

Anushka Fernandopulle
The Dharma of Leadership
Week Three: “Qualities of a Leader”
March 19, 2018



Hello again. Welcome to the third video in the series on dharma and leadership. In the first two videos, we went over how dharma teachings help us align with the truth of the way things are and how this can relate to leadership. In this video, we're going to talk about making your life a path of practice and define leadership a little bit more.

Like in the previous videos, I invite you first to just stabilize your mind, to gather your attention. When you feel like you can, take a deep breath in, and as you exhale, just feel yourself sitting here or standing. Just connect with the experience of the body. Try to relax your shoulders. Feel yourself breathing in, breathing out. If you want to pause the video now to do this for longer, you can. A few breaths can be helpful to collect the attention.

To recap, we talked about dharma as natural law, about the characteristics of change, of non-solidity, and of the unreliability in all of the experiential world. These are aspects that we may not notice as clearly if we're not paying attention, but it's helpful to gain insight into these in order to dissolve or dismantle the way that we relate to life that's based on a mistaken understanding of the way things are.

[To clarify] this question of leadership, let's define who's a leader and what leadership is. The most common way that people use this term “leadership” is usually about positional leadership. Someone is the president or CEO, or they're the director of an organization, department chair, team captain, class president, parent, or community leader. You have some official position with clearly defined responsibilities in your family, your community, your job, a social movement, etc. This is official; you are the “blank.” You have a title.



There is also something that could be called situational or emergent leadership. Whether or not you're the official leader, there are times when you see something that needs to get done. You perceive something to be attended to and you're the person there to do it. Emergent

leadership arises situationally and it can be there for a few minutes. For instance, if there's someone who collapses when you're walking down the street, you ask someone to call 9-1-1 and you check their pulse.

A friend of mine gave me another example. In Chennai, in South India, there are sometimes very snarled traffic jams during rush hour. Before an official police person or a traffic cop can get there, usually someone on their way to work gets out of their car and just starts to sort things out, directing traffic through the intersection. Then they get back in their car and they continue on their way to work.

There may be more times than you think when you have been or could be a leader, beyond just an official title. We can even question the idea of ‘a leader.’ Based on our insights and understanding from the last videos—namely, the non-solidity of all labels—we can reconsider ideas that we have about ourselves, whether it is “I am a leader” or “I am not a leader,” as true, untrue, or temporarily true. These thoughts can be useful at some points, but we can hold them lightly.

You can consider all the different ideas that you might have about yourself at different times—that you are very smart, stupid, a great leader, a terrible leader, etc. All of these are actually ideas that you have. These are momentary arisings in the mind and it's helpful to recognize them as such and take them all with a grain of salt. For different people, it can be helpful to cultivate one or the other. For some people who haven't seen themselves as people who can be leaders, it's helpful to encourage yourself to step up. Recognize that you do have something to offer and to give.



For others, it means stepping back, not holding so tightly to the idea that “I always need to be in charge. I'm always the one who runs things.” Hold that loosely and ask yourself, who's the best one in to guide this situation? Is collective leadership possible here?

Collective leadership can be very, very helpful to take advantage of the strengths of a variety of people in a group.

It also can be very helpful as a leader to recognize aspects of identity that impact the ways we interact with each other. For example, recognize that there are systems of identity that are impacted through historical systems of oppression in gender, age, and race that play out interpersonally through power, privilege, and communication. We need to keep this in mind when we're interacting with others in a group or in public systems. This is another way in which systems are built upon each other.

In the previous video I talked about systems containing repeating patterns that you can see in nature. “Fractal” is a bit of a fancy word, but it could be something very simple. For example, you see in cauliflower or broccoli that there are tiny repetitions of that same little tree-like structure in each of the fronds, and in each of the subareas of the fronds, and then in each piece of broccoli that you might have on your plate, and then in the broccoli tree or cauliflower head. This is the way that it is in nature. You can see even my shirt has some repeating patterns in it. There are big dots and there are small dots. Many, many aspects of our world have systems with repeating patterns. These systems interact with each other, seeming to lead to complexity, but there are actually rules underlying those systems. They interact in a non-linear but interconnected way. It's helpful for us to try as much as possible to recognize how these patterns have played throughout time as well as in the present moment.



For example, what happens on the national level impacts what happens on a state level, the city level, and the local community level. You can't extricate any of them from each other. [This even applies] beyond the national level to the international level, to the galactic environmental level, and bigger.

It's helpful to be able to read the patterns that occur so that we are then able to maintain balance in the face of ongoing events. This is where we can access qualities of the heart and mind that can help us manifest leadership—whether it's part of your official job, situational, or an example of collective leadership.

Think about who is a good leader. You can probably bring some people to mind who you've admired. Two professors, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, once did a study about leaders with over 75,000 people. Over 25 years, they asked study participants: “What characteristics do you look for most in a leader?” The top four characteristics were honesty, inspiring attitude, forward-thinking, and competency. The competency characteristic is related to the particular field [that they are in], but all the others are actually related to qualities of the heart and the mind. It's helpful to recognize that these are things we can develop. This is where the path of practice and human development in the Buddhist teachings is related to the development of leadership.

You could say that there's one game board we're all playing on and it's about achieving material goals in the world—success, money, career positions, degrees, etc. All of it happens through interactions and mental and physical activity. At the same time, there is another game board that we're playing all the time about the development of heart and mind. Whether we know it or not, we're always cultivating certain characteristics. We're planting certain seeds and watering and fertilizing them, but for most people, it's not done intentionally. As a result, the development goes in many different directions.



It's possible to have a more intentional approach to this process, and its beneficial not just for our own development, but also for the manifestation of leadership. We can recognize that intention is at the root of this process, and that cause and effect form a universal law for how things work.

We'll learn how to observe the way we speak, act, and interact with others, and the ways that others interact with us, too. It's possible to connect these insights to being a better leader. I'll give you some examples of qualities we can develop. We already talked about awareness or mindfulness—this capacity to be receptive and tuned in to the moment, clearly aware of what's happening before we have some lens of added perception. The key is to practice doing that with as much continuity as possible. Mindfulness is not hard to do for one moment, but to continue it is often challenging. If I say “Can you feel your feet on the ground? Can you feel your hands?” Yeah, you could feel that. But to continue that awareness without breaks is harder. It takes training.

How can we develop equanimity or balance of the heart and mind even in the face of unpredictable conditions? How can we prevent ourselves from getting knocked around? This kind of equanimity is a very mature spiritual quality; it's something we can cultivate through specific spiritual practices.

In the Insight Meditation tradition there are some practices for cultivating these hard qualities of equanimity. One method is to investigate experiences such as doubt. When the mind is beset by doubt, how can we see through that? How can we not be paralyzed by this feeling? For this week you can cultivate focus. As you're doing different things, practice cultivating focus by just noticing how wholeheartedly you are doing that activity. It's as simple as when you are drinking tea, coffee, or water—can you be fully there in those moments?

I recommend you try to find five times during the day when you have some very simple opportunity, even if it's for a few seconds or a few minutes, to recall being present. Come back.

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Feel the breath. Feel yourself touching a doorknob as you turn it. Feel yourself standing. Feel yourself drinking. If you have an elevator you have to ride in, push the elevator button. *Ding*. And as you step into the elevator, be present.

This is like taking a page from our friends from the Muslim tradition. Devout Muslims pray five times a day, orienting themselves toward that which is most holy for them: Mecca. What if five times a day, you oriented yourself towards that which is most important? What if you recentered yourself and connected to the heart?