

# Leading with Authenticity and Presence

by Susan Skjei, MS, MA

*When you meet a person who has inner authentic presence, you find he has an overwhelming genuineness, which might be somewhat frightening because it is so true and honest and real. You experience a sense of command radiating from the person of inner authentic presence. Although that person might be a garbage collector or a taxi driver, still he or she has an uplifted quality, which magnetizes you and commands your attention.*

These words from Chogyam Trungpa, paint a powerful and intriguing picture of an essential quality of leadership that often goes unacknowledged but is desperately needed during this time of social, economic and environmental turbulence.

The primary practice Chogyam Trungpa taught for discovering basic goodness was meditation. However, he considered all of life's challenges to be opportunities to practice and incorporated the various elements of everyday life into rituals for waking up. He emphasized the importance of decorum in everyday life, including how one eats, wears one's clothes, and speaks to others. All of these practices were intended to invoke the openness, fearlessness, and tenderness that is the hallmark of the Shambhala warrior. The path of warriorship provides an inspiring and uplifting journey toward greater wholeness and authenticity.

## Discovering Authenticity

The definition of authenticity within the Shambhala tradition refers to a state of awakened pres-

ence in which the individual has access to the profundity of basic goodness as well as appreciation of his or her own uniqueness. The Tibetan term for this awakened presence is wangthang, translated as “authentic presence” or “field of power.” Although authentic presence is inherent, discipline and rigor are needed in order to access it. According to Trunpqa, “The cause of authentic presence is the merit you accumulate and the effect is the authentic presence itself.”

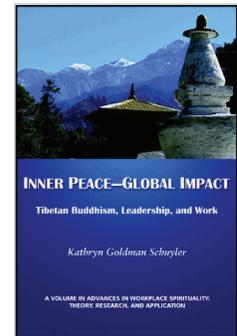
Merit or virtue comes from emptying out and letting go—the ability to empathize and exchange oneself with the suffering and aspirations of others. It is a result of gradual development as well as instantaneously letting go of the habitual mind.

Although these qualities of authenticity are familiar to us, Trungpa said, most people only experience them in glimpses. In order to sustain the glimpse, there is a need for discipline. This can be accomplished through the practice of meditation. There are two meditation methods that can assist with the journey toward authenticity. The first is called *shamatha*, which in Sanskrit means “development of peace.” First the practitioner must be able to simplify external stimuli, and thorough a simple technique, such as following the breath as it goes in and out of the body, bring his or her awareness into the present moment. The goal is not to try to think happy or pleasant thoughts or to think about peacefulness, per se, but through the process of

acknowledging that one is thinking, and letting go of specific thoughts, peace can naturally arise. According to Trungpa, “It doesn't really matter what thoughts you have in the practice of meditation, whether you have monstrous thoughts, or benevolent thoughts, all of them are regarded purely as thinking. They are neither virtuous nor sinful.”

The second meditation discipline is called *vipassana* or clear seeing. It is not enough to have stability of mind. One must also cultivate clarity and the ability to see the interaction of cause and effect that can result in insight. The meditation technique involves opening up to the environment or “space” and noticing what happens when the practitioner attempts to rest his or her mind in this. Trungpa also emphasized the value of meditation for learning to synchronize one's body and mind.

This method of synchronizing your mind and body is training you to be very simple and to feel that you are not special, but ordinary, extra-ordinary. You sit simply, as a warrior, and out of that, a sense of individual dignity arises. You are sitting on the earth and you realize that this earth deserves you and you deserve this earth. You are there—fully, personally, genuinely. So meditation practice in the Shambhala tradition is designed to educate people to be honest and genuine, true to themselves.



## ROUSING UNCONDITIONAL CONFIDENCE

There are many aspects to the Shambhala teachings, but perhaps the one that is most important for leadership development has to do with how to rouse unconditional confidence, regardless of external circumstances. This is called raising *lungta* or “wind-horse.” It involves tuning in to one’s body, emotions, and mental state, fully acknowledging and synchronizing them, and then letting go. In this way, a leader can learn to access the energy, or wind, of a situation and engage with it powerfully, as if riding a horse. By practicing this in a variety of ways, in both formal and informal settings, it is possible for the leader to develop strength and presence, or “merit” as it is known in this tradition.

## LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

The importance of courage and leadership presence in the midst of difficult situations has been well documented in the leadership literature. Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas have said that good leadership is about making sound judgments when confronted with crucible moments. Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic, used the same term and emphasized the importance of moments of truth for authentic leaders. Similarly, Joseph Badaracco described moments of courage or defining moments. All of these refer to the turning points at which a leader faces a challenge and then responds with the sum total of whoever he or she is at the time with whatever level of training and experience he or she has at that moment.

Many leadership experts have sought to analyze and evaluate the actions leaders take in these critical moments in order to recommend

additional training to help them respond more appropriately in the future. This is certainly helpful, but it doesn’t address the inner experience of the leader and how awareness impacts not only what the leader sees, but how he or she responds to the situation. As Bill O’Reilly, CEO of Hannover Insurance said, “The success of an intervention is determined by the internal condition of the intervener.” When a leader faces an emerging, complex challenge that is different from anything that has happened before, he or she must innovate on the spot. These moments require the leader to access a deeper level of authenticity, coherence, resourcefulness, and presence to respond appropriately (or at all). It might be said that authentic moments are those when we are most at home with ourselves or at one with ourselves. However, leaders cannot take these moments for granted. In order to understand authentic moments more fully, a deeper exploration of leaders’ lived experience is needed. This is what Chogyam Trungpa offered the world through his teachings on authentic presence—both an understanding of authenticity and a pathway for cultivating it.

## WORKING WITH FEAR

The biggest obstacle to authentic presence is fear. Leaders cannot eliminate fear, but must get to know their fear intimately in order to know how to work with it. Bravery is not the absence of fear but the ability to take wise action in spite of the fear. Pema Chodron, a Western student of Trungpa’s who became a monastic, wrote, “To the degree you face yourself and face your fear, you know what it triggers in you and all of the ways you try to run away from it, and trust the potential that you and

all other beings have to open up, be wakeful and be kind, you don’t right away discover courage, but you discover tender vulnerability.”

The antidote to fear is not a brittle confidence born of certainty, but the vulnerability of an open heart. Thus the Shambhala path emphasizes the importance of gentleness and vulnerability as well as fearlessness and confidence. The authentic leader balances these two qualities with discernment and intelligence. ■



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