

A manager's spiritual path towards liberation from his ego and of the organizations he manages

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Over the past two decades, I have held managerial responsibilities in various large organizations, both public and private. In these organizations, I have always worked with my teams to implement what is known as "collaborative governance". These are management practices that promote as much as possible the satisfaction of the fundamental psychological needs of people at work, namely the needs for autonomy, inclusion, and personal development. Based on these experiences, I created with a few associates in 2018 "Phusis Partners", a company that supports medium and large companies in the implementation of such governance.

For the last two decades, I have also managed (and still do) the association Philosophy & Management (www.philoma.org) on a voluntary basis. The cycles of philosophy seminars for managers (several of which addressed the links between spirituality and management) that I organized in this framework inspired and stimulated my commitment to a spiritual path.

Finally, for more than ten years, I have been receiving spiritual guidance on the path proposed by Arnaud Desjardins, disciple of Swâmi Prajnanpad, the creator of Adhyatma yoga, an adaptation of the Advaita Vedanta, a non-dualistic spirituality.

In this article, I present how this spiritual journey and my "collaborative" managerial practice have mutually reinforced each other: on the one hand, my spiritual journey has certainly facilitated the adoption of collaborative managerial practices that require work on oneself and one's ego; on the other hand, my daily managerial experiences have been as many points of support to evolve on the spiritual level.

In order to explain this virtuous dynamic between my spiritual and managerial paths, it is necessary that I first briefly present the path proposed by Arnaud Desjardins.

Arnaud Desjardins' Way: "Being One With"

The spiritual path proposed by Arnaud Desjardins (which I will simply call the path from here on, not because it would be unique but for the sake of brevity) consists fundamentally in learning to live by saying "Yes" to everything that happens, by not denying anything that is or happens.

In order to "be one with (with the whole of reality)" unconditionally, we need to free ourselves from our ego, also called "mind". Through a series of automatic processes, erroneous concepts and a misunderstanding of the "laws of life", the ego induces a feeling of duality: we come to believe we are particular individuals, separated from the rest of the world, each identified with a body, a name. As slaves of our ego, we only react - and do not act consciously and freely - to the situations that present themselves to us, according to the way our ego perceives these situations, judging more or less consciously they give us pleasure or displeasure. Although we believe we are free, we are not really free because our ego does not allow us to see the intrinsic neutrality of situations. The ego does not allow us to see that we are - ourselves and not the situations - the true creators of our well-being or our unhappiness. It thus accentuates the difference between the world as we perceive it and the real

world. To free ourselves from our ego is therefore necessary to live consciously and freely of our fears and desires. A desire is then considered as tension towards the future, a lack that we must fill.

Let us specify at the outset that "to free ourselves from our desires" does not mean to no longer have desires but to no longer be slaves to them. To do this, we must not repress them but rather live them fully and consciously. Finally, let us note that the four "laws of life" that our ego takes great care to ignore - sometimes very subtly and always in order to protect us - are: (1) difference ("*Two things are always different.*"); (2) change ("*Everything is change, nothing is permanent.*"); (3) interdependence ("*Everything is in relation to the rest of the world.*"); (4) causality ("*The world is just a huge and complex succession of causes and consequences.*").

To walk the path therefore consists of gradually freeing oneself from one's ego and accepting and saying "yes to what is", to the whole of reality, to everything that life gives to experience, in all circumstances. 'Accepting what is' does not mean being resigned or indifferent; accepting is simply loving.

The ego is subtle: to 'liberate' oneself from the ego is not to repress it, deny it or fight it - it is to 'see' it at work; what fights the ego in us is still our ego. The liberation of the ego cannot therefore be described by words, it necessarily passes by an experience, by a practice. It translates into a state of stable peace, a complete release of all physical, emotional and mental tensions. A "liberated" wise being no longer feels fear: he is one with the world, in the sense that he no longer identifies with himself as an individual; he has become the world in the sense that he feels only love and compassion. In his book "*La voie du coeur*", Arnaud Desjardins clearly defines what spirituality is and the "goal" of the path: "*Spirituality is the independence of the mind from all that is changeable, limited, measurable, in other words, from all that is name and form. [...] What is spiritual is that which has no form, that which does not change, that which is not conceivable, that which cannot be thought, that which IS. Discover that you are "That", that spiritual reality, and that everything else is material, even the noblest thoughts and highest impulses of the soul since they do not directly concern unaffected Consciousness.*"

I have been walking this spiritual path for more than ten years now. As the years go by, I am always more intensely committed to it through personal and professional experiences. What I particularly like about this path is first of all that it seems perfectly rational and does not require adherence to any belief: all that is required is to learn to "see what is", to accept it, to love it. I also appreciate that this path seems to be in agreement with the essence of all the great spiritual and mystical traditions, both Western and Eastern: through Arnaud's teachings, I feel that I better understand the teachings of Jesus, the Buddha or Lao-tzu, to name but a few. And moreover their teachings, as interpreted by Arnaud Desjardins, seem to me to be in perfect agreement with the thoughts of the philosophers who have accompanied me for more than twenty years (the pre-Socratics dear to Marcel Conche, Michel de Montaigne, Baruch de Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Omar Khayyam, or Pierre Hadot), with the verses of the poets I love (François Cheng, Christian Bobin, André Gide, or Khalil Gibran), or with the ideas contained in the books of novelists and thinkers who inspire me (Herman Hesse, Marguerite Yourcenar, Mikhaïl Boulgakov, Carl Gustav Jung, Michel Random or Paul Diel). Last but not least, I am lucky enough to benefit from the spiritual guidance of a direct disciple of Arnaud. Guidance is indispensable when one is on the path, as the ego can be extremely subtle in inducing us to believe that we are free of it, whereas it holds us even more in its power.

My spiritual journey helped me to change my managerial posture

All authors and practitioners of collaborative governance (which includes, among others, Isaac Getz's "liberated companies", Frédéric Laloux's "opal companies", Brian Robertson's "Holacracy" and Gérard Endenburg's "Sociocracy") are unanimous: one of the essential conditions for the successful implementation of such governance in an organization is a real change in the posture of its leaders. They must move from a "high" posture - of control - to a "low" posture - genuinely at the service of their employees. This change in posture requires work on oneself, which implies freeing oneself as much as possible from one's ego, as some theorists of collaborative governance explicitly write. However, the "liberation of the ego" referred to here is essentially limited to becoming humbler and putting oneself at the service of others. In this sense, it is a much less radical and profound "ego liberation" than that sought by a committed disciple on the path. Nevertheless, according to the adage "*who can do more can do less*" and based on my own experience, it is clear that the work on oneself that the path implies can only facilitate the adoption of the posture required to authentically engage in the implementation of collaborative governance. I will therefore present below, in a non-exhaustive way, how the work on myself accomplished to date on the path has helped me, in different organizations that I have tried to transform, (1) to delegate my powers as much as possible and (2) to put in place managerial practices aiming at increasing the satisfaction of my collaborators' fundamental psychological needs (autonomy, inclusion, and personal development).

1. Delegation of authority

Just as in the Vedanta tradition, the liberation of the ego that the disciple aims for on the path implies freeing oneself from the great forces that drive the world: money, power, the thirst for recognition, sexuality and even (religious) beliefs. Without abstaining from relations to these forces, it is a question of no longer being their slaves. Without claiming to be totally free of them, learning on the way to "see what is and say yes" has considerably reduced my need for power over others and my thirst for recognition, which has inevitably facilitated the delegation of my managerial powers required by the implementation of collaborative governance. In this respect, the understanding and practice of how to learn to "act freely" has been crucial for me. To understand this, let us briefly describe what "free action" is:

A free action is not a reaction. A reaction is dictated by our ego. A free action, on the contrary, is not dictated by it and by the psychic conditioning that it induces, such as the search for admiration, praise, gratitude or by the fear of blame.

A free action is accomplished by a person who no longer deludes himself into being the author of his actions. Instead, he sees himself as an instrument of life, letting life act through him. In this sense, free action goes hand in hand with "letting go" or "non-action", which does not mean that one "let's go" or does not act, but that one acts while being "free of the fruits of one's action", i.e., not being preoccupied with obtaining them.

A free action is an action performed with the sole purpose of consciously responding to "what the situation requires". It takes into account as much as possible all the available parameters but accepts the uncertainty - in view of the laws 3 and 4 of life (see above) - of what will eventually result.

By curing me - at least partially to this day - of the illusion that I was really in control of anything and of the pride of being the author of my managerial acts, the practice of the path has allowed me to confidently consider the implementation of a collaborative governance favoring complex, organic, and emergent interactions between my collaborators, acting freely while respecting rules defined in common but escaping my direct control.

2. Increased satisfaction of the psychological needs of employees

2.1. Autonomy

Beyond what we have just seen in point (1), the practice on the way to freeing myself from my ego has naturally led to the adoption of managerial practices aimed at freeing my own collaborators from my ego as well. Among other things, this resulted in the gradual replacement of hierarchical approval processes by processes of soliciting opinions and making decisions by consent (for more details on this subject as well as on all the other practices mentioned below, see www.philoma.org). Furthermore, since the proper functioning of collaborative governance requires the deflation of the ego of not only the managers but also of all staff members, we have also put in place practices and training to encourage this, such as the replacement of a "classic pyramidal hierarchy of people" by a clear "hierarchy of goals"; the distribution of leadership through new roles; training for all staff members in non-violent communication, ...

Finally, the practice on the path invited me to better recognize that everything is change (law 2 of life) and that it is about saying "yes" to the movement of the whole of reality as it manifests itself in our lives (what Swâmi Prajnanpad called the "festival of newness"). This also helped me to accept more easily the ideas and changes suggested by my collaborators. It helped me to adopt a culture that is irreverent to conventions and symbols of power (freedom to leave any meeting in which one is bored or has no clear added value; setting up small "pebbles" committees through which employees can propose solutions to their daily irritants - pebbles in their shoes - which managers must take into account; ...) and thus a culture that is more innovative and open to change.

2.2. Inclusion

The practice on the path aims at stripping ourselves of brakes, inhibitions and conditionings that are in excess and that encumber us. The practice therefore aims at de-cluttering and, from this point of view, it is therefore "egalitarian". As Arnaud Desjardins says, *"Not everyone has the voice to become an opera singer but everyone has the same spiritual potential."* In addition, the increased awareness through practice on the path of the intrinsic equality of each being (*"We are all inseparable waves of the ocean; therefore, we are all the ocean."*) also stimulated me to be more attentive to everything that could promote the feeling of inclusion of each person and to adopt practices in this direction (adoption of a facilitator role, assigned by an election without candidates to a member of the group, different from the original manager of the group; adoption of sociocratic practices in meetings; reduction, even elimination of salary inequalities considered unfair by the members of the group; adoption of a collective rather than individual bonus system; ...).

2.3. Personal development

Practice on the path requires us to seriously and continuously consider the quality of our actions, to ask ourselves where they come from and what purpose they serve. To do this, I regularly and authentically ask myself the questions simply formulated by Swâmi Prajnanpad: *"What, why, what for and how?"* As a manager, this has helped me to stop considering financial or shareholder value as the ultimate goal of management, contrary to the ideology promulgated by Milton Friedman. Shareholder value can only be a constraint, not the goal. The goal must be to contribute to the improvement of life in society, and this begins at least by taking care of the personal development of each employee. In this context, we have put in place practices that allow each employee to identify his or her "sweet spot" (the combination of roles for an employee that best combines the pleasure he or she has in fulfilling them, the relevance they have for the organization, their use of the employee's skills) and to

find the combination of roles that facilitates his or her fulfillment; or to give each employee the time to create, like a craftsman, a "beautiful work", whatever his or her roles and responsibilities.

Concerning personal development, which is so fashionable in many organizations, it seems important to me to specify, in order to avoid any misunderstanding and any abusive instrumentalization of spiritual practices, that personal development as it is envisaged in our current Western societies does not generally have as its goal the "liberation" of the ego, but its mere "improvement": personal development aims primarily at improving our capacity to succeed in existence. As such, it is a noble purpose. Indeed, despite what we have said throughout this article about the harmful duality that the ego induces between us and the world, the ego should not be fought as an enemy. The ego is necessary for us to play our role in existence. We nevertheless have to make sure that it is not our master, that we do not unconsciously become its slave. The improvement of the ego through the practices of personal development is thus positive. But it should not be confused with a spiritual practice aiming at the liberation of the ego, because it does not allow us to fundamentally question our multiple and subtle forms of dependence on conditions, events, and circumstances. For example, some meditation practices in companies aim to make employees calmer and more relaxed. In itself, this is not harmful, at least as long as these practices do not have the real ultimate goal of better exploiting employees for productive purposes. But in terms of the path as I have presented it in this article, such practices have nothing to do with spirituality. Ideally, meditation practices in organizations should go beyond improving our ego to be more productive. They should free us from it.

My managerial experiences are as many points of support on my spiritual path

In the previous section, we saw that the practice on the path, and the respect of the laws of life, which is an integral part of this practice, helped me to set up with my teams a collaborative governance in different organizations, in accordance with these laws of life (difference, change, interdependence and causality). We have also seen that, for all that, spiritual practices cannot be instrumentalized to help an organization function better, otherwise they lose their spiritual character and become mere instruments of personal development.

In this section, I would like to testify that all our experiences in life, and therefore also those that we live as managers, can serve as a support point to progress on the path.

Let me illustrate this with an example that received a lot of media attention in Belgium in 2015 & 2016, namely the conflict between the Belgian minister of transports at the time, and myself, then President (Director General) of the Ministry of Transports. I had to organize my defense in order to protect both the Ministry and my own position. After a year of conflict and the extremist attacks of March 2016 in the Brussels underground and at Zaventem's airport, the minister attempted to accuse me of failing in my mission. I took the decision to resign in order to expose the evidence of my innocence to the media and thus push the government to demand the resignation of the minister herself, which happened the following day.

How has this highly political and conflictual episode been a point of support on the path for me? It's very simple: practice on the path does not involve denying or running away from conflict, at least if it cannot be avoided. As I mentioned above, the path invites us to act consciously and serenely - that is, without hatred, without even considering the other as an enemy - and to accomplish, free of our fears (of blame, of criticism...) and our desires (of praise, of gratitude...), "what the situation requires". And that is precisely what I tried to do on this occasion, as calmly as possible, even if, paradoxically, in such situations, calmness can be interpreted as calculating coldness and the height of arrogance.

In any case, this experience was an opportunity for me to live very concretely two expressions dear to Arnaud Desjardins: "Everything is Brahman" (i.e., God) and "Everything is me". I thus learned, while fighting the minister through the media, to see Brahman and myself in the figure of the minister and thus to transcend spiritually the conflict that opposed us. This allowed me to live it calmly enough and to grow spiritually through this ordeal.

In summary

Through this article, I have tried to show, through my experience, how spiritual and managerial paths can be mutually reinforcing, especially if the managerial practices implemented, such as those of collaborative governance, do not contradict spiritual practices and the laws of life. I have also tried to show that despite the mutual fruitfulness of these paths, there is a fundamental asymmetry between the two: spiritual practice cannot be instrumentalized for the benefit of managerial objectives without being distorted, while managerial experiences can easily serve as a point of support for progress on the path.

These considerations lead me to want to dispel a doubt that might arise in some readers: could the instrumentalization of managerial experiences for the benefit of the path lead a manager to be less "effective", if only because he would be, as we have mentioned, less "obsessed" with achieving his managerial objectives. It would obviously be inappropriate for me to use my own experience in this case to dispel this doubt. And I am not in a position to make an informed judgement about the successes of other managers who are also on a spiritual path. So, in an attempt to dispel the doubt, I prefer to evoke figures who are dear to me and who have inspired me since my earliest childhood: those of the great masters of Japanese martial arts such as Master Awa for Kyudo (archery) and Master Ueshiba for Aikido. They excelled in their arts: Master Awa seemed to never miss a target; Master Ueshiba, despite his apparent frailty, made stronger men fall. And yet, they were totally detached from their "successes". They approached their art as a spiritual practice. Isn't it said that management is also an art?

To sum it up, management is for me a beautiful adventure, but spirituality, in the sense of a commitment to the path of liberation of the ego, is an even more exciting one. So, if you haven't already, I can only wish you to feel called to commit yourself to a spiritual path, whether it is the one proposed by Arnaud Desjardins or another one: the paths may be different but, if they are authentic, they all lead to this peace, to this absolute freedom, which is already within you.

