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Upanishads and Transformational Leadership

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Summary. *Power is a relationship that treats others as objects or things, while leadership does not. Knowledge consists of two parts. Studying the world as an object is the first half of knowledge called materialism, which is sufficient for power. Delving into the human being as the subject, as the knower, is the second half of knowledge called spirituality, which is necessary for leadership. This requires seeing oneself and others as not just the body-mind complex, but as the atman. The Upanishads are the fundamental texts that explain the atman, the real self of all beings. It is not possible to understand leadership without an inquiry into the atman. Many leadership authors and practitioners are groping in the dark because of their total ignorance about the very existence of the atman. Just as gold appears as the various ornaments like bracelet, the one atman appears as the various beings in the world. Leadership requires seeing oneness among the diverse beings in this universe, just as intelligent people will first see gold in all the gold ornaments. Enabling others to realize that they are not just the body-mind complex, but that they are the atman takes them closer to the state of oneness with everyone. This is moral leadership and authentic transformational leadership, that enable followers to lift themselves into their higher self. This can be achieved by elevating oneself in the Gunas hierarchy (reducing Tamas and Rajas and increasing Sattva), and by practicing Karma-Yoga.*

“Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Burns, 1978: 2). The lack of understanding about leadership is possibly because of confusing it with power. Most people who claim to be leaders are actually power-holders only.

1. The Central Problem: Distinguishing between Leadership and Power

Power

Power over other persons is exercised when potential power wielders, motivated to achieve certain goals of their own, marshal resources that enable them to influence the behavior of respondents by activating motives of respondents relevant to those resources. “This is done in order to realize the purposes of the *power wielders*, whether or not these are also the goals of the respondents” (Burns 1978: 18). Power is a relationship that seeks to address the goals of only the power-wielder.

Leadership

Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers. “This is done in order to realize goals mutually held by both leaders and followers” (Burns,

1978: 18). Leadership is a relationship that seeks to address the goals of both the leader and the follower.

Like power, leadership is relational, collective, and purposeful. However, leaders do not obliterate followers' motives, though they may arouse certain motives and ignore others. They lead other human beings, not things. "To control *things*—tools, mineral resources, money, energy—is an act of power, not leadership, for things have no motives. Power wielders may treat people as things. Leaders may not" (Burns, 1978: 18).

Two Types of Knowledge

Knowledge consists of two parts. Studying the world as an object is the first half of knowledge. We use the word 'thing' to refer to an object in this world. Chairs, tables, trees, plants, the sun, the moon, the stars, etc., are all things or physical objects. This is physical science or the knowledge of sensory data, objective data brought by the senses from the world outside. This is called materialism, or lower knowledge. However, this does not encompass the whole of experience (Ranganathananda, 2005: 12). It makes no sense to rush to the conclusion that there is nothing except what we see with our five senses.

When we study objects in physical science, a question arises about the subject, the one that studies, the observer that observes. Turning our searchlight in that direction is the second half of knowledge. The idea is to ask what this human being is as the subject, as the knower. A new tool is needed to probe into this field, using subjective datum from subjective experience, since one cannot know the knower. This cannot be studied objectively like studying the world of objects. This is also a science, a study of that, which impinges upon us at the sensory level, coming from beyond that level. This is called self-inquiry, spirituality, or higher knowledge. Swami Ranganathananda (2005: 13-17) provides a compelling argument about how the latest scientific discoveries have made it grossly inadequate and unscientific to confine oneself to only the lower knowledge. Upanishads are the seminal texts for the higher knowledge.

2. Upanishads as Foundation for Understanding Leadership

Those who have limited themselves only to materialism can only be power-holders and can never understand leadership. They see human beings as nothing more than the body-mind complex, and their dealings with human beings are no different from their dealings with non-human beings. They treat human beings as things, and as objects to be used. They refuse to give any importance to the fact that human beings think and question. The table, the chairs, and the sun do not question. This is power, or sometimes called management as contrasted with leadership. Managers manage *things*, but leaders lead *human beings*.

The body is not the real human being, neither is the mind, for the mind waxes and wanes. It is the spirit beyond, the atman, which alone can live for ever. "The body and mind are continually changing, and are, in fact, only names of series of changeful phenomena, like rivers whose waters are in a constant state of flux, yet presenting the appearance of unbroken streams. Every particle in this body is continually changing; no one has the same body for many minutes together, and yet we think of it as the same body. So with the mind; one moment it is happy, another moment unhappy; one moment strong, another weak; an ever-changing whirlpool." That cannot be the real human being, the atman or the spirit, which is infinite (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 2, "*The real nature of man*," page 79).

The atman never comes nor goes, is never born nor dies (Gambhirananda, 1988, Volume 1, page 151). "It is nature moving before the atman, and the reflection of this motion is on the atman; and the atman ignorantly thinks it is moving, and not nature. When the atman

thinks that, it is in bondage; but when it comes to find it never moves, that it is omnipresent, then freedom comes. The atman in bondage is called Jiva... So the Jiva, the soul, comes to higher or lower states. This is the well-known law of reincarnation; and this law binds all creation” (Vivekananda, 2016: Volume 2, “*The Atman: Its bondage and freedom,*” pages 257-258).

According to the Upanishads, self-inquiry or an attempt to realize the atman, results immediately in solidarity with all beings. The atman in one person is not different from the atman in another person. The atman is infinite and one. Just as gold appears as the various ornaments like bracelet and ring, just as mud appears as the various pots, the one atman appears as the various beings in the world. In addition, all of us are like branches of the same tree. Those who have acquired the second half of knowledge, will see oneness among the diverse beings in this universe, just as intelligent people will first see gold in all the gold ornaments.

Spirituality or the second half of knowledge is a prerequisite for understanding leadership. Human beings are not just the physical and subtle bodies (body, mind, and intellect), which are objects that can be perceived or sensed. The real human being is the subject, the atman. Seeing others as something more than the body-mind complex is the foundation of leadership. It is not possible to understand leadership without an inquiry into the atman. Many leadership authors and practitioners are groping in the dark because of their total ignorance about the very existence of the atman.

Chakraborty (1995) stressed the importance of striving for a subjective metanoia to counteract the objective paranoia of our times. David Bohm, the renowned physicist, had shown clearly the distinction between the measurable and the immeasurable. The West went overboard to establish measure as the king, thus creating fragmentation. To the Greek-derived Western ethos, the measurable alone became the reality.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978: 19) defined leadership as inducing followers to pursue common or at least joint purposes that represent the values and motivations of both leaders and followers. The problem of addressing the values of both leaders and followers could be handled in two ways. Burns termed the first one as transactional leadership and the second as transforming or transformational leadership. Transactional leadership, which involves an exchange of valued things, is based on current values and motivations of both leaders and followers. Transformational leadership on the other hand, does not take the current values and motivations to be fixed, but rather seeks to change them.

According to Burns (1978: 20), transformational leadership "occurs when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality," and results in a transforming effect on both leaders and followers. The purposes of leaders and followers that might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. The transformational leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.

Transformational leadership can be illustrated using the sheep-lion story, related by Swami Vivekananda (2016, Volume 2, page 86) in his lecture on ‘*The real nature of man*’:

“There is a story about a lioness, who was big with young, going about in search of prey; and seeing a flock of sheep, she jumped upon them. She died in the effort; and a little baby lion was born, motherless. It was taken care of by the sheep and the sheep

brought it up, and it grew up with them, ate grass, and bleated like the sheep. And although in time it became a big, full-grown lion, it thought it was a sheep. One day another lion came in search of prey and was astonished to find that in the midst of this flock of sheep was a lion, fleeing like the sheep at the approach of danger. He tried to get near the sheep-lion, to tell it that it was not a sheep but a lion; but the poor animal fled at his approach. However, he watched his opportunity and one day found the sheep-lion sleeping. He approached it and said, 'You are a lion.' 'I am a sheep,' cried the other lion and could not believe the contrary but bleated. The lion dragged him towards a lake and said, 'Look here, here is my reflection and yours.' Then came the comparison. It looked at the lion and then at its own reflection, and in a moment came the idea that it was a lion. The lion roared, the bleating was gone."

Identifying ourselves with the physical and subtle body is the sheep state. Inquiry into our real nature as the atman is the lion state. Enabling others to realize that they are not just the body-mind complex, but that they are the atman, is transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership requires taking followers to a higher level and not to a lower level. Followers are transformed irrespective of whether they are being taken upward or downward, but taking others downward cannot be really termed leadership. There is an implicit assumption that true leaders lead others to a better place, while taking others to a worse place is a form of manipulation or treating others as objects to be used. We could thus distinguish between two types of transformational leadership—authentic transformational leadership or moral leadership that takes followers upward, and pseudo-transformational leadership that takes followers downward. Pseudo-transformational leadership is in reality no leadership at all, since it is a form of manipulation, and manipulation is at the opposite end of a continuum from leadership.

Moral Leadership

According to Burns (1978: 4), "the result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents." Transformational leaders throw themselves into a dynamic relationship with followers who will feel elevated by it and become more active themselves, thereby creating new cadres of leaders. Transformational leaders raise their followers up through levels of morality.

The issue of moral leadership concerned Burns (1978) the most. He considered moral leadership as emerging from, and always returning to, the fundamental wants, needs, aspirations, and values of the followers. Satisfaction of followers' authentic needs is the primary objective of moral leadership. Burns held that transformational leadership "ultimately becomes *moral* in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both" (page 20).

The function of leadership is to engage followers, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise, and in the process to make better citizens of both leaders and followers (Burns, 1978: 461). In real life the most practical advice for leaders is not to treat pawns like pawns, nor princes like princes, but all persons like persons. Woodrow Wilson called for leaders who, by boldly interpreting the nation's conscience, could lift a people out of their everyday selves. That people can be lifted into their better selves is the secret of transforming leadership (Burns, 1978: 462).

James MacGregor Burns tells a story about a student who made the case to her classmates that Hitler was a true leader. However, according to Burns, the student's problem "was not confusion about Hitler, but about the true nature of leadership." Yes, Hitler

superficially addressed his followers' basest wants. However, he did not address their fundamental needs. Yes, he changed German society, but not for the better in the long run. Hitler thus was not a true leader because his agenda was his own, his goals were his own, and the German nation and people were merely the means he used to pursue his personal agenda of power and megalomania (O'Toole, 1999: 171).

Upanishads provide a concrete measure or test to check if followers have been lifted into their better or higher selves. Travel towards the state of oneness with all beings is going upward. Oneness with all beings is the test of truth and moral leadership, providing an easy way to distinguish between Gandhis and Hitlers. Those who pit one group of people against another group, are like those instigating some branches of a tree to cut down other branches; they take people away from oneness with all beings and are not moral leaders. Those who try to unite diverse people at a common higher level are taking them closer to a state of oneness, and they are moral leaders. Built-in internal wholeness, fulfillment, and joy has to be grasped as the true foundation of human existence. Leaders and followers alike need to actively recognize that the essential nature of human development is to hasten and perfect one's evolution for manifesting this involved wholeness (Chakraborty, 1995). Krishnan (2007) found that transformational leadership enhanced followers' spirituality or oneness with all other beings.

Ethical Leadership

Like immoral leadership, unethical leadership is in reality no leadership at all since it is a form of manipulation, and manipulation is at the opposite end of a continuum from leadership. "One idea stands out as the centre of all ethical systems, expressed in various forms, namely, doing good to others." These are all various expressions of that eternal truth that, 'I am the universe; this universe is one.' There is no reason otherwise to do good to others. "It is sympathy, the feeling of sameness everywhere. The hardest hearts feel sympathy for other beings sometimes." Even those who get frightened if they are told that their identification with the body-mind complex and this assumed individuality is really a delusion, that it is ignoble to try to cling to this apparent individuality, those very people will agree that extreme self-abnegation is the centre of all morality. And perfect self-abnegation means the abnegation of this apparent self, the abnegation of all selfishness. This idea of 'me and mine' is the result of past superstition, and the more this present self as body-mind complex passes away, the more the real Self or the atman becomes manifest. This is true self-abnegation, the centre, the basis, the gist of all moral teaching; and whether one knows it or not the whole world is slowly going towards it, practicing it more or less. Only, the vast majority of human beings are doing it unconsciously (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 2, "*The real nature of man*," pages 82-83).

The question arises whether this can be practiced in modern society, which takes us to the concept of Yoga. Derived from the root *yuj* (to bind together), Yoga means binding one's psychic powers, balancing and enhancing them. By yoking together and harnessing our energies, we force the passage from the narrow ego to the transcendent personality. The spirit tears itself away from its prison house, stands out of it, and reaches its own innermost being. Yoga is a method or discipline that leads to the realization of the atman or subject and a new understanding of the unity of all beings (Radhakrishnan, 1971: 50). Karma-Yoga is one such path. Mulla and Krishnan (2010) found that Karma-Yoga was positively related to transformational leadership.

3. Karma-Yoga: Path towards Oneness

According to Swami Vivekananda (2016, Volume 1, "*Freedom*," pages 97-98), until we give up the strong attachment to our existence as the body-mind complex, we have no hope of catching even a glimpse of the atman or that infinite freedom beyond. There are two ways to give up our attachment to this little universe of the senses or of the mind. One is the negative way, and the other is the positive way. The negative way is only possible to people with gigantic wills who simply stand up and say, 'No, I will not have this,' and the mind and body obey their will, and they come out successful. However, such people are very rare. "The vast majority of humankind choose the positive way, the way through the world, making use of all the bondages themselves to break those very bondages." The former way of obtaining non-attachment is by reasoning, and the latter way is through work. The first is Jnana-Yoga (the way of knowledge) for people of contemplation, and is characterized by the refusal to do any work; the second is Karma-Yoga (the way of action) for people of action, in which there is no cessation from work. Karma-Yoga is the means for active people to realize their true nature, according to the Bhagavad-Gita (Radhakrishnan, 1971: 132). The Bhagavad-Gita is like a fine garland or a bouquet of the choicest flowers collected from the Upanishads, beautifully arranged together in their proper places (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 4, "*Thoughts on the Gita*," page 106).

Unselfishness or Self-Abnegation

"Karma-Yoga is the attaining through unselfish work of that freedom which is the goal of all human nature." Every selfish action retards our reaching the goal, and every unselfish action takes us towards the goal. Hence, the only definition that can be given of morality is this: *That which is selfish is immoral, and that which is unselfish is moral.* "Karma-Yoga, therefore, is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness, and by good works" (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 1, "*The ideal of Karma-Yoga*," pages 110-111).

Human beings work with various motives. The motives may be self-centered or others-centered. "There are some who are really the salt of the earth in every country and who work for work's sake, who do not care for name, or fame, or even to go to heaven. They work just because good will come of it." If people work without any selfish motive in view, it may appear that they do not gain anything; but they gain the highest. "Unselfishness is more paying, only people have not the patience to practice it" (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 1, "*Karma in its effect on character*," pages 31-32).

Non-Attachment

Karma-Yoga is giving up all attachment to work, while working incessantly. Non-attachment means not expecting returns for oneself. It requires not identifying oneself with anything. "Misery comes through attachment, not through work. As soon as we identify ourselves with the work we do, we feel miserable; but if we do not identify ourselves with it, we do not feel that misery." If a beautiful picture belonging to another is burnt, people do not generally become miserable; but when their own picture is burnt, they feel very miserable. "Both were beautiful pictures, perhaps copies of the same original; but in one case very much more misery is felt than in the other." It is because in one case they identify themselves with the picture, and not in the other. "This 'I and mine' causes the whole misery." Every act or thought of selfishness makes us attached to something, and immediately we are made slaves. "*Everything that is done under compulsion goes to build up attachment*" (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 1, "*Freedom*," pages 100-104).

Duty-Orientation

It is necessary in the practice of Karma-Yoga to know what duty is. Any action that makes us go upward is a good action, and is our duty; any action that makes us go downward is evil, and is not our duty. “It is therefore our duty to do that work which will exalt and ennoble us in accordance with the ideals and activities of the society in which we are born.” It is work through the sense of duty that leads us gradually to work being done for its own sake. The objective of fulfilling duties is the attenuating of the lower self, so that the real higher Self or atman may shine forth—the lessening of the frittering away of energies on the lower plane of existence, so that the soul may manifest itself on the higher ones. By limiting selfishness, we open the way to an unlimited expansion of the real nature of man (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 1, “*What is duty?*” pages 63-67).

Bhajananda (2006: 8-9) cautions against Karma-Yoga being confused with mere work. To work like a bullock, or to work in any way one likes, is not Karma-Yoga. The work that most people do is nothing but an aimless rat race for name, fame, and sense enjoyment, and to call it Karma-Yoga is a misnomer. Karma-Yoga is a spiritual discipline that aims at Mukti, freedom, or oneness with all beings. The concept of Gunas helps explain the role of work in Karma-Yoga.

Gunas

Knowledge-complexes that exist in living beings are certainly different from those that exist in external inanimate objects in that they are far subtler and have a preponderance of a special quality of plasticity and translucence (Sattva). The fundamental characteristic of external gross matter or an inanimate object is its mass (Tamas). Energy (Rajas) is common to both gross matter and the subtle thought-stuff that is unique to living beings. However, mass is at its lowest minimum in thought-stuff, whereas the capacity of translucence or intelligence-stuff is at its highest in thought-stuff (Dasgupta, 1991: 241).

Thus, both thought and gross matter are made up of three elements—a plasticity of intelligence-stuff (Sattva), energy-stuff (Rajas), and mass-stuff (Tamas) or the factor of obstruction. Of these, the last two are predominant in gross matter and the first two in thought (Dasgupta, 1991: 242). These three types of ultimate subtle entities are called Gunas. These three subtle Guna substances combine in different proportions to create different entities with different qualities (Dasgupta, 1991: 243-244).

These three forces as manifested in the physical world are what we may call equilibrium, activity, and inertness. “Tamas is typified as darkness or inactivity; Rajas is activity, expressed as attraction or repulsion; and Sattva is the equilibrium of the two.” In every being, there are these three forces. “Sometimes Tamas prevails. We become lazy, we cannot move, we are inactive, bound down by certain ideas or by mere dullness. At other times activity prevails, and at still other times that calm balancing of both.” Again, in different people, one of these forces is generally predominant. The characteristic of one person is inactivity, dullness and laziness; that of another, activity, power, and manifestation of energy; and in still another, we find the sweetness, calmness, and gentleness, which are due to the balancing of both action and inaction (Vivekananda, 2016, Volume 1, “*Each is great in his own place,*” page 36).

For those who are predominantly Tamasic (highest on Tamas and comparatively low on Rajas and Sattva), performing any action is difficult, leave alone unattached action or Karma-Yoga. Once they increase their levels of Rajas, they will start doing some action. However, Karma-Yoga is possible only if they reduce their levels of Rajas and increase Sattva. Changing oneself from being Tamasic to being Rajasic to being Sattvic is the simplest

way to become a Karma-Yogi and to realize our real nature as the atman. Changing others from being Tamasic to being Rajasic to being Sattvic and enabling them to realize their real nature as the atman is transformational leadership.

4. Conclusion

There is widespread ignorance about leadership because most people have confined their education to only the knowledge of the objective world of objects. They have not endeavored to delve into the second half of knowledge, about the subject or the atman. So long as human beings are seen as the body-mind complex only, and are treated as objects, leadership is not possible. Most of those who claim to be leaders are only power-holders.

Transformational leadership involves enabling followers to lift themselves to a higher level. What a higher level means can be known by studying the Upanishads. Traveling closer towards realizing the atman and understanding one's oneness with all beings is going upward. Enabling followers to move closer towards understanding their oneness with all beings is transformational leadership.

According to Swami Vivekananda (2016, Volume 2, "*The real nature of man*," pages 83-84), there is the highest utility in the higher knowledge, the inquiry into the atman or the real human being. Happiness is what everyone is seeking for, but the majority seek it in things which are evanescent and not real. "No happiness was ever found in the senses." There never was a person who found happiness in the enjoyment of the senses. Happiness is only found in the atman, the Spirit. The next point is that ignorance is the great mother of all misery, and the fundamental ignorance is to think that the Infinite weeps and cries, that It is finite. "This is the basis of all ignorance that we, the immortal, the ever pure, the perfect Spirit, think that we are little minds, that we are little bodies; it is the mother of all selfishness." As soon as I think that I am a little body, I want to preserve it, to protect it, to keep it nice, at the expense of other bodies; then each of us becomes separate from others. "As soon as this idea of separation comes, it opens the door to all mischief and leads to all misery. This is the utility that if a very small fractional part of human beings living today can put aside the idea of selfishness, narrowness, and littleness, this earth will become a paradise tomorrow; but with machines and improvements of material knowledge only, it will never be. These only increase misery, as oil poured on fire increases the flame all the more." Without the knowledge of the Spirit, all material knowledge is only giving the selfish people one more instrument to take what belongs to others, to live upon the life of others, instead of giving up their lives for others.

The Upanishads take us to a very high plane of thinking. We reach a new dimension of thought, which is simply fascinating and intellectually stimulating (Ranganathananda, 2005: 11). Studying the Upanishads provides an experiential learning of transformational leadership. It is not possible to understand leadership without an inquiry into the atman.

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