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## **Spirituality and Management – Perspectives and Practices: Insights from Indian Wisdom\***

### **What is Spirituality?**

What is spirituality or spiritual pursuit? The Latin word '*Spiritus*' means breath. Breath is the most fundamental as well as a universal rhythm that keeps us alive and vibrant in our earthly existence. Thus, spirituality is the force or energy that keeps us alert, agile, open and receptive to new thoughts and ideas, and instills in us the willingness to adjust to external changes even amidst turbulence. It brings in fresh air and new light in individuals, organizations, and society at large and charge us with the dynamism to challenge ourselves to question old habits and outdated thinking and surge ahead to clear up the dead woods of the past and evolve into newer realms of awakening in thought and action, vision and mission. However, it also ensures that we retain our connection with the glory of the past and preserve our lessons from the same. Spirituality is not about a long-awaited destination or endpoint, it is a continuous journey of the human spirit, an adventure of our consciousness, a pilgrimage of our mind and heart. As Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate poet from India, put it succinctly in his beautiful verse with his matchless literary mastery:

'My pilgrimage is not  
at the end of the road;  
my temples are all there  
on both sides of my pathway.' (Translation mine)

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Now, where does this journey begin? It often begins by asking some deeper questions about life and work, some of which may be disturbing and unsettling, shaking us from our cushy and cozy zones of comfort. With the awakening of the need to imbibe new modes of learning and living within us, the real journey then begins at the level of the self. Each one of us has a particular notion of the self that is mostly limited within our body-mind frame and is conditioned by our experience of our physical body, our sense organs, our mental faculties, and our intellectual acumen. But hardly does this notion venture out of the comfort zone of ‘my body’ and ‘my mind’. The spiritual journey takes off when we begin to realize the limits of this constricted notion of the self and expand this notion at the level of our consciousness to include the others – initially the proximate others like the family, the neighbourhood community, organization and then the distant others like the society, the government, the environment and the planet at large. The systematic evolution of consciousness can be likened to the increasing diameter or circumference of a sphere as it reaches and keeps on engulfing larger concentric spheres. What really happens is that the narrow little self now expands to become a bigger and higher Self that permeates the self of the others. Gradually the petty concerns of the individual like mindless consumption, self-aggrandizement and competitive rivalry fade into the significance and are replaced by concern for others, the welfare of many and sensitivity to larger issues like social cohesion and ecological awareness. Deeper questions on the meaning of work and purpose of life become increasingly important in leadership consciousness whereby the leader is intensely involved and passionately engaged in reaching out to the society and the environment with his or her offerings or deliverables for global well-being.

### **Turning the Tide: Towards Spirituality in Management**

During the last three decades, there has been a growing critique of mainstream management education and its dominant paradigm based on capitalism, consumerism and a homogeneous industrial monoculture. Eminent stalwarts have made critical remarks, based on research and analysis from their respective standpoints in leading journals. (Ghoshal 2005; Bennis and O’Toole 2005). It may be pertinent here to share some of these alternative initiatives that have also opened up the avenues of entry of the notion of spirituality in management discourse and practice. In 2004 Ian Mitroff, Professor Emeritus, USC Marshall School of Business sent an open letter to the Deans and faculty of business schools in USA where he came down bold and sharp of our existing management education where he identified five areas of failure that resulted in the following aberrations among the students and faculty:

- ‘1. A mean-spirited and distorted view of human nature;
2. A narrow, outdated, and repudiated notion of ethics;
3. A narrow and highly limited definition of, and the role of, management in human affairs
4. An overly reified conception of the “sub-disciplines” of the field of management; and
5. A sense of learned helplessness and hopelessness among faculties, students, and workers regarding control of their careers and lives.’ (Mitroff 2004)

All this points towards some glaring pitfalls in both the process as well as the outcome of mainstream management education – dominance of our techno-economic identity over deeper and nobler aspects of human nature; failure to impart ethics education in manner that is vibrant, engaging and relevant to the students; sharpening of instrumental reason at the cost of critical rational faculties; denigrating the power of lofty emotions in personal and organizational transformation; splitting the holistic conception of management into disconnected pigeon holes of areas and sub-disciplines; and, loss of meaning in work and purpose in life.

At the same time there has been the search for an alternative holistic paradigm of organic connectivity so that “...our heart and head does not split knowledge into dualities of thought and being, mind and body, emotion and intellect, but resonates with a wholeness and fullness that engages every part of one’s being.” (Kind et al 2005) To usher in new air and new light into an otherwise structured and rigorous management education, illumined thinkers and leaders are seeking liberating insights from disciplines like humanities (literature, arts, films, music, theatre etc.), sports, spirituality, and others to establish the missing connect between learning and life. For long, we have kept on ‘solving the wrong problem precisely’ using methods that are primarily techno-economic in nature whereas the systemic and spiritual perspectives are ruthlessly pushed out of our vista of vision and concern (Mitroff 1998). The serious implications of attempting pseudo-solutions to the problems of our economy and society have been boldly highlighted by Knut Ims and Laszlo Zsolnai (2006) in the opening chapter ‘Shallow Success and Deep Failure’ of their edited book ‘Business within Limits’. In this book, they went ahead to present an alternative holistic and humanistic world-view rooted in Deep Ecology and Buddhist Economics. Michael Ray (1992) had proposed a similar paradigm in which he advocated that vision must replace profit as the key aim of business. S. K. Chakraborty (1995) identified the main pillars of wholesome business transformation in his concept of ‘Business Ashram’ on the founding principles of Indian philosophy, culture and

ethos. This resonates with Stephen Covey's (Covey 1995) emphasis on character beyond professional competence in his proposed shift in management metaphor from the stomach to spirit.

Beyond the organizational imperatives for enhancement of product or service quality there has been a thrust on cultivating a 'quality mind' (Chakraborty and Chakraborty 2006; Chakraborty 1998) or 'quality consciousness' (Chatterjee, 1998; Chatterjee 2003; Chatterjee, 2006) for all-round holistic development of the individuals. This has necessitated the quest for developing and implementing an enduring and sustainable Indian model of management with a spiritual foundation as an alternative to the dominant market capitalism model of management thriving on fierce competition. In the West too, the search for alternative sources of learning for management prompted Michael Gelb (Gelb 1998) to draw inspiration from the seven principles of learning and creativity laid down by Leonardo da Vinci, the stellar figure of Italian Renaissance. Weick (Weick 2006) propounded a new approach to learning through 'heedful relating' by cultivating the art of 'mindfulness'. There has been an increasing interest in Spirituality as evident from the rising number of publications on Spirituality and Holistic Management (Biberman, Whitty and Robbin 1999; Bell and Taylor 2004; Cash and Grey 2000; Fischer 1999; Mitroff and Denton 1999; Dehler and Walsh 1994; Neal et al. 1999; Pruzan et al. 2007; Tischler 1999). The concepts of Synchronicity (Jarowski, 1998) and Spiritual Quotient or SQ (Zohar and Marshal, 2000) are significant developments in this direction. Other important developments have been the concept of 'Soul work' in organisations (Mirvis 1997) and Spirituality at Work (SAW) movement (Benefiel 2005; Fry 2005; Labbs 1996; Marques et al. 2007; Milliman et al. 1999)

### **Spirituality and Purpose in Organizations**

The effect of spiritual awakening is felt as much in the individual as it is true for the organization. With the dawning of wisdom in leadership consciousness, the business leaders begin to identify themselves even if partly with the multiple stakeholders whose growth and well-being are no more isolated from that of the organization. The cult of management by manipulation is gradually replaced by striving for mutual understanding and cooperation. The more the spirit and purpose of business is awakened in the leaders their focus shifts from short term profiteering to building a humane, robust and sustainable organizational culture rooted in a far-reaching and inclusive vision, a compelling mission and humanistic values and ethics.

The leadership then consciously spends considerable time in evolving an inspiring Vision-Mission-Values framework by involving all the levels of the organization as far as possible and then ensures that it percolates down the line across the length and breadth of the organization. Awakened and enlightened ethical behaviour then does not become a mere compulsion but a spontaneous outcome of a deep and organic connect and communion in spirit with all the stakeholders. Ethics does not remain a mechanical adherence to the Company Code of Conduct but a lively and creative engagement stewarded by an enlightened leader and owned up across the organization. This also transmits a flow of positive energy to all other stakeholders and inspire them to make their respective valuable contribution to the movement towards enlightened leadership. Charged with a higher purpose and a noble mission, leadership decisions and action get elevated to the level of an offering to humanity for global well-being.

### **The Spiritual Odyssey: An Adventure of Consciousness**

What then is the implication of this spiritual journey for the organization?

Firstly, it makes the organisation a vibrant and throbbing entity that is always in the path of evolution. Like breath, it brings to the society fresh air and new light so that it can come out of the stagnant dragging force of the dead habits and fossilized ideas and thoughts of the past while retaining its effulgent glory. It opens up new avenues of experimenting with our innate creative energy and find out novel and pragmatic ways of resolving our pressing problems that apparently had created an impasse in our personal and social spaces of development. To use a current phrase it shows us multiple ways of how to ‘think out of the box’. Spirituality, in essence, embraces different pathways of liberating the self so that we may reach the zone of enlightenment. Enlightenment is not a sudden flash of light from the above. An old poem will make it clear.

‘Before enlightenment, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers,  
During enlightenment, mountains are no more mountains and rivers are no more rivers;  
After enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers are once again rivers.’  
(From personal diary collection)

Then what has changed? It is the way we look at the world and ourselves too.

Secondly, another important aspect of spiritual culture is encouraging the art of questioning and dialogue. One may recall the golden words of Socrates: 'An unexamined life is not worth living.' Such examination begins with asking the deeper questions that may often be uneasy. It may be mentioned here that the Upanishads have been composed in a mode of conversation between Teacher and Student or Master and Disciple. Profound topics on philosophy and life, in general, have been deliberated upon here through questions from the student-seeker and the answers given by the Master. The text of the Bhagavadgita is all throughout a conversation between the disciple Arjuna and his Master, the Blessed Lord (Shri Bhagavan) Himself. The conversation is logically structured and systematically evolving taking the seeker gradually up along the progressively unfolding layers of consciousness to the final rendezvous. When the leadership consciousness also evolves in a similar fashion, with increasing clarity and depth, the dead woods are cleared and it steers ahead towards creating an enlightened organization.

Thirdly, with the human consciousness growing beyond the small self and then flowing into the others, the constricted notions of material consumption, self-aggrandizement, mindless competition gradually give way to concern for others, welfare of the others, and an individual as well as collective quest for something higher in life beyond our narrowly circumscribed limits of a life that is closed within rigid boundaries.

Fourthly, at a macro level, with our growing connectivity with the planet and the cosmos in heart and spirit, there is a natural flowering of ecological sensitivity within us. This is qualitatively different from the number crunching exercises that experts often engage in for generating environmental awareness. This is more a matter of feeling from the heart as one is in deep communion with Nature at this level of ecological consciousness.

And finally, with the complete evolution of spiritual consciousness, our interaction with the world and our relationships with others becomes like a sport that we begin to play as we are increasingly becoming aware that the other is essentially identical to us at the core, and the difference is only in external forms. This reduces the chances of violence and strife and helps create a climate of peace and amity through mutual understanding and cooperation. Above all, we all begin to enjoy the drama of life like a child playing a game all the while with another!

Sri Aurobindo, probably the most profound seer-philosopher of modern India, had given us the most beautiful and vivid depiction of God:

“What is God after all? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden!”

### **Integrating Indian Wisdom into Management Learning: Spirituality in Practice**

Now the question remains, what are those learning processes that enable an individual to think beyond the boundary of the self and the organization and include the others? Indian spiritual wisdom has pertinent insights to offer in this regard. It may be mentioned here that Indian spirituality is not just an exercise in high-level philosophical thinking. It also lays down practical methods for the individual as well as collective assimilation of the spiritual messages in life and work. These are psychological processes that help in internalizing the insights in real life by expanding and enriching one's consciousness. These have been tested and tried in various management courses taught at the Management Centre for Human Values, Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta under the stewardship of the legendary pioneer in this field, the late Prof. S. K. Chakraborty. In several courses in IIM Calcutta and later in IIM Shillong as well as in corporate training programmes these psychological methods have been tried with a fair measure of success. The method which was founded on the principle and practice of mindfulness was called 'Quality Mind Process (QMP)' and comprised of a few steps as follows:

**1. Awareness Internalization:** by way of alternate nostril deep mindful breathing and inhaling positive vibrations from the surroundings and exhaling one's own positive vibrations from within to the environment creating a feeling of positive and harmonious exchange process with the world outside.

**2. Intimate Contact with One's Inner Space:** by following our normal breathing through both nostrils and make entry into one's inner space and remain in touch with one's inner life and enjoy just being with oneself.

**3. Emptying and Stilling the Brain Space:** by taking the awareness into the brain space and auto-suggesting that the brain space is becoming light, loose and empty so that the thinking process of the left brain may be suspended and the creating faculties of the right brain awakened for the holistic perception of reality. If any thought comes, one has to remain a witness to the thought and not chase it or be guided by it.

**4. Opening Up at the Top of the Head and Inviting Higher Universal Consciousness:** by way of opening up at the top of the head and inviting higher universal consciousness in the form of

sunlight to bathe and energize one's entire internal system and uniting with one's own individual consciousness in a grand, splendid union ('Yog')

**5. Concentrating on the Luminous Heart Centre and Identifying with one's Real Self:** by way of concentrating on a steady luminous flame at the one's heart centre (where the stomach and the chest meet, the cave of the heart) and identifying with it by auto-suggestion as one's own Real Self, 'I am IT!' (I am this steady flame in essence; this is my true identity)

**Quality Mind Process (QMP)** as an exercise in cultivating awakening of consciousness has been practiced for several decades in our courses and corporate workshops with positive feedback and outcome. The benefits are as follows:

1. Increases the ability to deal with turbulence and uncertainty
2. Maintains poise and equanimity in moments of ups and downs in work and life
3. Fosters holistic thinking and creative potential
4. Awakens and sharpens ethical sensitivity
5. Helps effective management of stress
6. Allows smooth access to wisdom in the effective discharge of leadership roles
7. Fosters empathetic relationship and positive team-spirit

The positive feedback from the students and workshop participants have resulted in gradual integration and acceptance of this process in management pedagogy. The process can be done by a person at an individual level as well as in groups, each group comprising of about 25 to 30 members. This can be adopted as an integral part of any learning or training module on Self Development and Organizational Renewal. For decades these workshops have been conducted successfully in such reputable Indian organizations like Tata Steel, Tata Motors, State Bank of India, Indian Oil Corporation, Oil India Limited, Oil and Natural Gas Commission, Bhilwara Group, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited, Steel Authority of India, Gujarat Ambuja and many others. Repeat courses in these organizations went on to prove the effectiveness of the process for individuals and organizations. Academics and management consultants from both the eastern and western hemispheres of the world who attended the Human Values Workshops at IIM Calcutta had also gone through this QMP and found it a lifetime take home from the Workshops as testified by their honest and transparent feedback. QMP made an enduring impact by expanding the mind-space of business leaders beyond the organizational boundary, promoting inclusive thinking, awakening higher and deeper levels of consciousness,

developing ethical sensitivity and finally inspiring them to engage in creative and effective organizational interventions.

### **Concluding Reflections**

Pertinent insights from the millennia-old classical wisdom literature of India may throw light on such alternative sources of learning like learning from stories and parables (Gandhi), lessons from nature (Rabindranath Tagore), learning from meaningful and engaging conversations (The Upanishads and The Bhagavadgita) and also learning from spiritual wisdom in a tryst with silence and solitude (Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo). Moreover, the practice of Consciousness awakening exercises like the Quality Mind Process or contemplative practices based on understanding the inner-witnessing self (like surfing breaths) can help open up new horizons of thinking by stimulating our right brain activity for holistic perception and creative expression. It will also teach us the art of asking questions that break the barriers of linear thinking and binary logic Pertinent in our thoughts and perceptions and leave us with some burning questions to keep our inner lamps aflame in the silence of the night.

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