Where does courage come from?



Sometime ago, I was invited to facilitate a workshop at a social innovation conference in Berlin, around the theme: “Where does courage come from?” In the margins of this conference, I was interviewed. What follows is an edited version of that interview.

What is your personal answer to the leading question of our conference “Where does courage come from?”

The root of the word courage comes from the Latin “cor” which means “heart", the beating engine of our being, this powerful, mysterious and perpetual life giving force that is based on confidence. Courage is not a very ancient word, as its earliest use is found in French and English medieval texts. In Pali, the Buddha’s language, there is no word for courage. The closest match would be fearlessness, no-fear, or the absence of fear. And that is maybe a more workable word than courage, which is often associated with heroism and imperialism.

So let’s explore fear, which is in the first place a basic emotion. Possibly even the first emotion we experience when we are separated from the

womb and born into this world. But it is also a product of ego. Our life's journeys are conditioned by ego. No-fear, or we could equally say deep trust, arises when we let go of ego and come back to our natural, unconditioned state, like a baby who is naturally fearless, confident, and courageous.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says: "From craving springs grief, from craving springs fear. One who is free from craving has no grief, so how could fear arise?" It is the conditioned functioning of our mind, based on past experiences, that creates fear, and therefore develops what master Dogen often refers to as "fences and tiles", the protection mechanisms the ego develops to sustain its delusions. Letting go of these fear based protection mechanisms not only liberates us from our delusions, it also opens up the heart to a new possibility to deeply trust reality as it is, and stand wholeheartedly in life. Even if we inevitably will experience pain and loss that are inherent to life itself, it will not lead to suffering. So the courage the Buddha teaches is the inner strength that comes from letting go of clinging and craving. When there is nothing to defend, there is nothing to fear.

You are a zen monk. What does your daily practice look like?

The basis of my practice is called zazen, or sitting meditation. It consists of sitting quietly, while being attentive to the body posture and the rhythm of the breathing. When we focus only on the body posture and the breathing, our mind is continuously brought back to the living reality of the present moment, here and now. Here, that means in the body (we are always physically 'here') and now, that means in harmony with the rhythm of breathing (we always breath in the 'now'). When practicing this regularly, the mind starts functioning differently, like a mirror that reflects reality as it is, without the filters of our past experiences, possibly biased by grief and regrets, or projections into an uncertain future, possibly distorted by fear and anxiety. When we decide to make a step inward, by embracing the stillness of meditation, these filters and distortions gradually dissolve, and we re-discover and re-unite with the lightness of our true nature. It is kind of comparable to the characteristics of a glass of untransparent, muddy water that is put on a shelf. With stillness and patience the mud sinks to the bottom while the water on top becomes crystal clear again. Continuously bringing back our attention to the living reality of the present moment allows us to move out of the mental space and clearly see the craze of our thought processes, without being completely carried away by these illusionary mental constructs, that are a product of ego.

In my daily routine I sit 20 to 40 minutes in the morning, depending on my schedule. It is more difficult when traveling. But luckily the practice is not limited to sitting meditation, and regularity is actually more important than length. So I try to practice in any given situation, albeit often for the length of just a few consecutive mindful breaths while adjusting my posture to become graceful again. We can practice in every imaginable position, when sitting, standing, laying down, or walking. In almost any given circumstance it is possible to bring the awareness back to the sensations of the body and find grounding in the breathing – especially in the outbreath. For instance when we need to be patient, like waiting for a connecting train, or at the cashier in a supermarket, or while doing repetitive tasks, like brushing our teeth or even while sitting on the toilet. All such recurring situations are grateful opportunities to practice.

Complementary to continuous practice throughout the day, so-called gyoji, I also regularly practice in zen dojo's and during more intense retreats, so-called sesshin, guided by other teachers. That is important to allow for deepening of the practice, to harmonize with other practitioners, and to enable me teaching others in return.

How would you describe the connection between mindfulness and wellbeing?

I would say that mindfulness, as in embodied awareness practice, is a supporting resource to wellbeing. In the last 25 years there has been an exponentially growing body of scientific evidence about the positive influence of meditation and mindfulness on mental health, stress reduction, pain relief, increased focus, productivity, and so on. But wellbeing is so much more than mental health only. Wellbeing is hard to define, let alone measure. Most attempts to describe the nature of wellbeing have merely focused on particular dimensions of personal wellbeing (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual). What we can say about personal wellbeing is that it is subjective, and that it is always a dynamic balance between the challenging events of life, and the resources available, to help support one's subjective wellbeing, like e.g. sufficient sleep, regular movement, healthy food, meaningful relationships, and awareness practices like mindfulness.

But focusing only on "personal" wellbeing through mindfulness holds real risks. Subjective wellbeing, by definition, is related to the personal feelings, preferences, and opinions, and therefore produced by ego. Instead of being a path of liberation from the illusion of ego, secularized mindfulness risks to strengthen that illusion. To me that partially explains the fallout in practice

among practitioners who did the eight-week mindfulness course to shortly after abandon practice all together. Another risk and documented reason for fallout is that mindfulness practitioners miss community. It is for good reasons that in the Buddhist tradition the community, or Sangha, is considered one of the three treasures, next to Buddha and Dharma. The meaning of community isn't just bonding and belonging. In a Sangha practitioners support each other to overcome obstacles on the path to liberation of ego.

You are also involved in the international Wellbeing Project, which aims to catalyze a culture of inner wellbeing for all changemakers. What is your role there? How does the project enable positive change?

Surveys by social entrepreneurship networks like Ashoka, Schwab, and Skoll among their changemakers revealed the heavy toll social entrepreneurship had on these leader's wellbeing. Negative effects like over-identification with the work, unhealthy leadership styles and narratives of sacrifice and martyrdom, divorce, substance abuse, depression and burn-out were very common in these networks of social change leaders. I was part of these networks and my own life was no exception. After a 20-year entrepreneurial rollercoaster I felt depleted. Zen practice helped me to notice some burn-out symptoms timely. I acknowledged these symptoms and decided to take care and find support. I transitioned from my executive leadership role in the organisation and started a healing journey. A difficult time, characterised by lots of tears, various therapies, and reconnection with the ground under my feet, literally! I did a permaculture course, started a vegetable garden en learned beekeeping. In that same period, I met with other social change leaders who had gone through similar journeys. From these joint experiences The Wellbeing Project was conceived in co-creation with some main players in the field of social innovation, and became a catalyst initiative to support social entrepreneurs with their inner journey, based on the vision that doing sustainably well in society requires inner wellbeing. I joined the senior leadership team as Co-Lead Awareness.

At the conference, you offered a workshop with the title "an exploration of self-leadership". How can we lead ourselves? Which competencies do we need to develop for good self-leadership?

Leading ourselves requires presence (as in embodied awareness) and self-compassion to enable us holding space for difficult emotions and transform perceived threats into new possibilities. Often social innovators act from an unhealed place of hurt, based on the pain they experience from the social or environmental injustice they address with their work. But when they, or better said "we" - because I am just the same, when we act from a place of anger and hurt, we risk to unconsciously transmit what we desperately try to defeat. By doing so, we only sustain the same underlying patterns without solving the root causes. Then it is the collective and transgenerational trauma pattern that propels itself.

From a Buddhist point of view, the root causes of suffering are ignorance, greed and hatred, the so-called three poisons. At the basis there is ignorance, a lack of understanding that the “ego” isn’t something substantial, permanent, and separate from the cosmos. Because we see ourselves as separate, permanent and substantial, we dislike what stands in the way of that fixed idea of self, and yearn for what we think is missing. And therefore we experience reality as unsatisfactory. But in reality, nothing is missing. nothing is too much. Reality as such is immaculate.

Realising that allows us to move from “ego” to “eco”, to see ourselves as part of reality, rather then being on top of it. And that simple shift in consciousness about the nature of self and reality allows to develop qualities like courage, confidence, compassion, and creativity.

How did you experience the conference? Is there a moment of your workshop or during the day that particularly stayed in your mind?

The conference was very inspiring. Unfortunately my level of German language is insufficient to understand every nuance of what was said. But that kind of “being lost in language” made me also more receptive to the subtle layers of what happened energetically in the room. I noticed an amazing trust, openness and honesty in the community present. Opening up to the vulnerability of our human condition is really a sine qua non to learn about courage.

My own workshop was an exploration of how we can lead ourselves beyond being a victim of crises, to become more courageous agents of change for all, starting by changing ourselves. At the beginning I challenged the participants, putting them ‘on the spot’ by asking them to speak up publicly: “where does courage come from?” For some participants it was easy to speak out aloud, but others were confronted with their fears of speaking up in public. What stayed with me was that noticing this fear

together, and consciously holding space for it, became the source of transforming that fear.