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Indian Perspectives on Mindful Leadership

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Abstract

It is generally believed that practice of mindfulness has its roots in ancient eastern tradition of Buddhism. However, there is ample evidence that ancient Hindu texts lay stress on meditation, silent contemplation and acceptance of things as they are, which is the essence of mindfulness. Upanishads, a collection of Indian religious and philosophical thoughts written probably between 800 BCE to 500 BCE – describe meditation, often suggesting use of a chant or a mantra. Mindfulness practice in Hindu tradition emphasizes silent meditation – with or without use of chants or mantras – to calm the mind.

Mindfulness enhances directed awareness and allows for examining problems or issues from different perspectives and stimulates wider thought. Mindfulness approach calms the mind, can enhance insight and clear the mind for experiencing ‘a-ha’ moments.

A mindful approach by leaders when dealing with issues at hand, helps team members relax, create safer spaces for creative exploration, allowing for deeper understanding and supports problem solving through generation of innovative and creative ideas. The mindfulness leadership approach aids flexibility and thought clarity. Other advantages of a mindful leadership approach includes leading by example, appreciation and recognition of team efforts, humility, openness to feedback, awareness of own thoughts, emotions, speech and behavior, ability to read people, situations and ask relevant questions, intuitiveness, receptiveness to change, willingness to adapt, willingness to change, ability to effectively engage with employees and situations.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Buddhism, Hinduism, Leadership

Introduction

It is general belief that mindfulness has its origins in the ancient eastern tradition of Buddhism. But there is ample evidence that the practice of mindfulness has its origins in the various ancient Indian philosophical schools, including Buddhism. Many of these religious

traditions laid stress on the monism between body and mind, the centrality of consciousness and focus on mediation Singla, 2011 and mindfulness as a means of regulating and controlling the body and the mind. The term Indian Philosophical schools primarily refers to the ancient Indian traditions that originated on the Indian subcontinent. These schools are classified as orthodox (astika) or heterodox (nastika). These division between the schools is based on three criteria – (a) whether these schools believe in the Vedas (a large body of ancient Indian texts) as the source of all knowledge (b) whether these schools believed in the Brahman (universal reality underlying all phenomena) and atman (inner self or soul or spirit) (c) whether the school believes in after life.

Orthodox and heterodox schools of Indian philosophy

The orthodox schools accept the Vedas as the source of knowledge and the heterodox schools reject vedic thought. There are six major orthodox schools and five major heterodox schools of Indian philosophy. The orthodox schools include – Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. The Nyaya school stresses on realism emphasizing analytics and logic; Vaisheshika is a naturalism school stressing on the theme of atomism, which postulates that all objects in the physical universe are reducible to atoms; Samkhya is a rationalistic schools with themes of dualism and atheism; the Yoga school stresses on the systematic studies to improve oneself physically, mentally and spiritually. This school shares similarities with the Samkhya school and has had the greatest influence on other schools of Indian philosophy; the Mimamsa school stresses upon the tradition of contemplation and reflection upon the meanings of the vedic texts; the Vedanta school is one of the most prominent of the Indian philosophical schools and relies upon the speculations and philosophies regarding knowledge and liberation contained in the Upanishads, the ancient Sanskrit texts which form the basis of spiritual teaching in Hinduism. It is to be noted that there are various Vedanta schools ranging from dualism to non-dualism, all of which have been developed from the common connection of the Upanishads.

The heterodox school includes – Jain, Buddhism, Ajivaka, Ajnana and Charvaka. The Jain philosophy is one of the oldest schools that separates the body and the soul. It emphasizes asceticism, non-violence (ahimsa) and relativity of view points (anekantavada). It rejected the authority of the Vedas; The Buddhist philosophy has its roots in the

teachings of Siddhartha Gautama also called the Buddha, who lived in the 5th century BC. Buddhism rejects the vedic concepts of the Brahman (ultimate reality) and atman (soul, self). But Hinduism and Buddhism shared many concepts such as the belief in karma, dharma (idea of ethics), and impermanence of all material things and the body the possibility of liberation (moksha, nirvana); the Ajivaka school stresses on the doctrine of absolute determinism (fate) and holds that there is no free will and that everything – what has happened, what is happening and what will happen – is preordained and a function of cosmic principles; the Ajnana school represent the philosophy of radical skepticism. The schools held that it was not possible to ascertain the value of philosophical propositions and even if it was possible, it was useless and not relevant from final salvation. The school specialized in refutation without offering any positive doctrine of its own; The Charvaka school is one of skepticism and materialism. The school held that direct perception, empiricism and inference are the proper sources of knowledge and rejected the reasoning of ‘relinquish pleasure to avoid pain’.

It is seen that the different Indian philosophical schools held diverse perspectives, significantly disagreeing with each other. But the predominant thread commonly running through many of these Indian philosophical schools, especially the orthodox schools and the Jain and Buddhist schools is the stress upon mindful mediation and contemplation.

Understanding Mindfulness

Living in the present moment is mindfulness. It is a conscious practice of attending to self, others and to the world. This conscious process helps the individual to positively adapt to the situations which increases the productivity in the individual (Chaskalson, 2011). In other words mindfulness is paying attention to here and now (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). Zinn further elaborates that paying conscious attention non judgementally is mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009).

The meaning of mindfulness is having clarity of what is going on in our mind, body and in our environment. Simply it is a perception or awareness of what is happening with us simultaneously. It is a down to earth practice rooted in the existential domain of human beings. Mindfulness has three characteristics. They are non judgemental attitude, living in the present moment and disinterested. In mindfulness we won't be comparing

or contrasting anything, we will try to accept as they are without any prejudices.

Mindful attention helps the individual to systematically recognize the present moment and helps in change course. This results in creating a quickness in responses and adaptability (Thera, 2005). Mindfulness practice doesn't promote suppression of any thoughts but promotes the concept of letting go (Goenka & Hart, 1997). Mindfulness is paying attention to any stimuli non judgementally and objectively. This objectivity brings a conscious way of living life, keeping away the negativity from self. Dhamma or mindfulness practices help the individual to be aware of self and aware of any attachment and helping them to let go of it (Gunaratana, 2010).

Mindfulness helps the individual to move away from controlling the situation and helps him to face the situation / stimuli as they are. In this process the individual becomes calm, focused, relaxed and shows well being. It helps the individual to be peaceful in his life (Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2014). Mindfulness practice starts with deep breathing which helps the individual to focus on his / her breathing, and moves on to concentrate on the breath and keep his thought on "just being" and not on anything else. Next is to be aware of his body and to focus the attention on relaxing the body. The final step is walking meditation which helps the individual to move in different spaces keeping his awareness on the present moment (Hnh & Hanh, 1992). Several studies have proved the changes in the thought process (Didonna (2009) and in the meta levels of cognition (Hussain, 2015). Mindfulness addresses three axioms, namely intention, attention and attitude (Shapiro et al., 2006).

Mindfulness is getting a lot of attention in the contemporary research including education, mental health and leadership. Reb et al. (2014) shows that mindfulness is very recent in the western research paradigm and in the eastern religious perspectives it has been existing for more than 5000 years. A study by Emanuel et al. (2010) found that mindfulness has become a practice of non secular individuals irrespective of its origin. However there is still a confusion on mindfulness (Fries, 2009) whether it is a meditation technique followed by eastern religious practitioners.

Mindfulness in Indian schools of philosophy

Mindful meditation as a distinct practice appears in the various schools of Indian philosophy. The Yoga Sutras, dating to approximately 200 (CE) is a quintessential manual on mediation. It includes philosophical perspectives and meditation techniques drawn from both the orthodox and heterodox schools, including that of Samkhya, Jaina and Buddhism schools. It is interesting to note that excavations of Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Indus Valley cities depicts meditating figures. Both in the vedic and non-vedic traditions such as Jain and Buddhism, mindful mediation appears as a important technique to accomplish the goal of liberation. The yoga sutra for instance recommend restraint of the fluctuations of the mind that enables gradual dissipation of the 'karmic' influences and reshape ones identity by allowing for attaining a state of non-judgmental acceptance of the here and now, abandoning attachment to material things and fixed behaviors and reaching deeper self-understanding.

Mindfulness in Hinduism

Mindfulness practice has a root in the eastern religions. Both Hinduism and Buddhism emphasizes the need to be calm and to pay attention to the present moment. People have been practicing it for over thousands of years. In east, the secular religions and practioners of these religions promotes mindfulness practice. In the west in the recent few decades mindfulness got the importance along with yoga and medication. But still the roots for mindfulness is on the eastern religions / eastern philosophies (Trousselard et al., 2012). Says mindfulness should not be reduced to only Hinduism or Buddhism. They argue that mindfulness practice has been advised in all the religions including Christianity, Judaism and also in Islam. But in Hinduism and Buddhism mindfulness is practiced widely hence several practioners follow it intensively.

Hinduism is a oldest religion in the world. It has not been founded by one person. Before 2500 – 3000 years it was called as vedic traditions. The modern day Hinduism also keeps the same god's and goddess in its philosophy. During the British period the vedic religion was called as Hinduism mainly because the origin was from the Indus valley the current day Pakisthan. The vedic period produced many scripts including Upanishads

and epics. These texts explain the role of a follower which includes dharma – way of life. Mindfulness is part of these rules and regulations or way of life as prescribed by the vedic texts. The discussions on mindfulness in Hinduism start with yoga and vedic meditation practices.

The connection of body and mind is well explained in the eastern philosophies. Since ancient times masters / the followers of these philosophies tried to find and explain the connections between the two. These masters explored that beyond the physical body and mind there are higher order of functioning. These higher order functioning could be attained by exploring the non conceptual level of awareness by moving away from the everyday thinking process. The strategy for this is called inward attention otherwise widely called as meditation. This inward attention helps to gain the higher order functioning or higher consciousness.

Along with meditation physical postures called as “Asanas” encompass the study of yoga. Yoga is a Hindu spiritual / scientific discipline that promotes breathing exercises, meditation and specific body postures. Through these strategies yoga helps an individual to understand the physical self, the mind and beyond the mind. The eastern philosophies bring the interconnectedness between the body and mind by explaining the term “Prana” the energy. The masters of these philosophies have found the relationship of prana with the physical body and with mind. According to the ancient yogic texts called as “Upanishads” the various levels of existence form a continuum. These levels called as “koshas” (Balasundaram & Sathiyaseelan, 2016) or sheath. The energy flows through one kosha to the other. The Upanishads describe the pranamayakosha as vital sheath and governed by the manomayakosha the mental body.

The science of breathing is called as “Svarodaya” in Sanskrit meaning science of breath the self awareness of the breath. This has been neglected widely. The teachings of “pranayama” the regulation or control of breath explain the process of controlling mind. Pranayama means expansion of energy “ayama” is expansion or manifestation and “prana” is energy. The simple philosophy of pranayama is this that if an individual controls his breath could control his mind too. This particular science explains several breathing practices and the benefits of these techniques. For example “brahmari” is a breathing technique in which the breathing process is like a bee. The practitioner uses both nostril

and mouth to inhale and exhale with a buzzing sound. This type of breathing helps in the lung cleansing. Similarly there are techniques called sitkari, sitali, ujjayi, suryabhedana, and Murchha pranayama. etc.

As per Hinduism the pranayama helps the individuals to live his life mindfully through breath control. In other words we could say one who is able to control his breath controls his mind. Controlling the breath and controlling the mind helps in healthy and peaceful living. The pranayama and yoga postures and “mudra” the hand gestures directs the individual towards living in the present moment.

The studies examined the relationship between yoga and mindfulness shows higher levels of mindfulness (Gaiswinkler & Unterrainer, 2016). This positive correlation shows that the origins of yoga with Hinduism so does the origins of mindfulness from Hinduism. We could say there is an intertwined nature among yoga, mindfulness, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Mindfulness in Buddhism

Buddhism and Hinduism shares many commonality. People tend to believe that Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism. But it is not (Hacker Davis, 2006). This common belief is due to the understanding that Gautama Buddha's parents were followers of Hinduism. Before Gautama attained Nirvana he was also following Hinduism. However the similarities between these two major eastern religions are, both have come from the same region and the main focus is on “Dharma” or the way of life and both are very old. But when you compare both their emergence Hinduism dated back to 4000 BCE and Buddhism around 400 – 500 BCE. Buddhism through its philosophy tries to enlighten its followers. As in Hinduism, Buddhism has also several sub sects namely Theravada Buddhism, Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

Mindfulness derived from the concept “Sati” from the Buddhist traditions (Gunnaratana, 2010). Roughly translated to “looking at things as they are”. Sati could be equated to the word “Smrti” in Sanskrit. Several interpretations for these words. One which comes very close is given by (Sharf, 2015). He says sati entails discrimination of moral valence. In Buddhism moral precepts are revered and considered sacred. To live in line with the moral precepts mindfulness is the first step.

Buddha explains in the paliscritures that aim of the mindfulness is purification of human beings. He says to attain nirvana or nibbana mindfulness is the process. He further explains mindfulness helps in overcoming sorrow, lamentations and grief. The philosophy of Buddhism is mainly rooted on understanding the causes for desires and enmity the fundamentals of living. Through mindfulness we can try to understand the our actions, our reactions, our thoughts, our attachments and our non attachments. This understanding or awareness will help us to realize our existence in this ever changing world. This will eventually leads to cetovimutti which could be translated to the release of the mind. As Buddha was saying nirvana / mukthi in Hinduism and is the basis for vipasana which could be translated as insight into our existence.

Buddha taught mindfulness among his disciples to increase the four important Brahma Viharas – they are the dwelling places of Brahma. These four concepts are cultivation of metta or maïtre – this could be translate as non enmity and friendship. Cultivation of karuna – this could be translated as compassion. Cultivation of mudita – this could be translated as rejoices on others good fortune with selflessness. The fourth one cultivation of upesha – this could be translated as equanimity and acceptance of all without any partiality. If we could look into these four principles we could easily understand how these are close to the characteristics of effective leadership.

Effectiveness is one of the major requirement for being a leader. Mindfulness helps in bringing the effectiveness in life. This could be achieved through practicing authentic mindfulness in the four foundations namely body, feelings , mind and phenomena.As per Buddhism the four foundations of mindfulness of body includes is understanding the physical presence and the physical and verbal behavior related to it. The leader needs to be aware of his physical presence. His or her physical behavior and verbal behavior while interacting with the team, colleagues and employees.

The second foundation of authentic mindfulness is mindfulness on feelings. This is the understanding of our attitude and our emotions and also the perceptions of a particular day and time. A leader needs to know his emotions and how the emotions acts on his feelings. His negative emotions or feelings should not affect / influence his leadership skills. Mindfulness on this foundation helps him to stay focus on the present moment of his feelings and emotions and helps him to control any negativity associated with it

towards his decision making or in problem solving.

The third foundation is mindfulness on thoughts and mind. This focused on the thoughts which are occurring in the present moment. As we mentioned in the earlier paragraph being mindful helps the leader to be aware of his negative thoughts while taking any decisions or while interaction with colleagues.

The last foundation is mindfulness of phenomena which is awareness of the situations, people and other living things. These foundations help the leader to navigate enhancing wisdom and insights. This foundation is very important for a leader considering the volatility of the business world being aware of what is happening around him and perceiving it without any judgement is highly important.

Mindful leadership

There is a fast changing phase felt in the business world. Some authors call this as the cognitive capitalism (Boutang, 2011). In this phase flexibility and innovation are found to be critical for the success of the organization or business. Which brings in the need for a leadership style to deal with these challenges (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). According to George (2010) the leaders are in need for a strategy or tool which could build their capacity to face these challenges such as mindfulness. This author says that mindfulness is a state of fully aware of self and the sensitivity to the situations.

A mindfulness approach is a conscious effort in changing the mindset, attitude and subsequently the behavior. Mindfulness helps the team members to be aware of this mindset and their attitude and helps them to meditate and relax and create a safer space for creative exploration as can exercises that teach listening and acknowledgement. The mindfulness approach aids flexibility ,clarity includes leading by example, appreciation and recognition, leading with humility, openness to receive feedback, awareness of own thoughts, emotions, speech and behavior, able to read the people, situations and asks relevant questions, intuitiveness, receptiveness to change, willingness to adapt, willingness to change, engagement with employee and engagement with situations (Marturano, 2014).

Mindfulness leadership is a unique style in which the leaders makes the followers to understand their “self” and creating better conditions for understanding the “situations” too, by this they are helping the followers to identify their own future leadership ability

(Whitmore, 2011). Several studies such as (Chemers, 2014) and (Rego, 2008) are urging the organizations / business to integrate this leadership style for a better understanding of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of human beings. Studies by Dhiman (2009) and (Sethi, 2009) are bringing in new application of mindfulness in the action oriented perspectives of the western countries.

Aurelius (1894) says we have power over our mind and not on the outside events. The moment we understand this we get our strength. As per this saying mindful leadership comes from understanding our mind, the thoughts and the reactions of it in our behavior. Study by Harvard professor Gilbert (2012) generally 30 to 50 percent of the time individuals are having wandering mind. Their study found that those individuals who have wandering mind tend to be unhappy and they were found to be distracted all the time. On the contrary the individuals who are focused are very effective in their work, time management and in the life.

Similar study by Ehrlich (2015) shows that leaders who use mindfulness in their leadership style has a lasting relationship with their followers and employees and by which helps the organization to grow. Studies are showing the relationship between mindfulness and cortical plasticity important for cognitive and emotional processing Lazar et al. (2000) and self regulation (Carver & Scheier, 2011) emotional regulation, self referential processing and perspective taking (Hölzel et al., 2011).

George (2010) found that self awareness and self compassion helps the leaders to keep their emotions under control and also helps them to understand the impact of it on others by which focusing them towards organizations goals. Studies by Dunoon and Langer (2011) shows that mindfulness helps the leaders to view the issues and the situation differently and helps them to accept the situations as they are before taking any actions (Gelles, 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2009; Marturano, 2014).

Dharma as a leader

The comparison of these four foundations of mindful leader with the principles from Upanishads the following clarity emerges.

Brahadaranyaka Upanishad points out “Daammyat” which could be translated in English to self control. Mindfulness is brings in the clarity of awareness through which

controlling our body, thoughts, feelings and reactions to all of it that is behavior. Taittiriya Upanishad motivated the leader to speak the truth and practice virtue and not to be negligent of it. The verses from the Taittiriya Upanishad is “Satyam Vada! Dharmamcara!” .Mindfulness helps the leader to be aware of Daammyat and helps him to lead his path on Satyam and Dharmam. Because a leader can make an organization or could break an organization. That depends on his virtues. Dhamma in Buddhism which equivates to the dharma or satyam(Truth) is achieved through mindfulness.

The Chhandogya Upanishad on dharma gives instructions to the followers to not to cause any damage to the fellow human beings either through your mind “dhambikam” or through your words “ vachikam” or through your actions “ khayikam”. Chhandogya enforces on the following measures such as austerity, charity, truth and straight forwardness among the leaders. Similar measures have been stressed upon by the Mitrayani Upanishad along with instructions to avoid angry words, jealousy, meanness, cruel thoughts and cruel behavior and rash actions. This Upanishad also stresses on silence as one of the major dharma to be followed by a leader.

When we looked into the Hindu law written by Manu and Yajnavalkya, both of them speaks of “ Achara” means conduct. They stress on the importance of achara or the code of conduct of the every human being and specifically people in a position to lead. In their writings dharma is ranked high. Manu stresses following dharma is very important for a leader to continue as a leader. Some of the principles mentioned by the other Upanishads are mentioned here as well, such as being patience, controlling self , having integrity, purity in thoughts and actions, restraining from negative things, being truthful and devoid of anger.Yajnavalkya is insisting what Manu has spoken and along with he is also describing the need for being modest, having good intelligence, not stealing others possession and a willingness to learn as dharma of a leader.

Triguna theory and mindful leadership

The Triguna theory offers a an useful framework for understanding mindful leadership. Triguna theory finds mention in the Atharva Veda and Bhagavad Gita. However it is in the Samkhya system that the theory gains prominence. According to this theory, inner core of an individuals’ personality constitutes of three ‘gunas’ or qualities, viz.

sattva, rajas and tamas. Sattva is characterized by the quality of balance, harmony, goodness, purity, creativity, positivity, peacefulness and virtue. Rajas by passion, action orientation, self-centeredness, egoism, and individualism . And tamas by imbalance, lethargy, anxiety, apathy, violence and ignorance. The three gunas interact and compete with each other in an individual, resulting in preponderance of one guna over the other. The degree of dominance of one guna over the other two determines the personality type of the individual, which can be classified as the sattvic, rajasic or tamasic personality types (Rao et al., 1966).

Personality type dominated by sattva show better leadership behaviour (Kejriwal & Krishnan, 2004) and is more akin to a mindful leader. Sattva qualities enhances leadership and leaders with sattvic qualities display greater levels of sympathy, motivation to work and acceptance of failures (Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003). The study by Narayanan and Krishnan (2003) also found that Rajas and Tamas gunas show poor correlation with good leadership. When a leader is dominated by sattvic qualities, she has a calm and serene mind (mindful), is alert and performs the job with precision. Sattvic leaders tend to possess good sense of balance, high positivism in the face of challenges and crisis and are more creative and innovative than the other personality types in the triguna theory.

Conclusion

A mindfulness approach to such issues helps team members meditate and relax and create a safer space for creative exploration as can exercises that teach listening and acknowledgement. Also, the creativity and innovation process involves understanding the problem that you are trying to solve and generate ideas from there. The mindfulness approach aids flexibility, clarity includes leading by example, appreciation and recognition, leading with humility, openness to receive feedback, awareness of own thoughts, emotions, speech and behavior, able to read the people, situations and ask relevant questions, intuitive-ness, receptiveness to change, willingness to adapt, willingness to change, engagement with employee and engagement with situations.

The pressure to perform and meet expectations can leave us stresses and anxious. But a mindfulness based leadership approach offer the scope to deal with it calmly and dispassionately. Mindfulness combined with leadership provides positivity beyond the

workplace. The combining of mindfulness with leadership that enhances positive experience of leadership can be brought about by deliberate and enduring practice by the leader. To achieve this an individual need to be aware of self, aware of others and aware of the world. In this VUCA world, mindful leadership practice brings a rapid change in any individual without many positive side effects.

As our articles projects the mindfulness leadership practices have been studied, prescribed and practiced from very early periods of human existence. Over the centuries, mindfulness approach has been suggested as an approach to meeting the leadership expectations of a dynamic world. Mindfulness provides the ultimate world view of looking beyond self and cultivating a rich and meaningful experience for the leader, team members and organization. The approach helps leader to effectively engage with employees and improve their wellbeing. It brings in humility and integrity in the leader. Leader becomes flexible and is able to better understand her employees. A mindful leadership approach can contribute immensely by connecting to the world with pragmatism, confidence and humility.

Study limitations and future research directions

The focus of this paper is on the roots of mindfulness-based leadership in Buddhism and Hinduism, while mindful approaches to leadership in other cultures or religions have received little attention in our study. Mindfulness is also important both in the field of psychology in general and in positive psychology specifically. Future research is clearly needed on two aspects of mindfulness. One, future studies can investigate the use of mindfulness in non-Buddhist and non-Hindu traditions. Two, mindful leadership can be examined from the positive psychology perspective.

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