the zendo cushions (two round and one square), she asked him what the preferred order was. While he continued to work, “he was just sort of saying something, just sort of aloud, while he re-arranged them, ‘Let’s see, the square one doesn’t go on top, because it’s a support cushion,’ but at the same time he wasn’t putting it at the bottom, either.”

Personal feelings can influence our decisions as leaders, especially concerning whether and when to correct someone. Liam proposed two reasons for why setting personal feelings aside is important. First, because “the quality of the decision is absolutely inversely related” to the strength of our feelings:

And then the other part of it that’s hard is that when you try to move away from them, that is, those feelings, it can seem awfully cold and calculating. It really can. And that feeds back to you. You know, “what kind of a person am I, you know, if I’m going to fire this guy? Is it because I don’t like him or because he’s an idiot?” He went on to talk about how having a personal connection might seem like it would be helpful, but in his view it is not. “Because you’re inevitably going to be substituting you, you and your thoughts and your grasping, *for them*, right? ... You have to *have* personal connection, but not have that personal connection dominate your relationship in such a way as to get in the way of actually helping this person.

In my experience with offering correction in the workplace, I have often had a fixed view about my self and the other person: “I am Jody, I am the manager who will be having to correct this employee. They are the person who is always late.” Personal feelings are usually in-play, too: I might feel resentful that my time is “wasted” by the person’s problematic behavior, or fearful about next steps might play out. I tend to “think ahead” about the upcoming conversation. But by rehearsing the scenario and imagining them in our mind’s eye, I create a fixed-view mindset rather than going into the room ready to face the present moment, which will be ever-changing as we proceed into the discussion.



Noah went on to talk about another aspect important to correction: the need to recognize that many organizational rules are arbitrary. They may be important customs, like driving on the same side of the road, but there’s nothing inherently moral about some of the forms used in a zendo or in an organization. “I think we’re very sensitive to that. The point at which sort of an organizational rule becomes exploitative rather than in the service of some larger purpose.” By emphasizing the “larger purpose” involved in why a corrective action is happening, a manager can set aside her ego and help the employee also distance the corrective action from their own ego.

Marcus suggested handling corrections within a team or Zen group by assembling a few people you trust and having a small meeting about the topic to get their thoughts, with a mindset to how things could be improved. Marcus has also demonstrated how to discuss best practices with the group instead of singling out an individual. In Zen centers there is often a pattern of alternating sitting meditation with walking meditation. After one of the walking sessions, I stepped away to use the facilities, and so I came back into the seated meditation area a little late. Just before the lunch break, Marcus simply said: “If anyone needs to use the facilities, the best time is at the beginning of walking meditation, because it’s less disruptive to rejoin the group during walking, and then we all can come back into the zendo together.” By offering the correction in the whole-group context, everyone benefitted; he emphasized the purpose of the correction; and he didn’t single anyone out.

**Reducing centrality of the leader’s role.**

All four participants discussed ways in which the centrality of their role as a leader or Zen teacher could cause problems. “Sometimes,” admitted Noah, “the best leadership is no

leadership.” The comments hearken back to avoiding fixed views about one’s role and the situation.

So I work as a chaplain in the hospital... If I enter the [patient’s] room nervously, sort of holding some agenda of what I’m going to say and do, then I actually end up missing a great deal that’s going on. That if I enter the room instead with an attitude of, “I don’t know. I don’t have the answer,” not carrying the mind of the expert, but my beginner’s mind,<sup>2</sup> then I learn something about that person that I had no expectation of knowing and that some surprise and some insight that actually becomes more helpful for me understanding them, understanding their situation and being able to relate to that situation. So it’s another example of a way in which—to whatever extent I exercise any leadership in that situation, it depends on my letting go of that role as a leader.

Prior to Zen practice, when I went into a meeting that I’d set up, I definitely had a clear idea of what I wanted to see happen in the meeting. On one hand, that’s good planning. On the other hand, if I was focused on my goals rather than on what was happening in the room, it was very limiting. Some of the best meetings I’ve had since practicing Zen are where I do plan a little, but then as I enter the space, I let all that go and I try to experience what’s happening in the room. So, sure, I’m the one who starts the meeting off, I “ring the bell,” if you will. But then I sit there and I just try to experience. If nothing is happening in a forward motion, I have an outline. But often I am amazed at how much happens in the meeting that doesn’t require any direction from me at all. And at the end of some meetings, I have realized we actually got all of the goals I’d written down done, but without me pursuing them. I had just sat there and I tried my best to just be there and to pay attention.

Several participants discussed preparing future leaders, and de-emphasizing their own identification with the group as its leader. Liam talked about delegating complicated problems to the person he was mentoring as CEO of the business, coaching her and supporting her, but

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<sup>2</sup> This was likely a reference to Shunryu Suzuki’s famous book, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*.

expecting her to make decisions about how to proceed. Marcus talked about implementing a dharma talk rotation, so that everyone participated in teaching. Noah suggested that at one time his center suffered from a sort of “founders’ syndrome,” and how his focus shifted to breaking out of a primary leadership role:

I’m seeing the necessity of sharing leadership, and also as I get older, the question of who will take over. And how do I let go and also prepare someone else to be a leader in my situation. I guess that’s another way in which anyone, any position of leadership also has to be prepared to let go of it. And if we hold onto it too vigorously, we actually end up destroying it.

*Researcher: But I’m also hearing you say there’s an idea of preparing the next person...*  
 Noah: That’s right. Or prepare them not only with a vision of what needs to be done, but also to not take that vision too personally and make it ‘all about me.’

All four participants mentioned prominent cases of power abuse, including sexual abuse, by Zen leaders during the interviews. They noted that the driving factors in those cases could manifest in far more subtle ways as well. Noah commented, “when we identify leadership with power, we make a mistake. Rather than seeing it as service to the community.” Liam discussed how veneration of one’s teacher can be a problem:

that sort of revered figure, is just a human being. We have to change our relationship to him... because if they maintain that unapproachable ‘I’m authoritative’ position, that’s inhibiting. That’s not helping. You know? So that’s important again for us to realize in terms of impermanence and in terms of grasping, because we’re grasping onto them, too.

Liam went on to talk about always thinking critically about the teacher’s words:

He’s wrong all the time, just like you, just like me. So you have to take things as sort of suggestions and guidance, not as a directive. Because after all, you know, *you’re* responsible for you, he’s not responsible for you. *You’re* responsible for you. And if you’re ... adopting his advice, you know, whole cloth, then basically, you know, you’re not being true to yourself. You’re not being self-aware. You’re not being responsible.

In balance to these cautions of not trusting in a leader’s words, Eva offered some ways of thinking in the category of reverence and affection for a leader by referring to Dogen’s essay on

plum blossoms in snow, written in honor of his dying master. I selected the following excerpt to represent that essay:

When the old plum tree suddenly opens, the world of blossoming flowers arises. ... These blossomings are not-being-proud-of one, two, or countless branches of the old plum tree... Blossoming is the old plum tree's offering. The old plum tree is within the human world and the heavenly world. The old plum tree manifests both human and heavenly worlds in its treeness. Therefore hundreds and thousands of blossoms are called both human and heavenly blossoms. Myriads and billions of blossoms are buddha-ancestor blossoms. In such a moment, “All the buddhas have appeared in the world” is shouted: “The ancestor was originally in this land” is shouted as well (Dogen, 1253)

Eva commented, “you get a sense of like, this sort of intensity of missing him, or awareness of him.” She also noted a contemporary teacher, Noritaki Roshi, owned a print taken of his teacher's feet at his death, which reminded her of the affectionate pictures taken of baby's feet.

### **Discussion**

These interviews cast light on existing leadership models to inspire our imagination and expand our understanding about what leadership might be. The concepts of Emptiness, Impermanence, and Interdependence seem helpful for reducing potentially problematic effects of ego on leadership and followership, and for enhancing group dynamics to more effectively achieve organizational missions. The models, concepts, and activities of leadership discussed in this paper may be useful as lessons for Zen practitioners studying themselves and determining how to best participate in the various groups they may be involved in, especially as they may shift in and out of follower and leader roles.

Social science models, including leadership models, are useful for many reasons, including defining abstract ideas, supporting measurement of abstractions, and testing theories. For the present study, leadership models were useful lenses to try to “see” the components of leadership. The literature review discussed how the charismatic leadership model (Conger &

Kanungo, 2003) points out the risk of followers’ ego attachment to leaders, and of leaders’ ego attachment to themselves. The Zen concepts of emptiness, interdependence, and impermanence offer support for gaining a better understanding of one’s self that may help leaders avoid the “dark side” of charismatic leadership. The model of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1996) seems to naturally support many of the interviewees’ perspectives, harmonizing with the ideas of leadership as creating an environment, offering feedback with a focus on organizational needs, and of avoiding a hierarchical or superior view of leaders. In-line with Greenleaf’s theory, the interviewees talked about leadership as not influencing others but about helping people realize their own vision and wisdom. Finally, Kelley’s model of Followership (1992) seems important for avoiding conflation of the roles of followers and leaders. The interviewees seemed to want to emphasize the role of followers and to de-emphasize the role of the leader, and mentioned how roles can be fluid. Identifying who is in the leader role at a particular time is clearly important, as leadership entails certain responsibilities: the *jiki* in a Zen center rings the bell to begin meditation, and performs rituals at the altar on behalf of all present. However, outside of specific roles, interviewees sometimes seemed uncertain of how to describe the importance of followers’ work without equating that work with a leadership role. Kelley offers a way of thinking about the role of follower as highly productive but in a way that does not duplicate the role of the leader.

The interviewees also critiqued the practice of leadership within Zen communities themselves, in hopes of avoiding problems as described by Lachs (1999, 2002). Interviewees specifically discussed the problems with followers becoming attached to leaders, despite the fact that nonattachment is purportedly a central tenet in Zen communities. Leaders can model non-attachment by focusing on interbeing of the group or organization, and highlighting the importance of followers’ activities as instrumental to the flourishing of the group. Such practices

can lead to greater empowerment of followers, increased critical thinking of followers, organizational learning, and smoother leadership transitions. The interviews support Lach’s assertion that positive leader behaviors will not necessarily emerge naturally in Zen communities, however. Like everyone else, Zen practitioners need to reflect deliberately about the potential dangers of the leadership dynamic, leaders and followers alike.

Interviewees’ comments illuminated how the Zen concepts of emptiness, interdependence, and impermanence may support a healthier relationship between ego and leadership, both inside and outside of Zen communities. These three concepts frame the next part of the discussion.

### **Emptiness**

The concept of “emptiness,” or no-self, involves the realization that we do not have an objective, separate self. What we may think of as our self—perhaps our body, our thinking mind, or our personality—is composed of non-self elements (Hanh, 2012). Our bodies are made of minerals, sunshine, and water. Our personalities are formed by genetics, our culture, our environments, and neurochemical reactions. Through meditation, one can discover an intuitive awareness of our universal self. Dogen wrote, “To study the self is to forget the self.” Shunryu Suzuki’s comment on this was, “When we forget ourselves, we actually are the true activity of the big existence, of reality itself.<sup>3</sup> I observed the concept of emptiness to underlie the interviewees’ conceptions of leadership as a role rather than as an inherent identity. The Zen leader who sees through the delusion of her own ego has the opportunity to model authenticity,

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of self and universal self, see also Kosho Uchiyama, *Opening the Hand of Thought*, 79-88.

both in practicing leadership behaviors and disassociating those behaviors from an inherent identity as “leader” or “expert.”

The interviewees’ underlying convictions about emptiness may have led to their questions about whether their leadership was “good enough” and in how to conduct themselves in a way that does not center or superordinate the leader’s role. There may be a tendency for leaders to think it’s “on them” to “get things right,” but these are paths back into ego and fixed views. Instead, as Noah said, “Who knows what’s going to survive, who knows what we leave behind, who knows what kinds of influence anything that we do has in the world? And ultimately that’s really a much bigger process than we can be responsible for.” For leaders who are shy or fearful of living up to their followers’ expectations, the concept of emptiness may be a source for confidence in fulfilling the role, to avoid falling into a trap of *hiding* behind the curtain.

A solid grounding of no-self also seems to be helpful in situations of correction; if we can avoid ego in ourselves and avoid discriminating between self and other, we may help the other person avoid a sense of judgment and defensiveness. We can learn about our egos during these times, as well as when *we* are receiving correction.

The interviewees’ perspective on praise as dangerous seems unusual to the study of leadership dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Hearing that we did a great job may feel good, but also reinforces the idea of a separate, objective self, which can be a trap. Constructive criticism can help us become more effective, but dwelling on failures and mistakes unduly is equally as dangerous as dwelling on praise: both blind ourselves to the true situation because our egos are likely to get in the way of seeing what is really going on. And yet, individuals do make progress and the value of decades

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<sup>4</sup> Recalling, for example, Dale Carnegie’s explanation of the influence of praise in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, (1981, 18-31).

of practice and experience is undeniable. These seeming dichotomies related to our individual and collective natures are ripe to be explored through meditation on emptiness. We can learn about our egos and our true natures from all of these struggles.

### **Interdependence**

Zen meditation offers the opportunity to see the world’s interbeing and to transform our ego, or manas, into an understanding of equality, “which means the ability to see the one in the all and the all in the one” (Hanh 2006, 113). This concept seems to underlie the interviewees’ idea about leadership as a way to create a conducive environment for others to discover their own wisdom, rather than on leadership as a one-way influence process. The concept of interdependence also supports the possibility for less confrontational correction by focusing on how an individual’s behavior affects the larger organization.

Keeping the entire organization’s network in view is certainly something a leader needs to do, and that can help avoid the feeling of leaders’ centrality or hierarchy. This vision of interdependence seems key to the interviewees’ desire to help followers avoid attaching to the leader, as well as for the leader to avoid attaching their self-esteem to their role as leader. Identifying the activities of followership to be as critical as those of the leader may also be helpful (Kelley 1992). Through describing her insights into the organization’s interdependent being, the leader may be able to help people set aside their own egos during group interactions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered all of us a special opportunity to observe interdependence. When my university decided to conduct the remainder of our semester online, the effort required the whole organization to start working together in entirely new ways. Since we had not been designed as an all-online university, there was initially some imbalance in workloads, as people already involved in support for online teaching were overloaded, and



people responsible for physical materials had less to do. Some people struggled as they suddenly felt less useful, but I observed the organization to be like a spider’s web, where there was strain around the part of the web that happened to catch the fly, but where the entire web was still critical for the overall mission. What is the most important part of a spider web?

### **Impermanence**

Ego seems to play a formative role in leading us to create and attach to fixed views, when in reality, everything is impermanent. As Noah reflected,

When we do something with sort of ego intention... we set something up that is as if we’ve tried to establish something fixed. Something that is permanent and that ultimately encounters the inevitability of impermanence. So whatever we do with ego intention ... becomes illusory because, sooner or later, it encounters impermanence... it’s the way in which those things that are sort of ego-driven carry with them a sense of something false, something deceptive, something that is untrue.

In his mind, our tendency to grasp on to fixed views is related to our ego. Several interviewees commented on how such grasping is unhelpful to our leadership. By letting go of our egos, we support not grasping onto fixed conceptions that “we know just what to do.” We have greater potential to see the situation as it really is. Decisions have to be made, but our mindset toward them may be more provisional than we might otherwise think fitting for a leader.

As leaders engage in setting a vision for their organization through a collaborative process, leaving their ego out of the process may help model the impermanence of any particular vision statement. A group can develop a shared vision and move toward it together without attaching their identities to it. Non-attachment may not be the default for human nature, but it is possible, and the result may be increased authenticity of the vision and a reduction in disillusion when the vision is inevitably not realized according to anyone’s initial conception.

The process of observing our egos forming fixed views can also help us “study the self.” If we are alert to the possibility of our ego increasing the fixity of our views, we might avoid the

mistake of fixation. And, if we detect ourselves fixating on a perspective, that discovery might help us to see our ego may be more involved than we thought. If we are able to leave our egos out of the equation, that is, we “forget our selves”, the world is open wider to more profound observations, or as Dogen promised, we can be “actualized by myriad things” (1247).

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this research must be acknowledged. The context is American Zen, thus, the study does not represent Zen thought or practice in other countries and cultures (see Thanissaro, 2017). Furthermore, the sample size was small, and the author and all four of the interviewees were white. In America, whiteness in leadership is dominant (Jones 2017) and whites may be ignorant of how their race affects their leadership, while leaders of color are constantly forced to consider their racial group identity by the world around them (King 2018). Zen communities have only just begun to acknowledge the presence of systemic racism in what ought to be a realm of equality (“Making the Invisible Visible” 2000). Angel Kyodo Williams’s excellent introduction to meditation from a person of color’s perspective is excellent reading for beginning to understand how a person of color’s experience in Zen may be quite different from a white person’s in contemporary American culture. Her teachings also illuminate how multiple identities may layer and overlap within our conceptions of self. An understanding of ego and leadership is incomplete without such perspectives.

Gender emerged a few times in the interviews. The one woman participant discussed how she sometimes felt seen as a source of emotional support when she would prefer to be seen more as a consultant with ideas about how to improve practice, given a specific challenge. The male participants did not mention their gender in their own practice of Zen or leadership. However, when speaking about some sexual abuse problems in Zen centers, they referred to male-female

power and gender dynamics as present in those situations. It seems likely that gender identity influences experiences of ego and leadership for both Zen practitioners and non-practitioners.

While the role of gender and racial identities are beyond the scope of the present paper, they and other identities are quite relevant to the topic and further research could investigate how identities further illuminate the practice of Zen and leadership.

### **Conclusion**

For me, the pragmatic takeaways of this research are manifold; by listing them, I hope I do not limit the reader from finding their own:

- In overseeing a department, thinking of it as tending a garden, or creating the most helpful and supportive environment for the group to work (instead of seeing myself at the top)
- In one-on-one coaching or supervision, emphasizing others’ practice and inherent nature (rather than thinking about what I am going to say, and being afraid I won’t come across well)
- When the decisions inevitably arise where there are seemingly no good options, only not-worse options, taking responsibility for the negative consequences that result, and helping people avoid binary judgments about decisions
- Before offering feedback, practicing zazen to try to set aside my ego, and to focus on the organizational purpose at hand
- Before offering verbal feedback, instead considering whether a demonstration of how to something, or talking out loud about why I go about something a certain way, might be more helpful.
- When receiving feedback, quickly set myself aside as the target for that feedback. Instead, my focus can be on how me using that feedback might result in something better for the organization and its mission, or for the team.
- When entering a room to lead a meeting, keeping an open mind about what will happen rather than thinking I need to make something happen
- Respecting experience and traditions without idolizing them

Eight bullets are a lot! Before practicing Zen, I would have tried to move forward on all fronts by doing something formulaic, like thinking through this checklist at the beginning of my work day. And that might not be a bad idea. However, in realizing how the concepts of emptiness, interdependence, and impermanence underlie these ideas, and how ego-attachment is a primary cause of delusion, I can see how meditation on such broader realities may help

implement desired changes in behavior. The eight bullets above may happen because my mindset, illuminated by the insights of the interviewees, may become more fertile ground. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that teachings are merely “a means of presenting insight, using words and concepts” (2015, 17). He continues, “When you use a map to get to Paris, once you have arrived, you can put the map away and enjoy being in Paris. If you spend all your time with your map... you’ll miss the reality.” Hanh also urges finding the help of a community or teacher to further increase understanding and put things into practice. Research into leadership ethics finds that everyone has blind spots (Bazeman & Tenbrunsel 2012), so identifying a mentor or colleagues willing to provide outside perspectives also seems important.

This study suggests that Zen philosophies may cast light on existing leadership models, and that Zen practice can illuminate the leadership dynamic. The leadership dynamic also appears to be a sort of laboratory that can illuminate one’s Zen practice, offering opportunities to study concepts like emptiness, interdependence, and impermanence. The role of ego is specifically relevant because in group dynamics, presumed distinctions between self and other arise constantly, and frequently pose obstacles to forward movement.

I want to close with a pause for self-reflection. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that teachings of emptiness, impermanence, and interdependence are “not doctrines or subjects for a philosophical discussion. They are instruments for meditation, keys to help us unlock the door to reality. When someone offers us a hammer for our carpentry work, we should not put it on an altar and worship it. We must learn how to use it.” (2006, 212). I invite the reader to choose an amount of time and to meditate, becoming aware of their own self-concepts, concepts of groups in which they are involved, and the leadership dynamics surrounding us all.

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### Appendix: Interview questions

Participants were advised, “(These are just ideas / conversation starters - We can diverge onto any topic of interest or questions you might think are more relevant!”

1. In any of your walks of life, do you now or have you ever considered yourself a leader? Please briefly list and describe each of these contexts. (Possible follow ups: Were any of those educational or nonprofit contexts?)
2. In what ways have you found your practice of Zen to be relevant to your leadership practice?”
3. Our world seems to struggle to understand what leadership is. What perspectives do you think Zen has to offer to the conversation?
4. Have you observed other Zen practitioners functioning as leaders? Please describe some of these situations (without using names).
5. Some say that followers are as important (if not more so) to leadership than are the leaders. Have you had occasion to observe how Zen affects followers and leaders working together?
6. Do you see any conflicts between Zen practice and leadership practice?
7. In Zen we practice not being attached to other people or even ideas. However reading about Zen teachers and students, clearly there is some form of attachment to leaders and teachers as inspirational. What thoughts do you have about this? Have you had to take actions to discourage unhealthy attachments of others to your self as a leader? Have you discovered in yourself attachments to your leaders?
8. In a leadership role, have you taken actions to try to get people to move in a common direction? Can you talk more about those experiences?
9. How can a leader conduct strategic (far-future) planning with her group, yet maintain focus on the present moment?
10. There’s a lot of research about how to motivate unproductive employees / team members or to correct problematic behavior. Have you had such occasion in your leadership roles? How might your Zen practice have influenced your thinking and behavior in response?
11. What questions might you have about Zen and leadership?
12. Are there Zen practitioners whom you think have leadership roles - in or outside of Zen - that you think I should approach for a similar interview?