

Living in the Question

By Michael Chender



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We are a group of people from many different parts of the world, many different sectors of activity, and many different communities, and undoubtedly we are here for many different reasons. Some of you may be here because you're challenged by a specific organizational or community issue and you are hoping that you will acquire skills, perspectives, and insights to engage that issue more fruitfully. Some of you are here because you're going through a period of personal or organizational transition. Others have been intrigued by this event for awhile and now you finally have the chance to be here. Some of you are here for no particular reason you can put your finger on. All of these are very good reasons. They are all completely valid and provide exactly the raw material you'll need while you're here.

This is our fourth annual gathering. The first was several months before 9/11, so we have been coming together during a very interesting period of profound upheaval, fear, consolidation, retraction, and—in parallel—of growing conversation and convergence around the question of what are the necessary and critical conditions for establishing good communities and good society. The Shambhala Institute is a place for sharing the tools and perspectives that will help us accomplish such communities and society. In doing so we hope to encourage collaborations in whatever magical and synchronistic forms they may arise— between the people that are hereto develop fresh language and fresh methods to take back into your communities and organizations.

Our full name is the Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership. For us, *authentic leadership* is actually a question. It is easier to point to what is inauthentic. A few weeks ago an election was called in Canada. This is a country that is famously supportive of its government and much less cynical as a rule than many other places. But even here, the pollsters and journalists are expressing amazement at the depth of cynicism and disaffection with the political leadership. Needless to say, that's not a situation that's unique to Canada right now.

In business, the myth of the hero-CEO is also losing ground. Last week in an airport I picked up a *Harvard Business Review* compilation of articles

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on “What is Leadership?” The lead article of the same title was written by Daniel Goleman, who is the author of *Emotional Intelligence* and a long-time meditation practitioner. The article points to a need for the kind of intelligence and flexibility that allows us to actually read and relate to situations as they unfold. I find it very interesting and hopeful that the HBR was focusing its presentation of leadership in this way.

There is also a growing conversation around ethical leadership, values-based leadership, and servant leadership. The questions that arise from these discussions are, What *are* the ethics? And what *are* the values? And who and what are we serving? In all these approaches to leadership, we need to know what is worth following. Similarly, what is authentic? What is genuine and true? What is the place from which we can lead authentically? And what are we leading towards? These are the same questions whether we’re talking about an organization, a community, or leading our own life.

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Undoubtedly we have different ideas about what is *authentic*. At least I hope we have different ideas. Otherwise our time together would be very boring and somewhat fishy. My personal approach, coming out of my training in the meditative traditions of Buddhism and Shambhala, is that what is most authentic about human beings is a basic instinct towards wisdom and compassion, which is very undeveloped in many cases but which is absolutely there. Now, you may have a completely different idea. But let’s step back from concepts and ideas, and look at what we all can be sure is true in this moment, what can we be absolutely sure is genuine, aside from our ideas.

I would say that what we can be sure of is that we have a question. Whether or not it’s articulated, we wouldn’t be here if we didn’t have some kind of question. It could be a big question we’re holding; it could be a sense of a journey or quest. It could be a very practical, immediate question. It could simply be a sense of being confused. Or it could be an irritating whisper that arises whenever we state what we really know to be true—“I really believe I’m doing this because of such-and-such”—and that right as you say it whispers, “No you’re not.” And there’s a little funny moment when you can’t quite retract it and so you just sort of ignore it and go on to the next part.

So things don’t quite fit, and I think this is the common human experience. It’s an uncomfortable situation, but it’s the real starting point in terms of working with authenticity.

When different ideas and voices are rubbing up against each other inside us, challenging us, there’s friction and there’s heat. It’s uncomfortable and it’s difficult to stay with. The radical instruction put forward by both the dialogic and Buddhist meditative traditions is that rather than habitually avoiding that discomfort by jumping to an “answer,” we stay with the question. We stay with the discomfort, we live in the question.

So authenticity in this case is not a thing or a particular state, but it is the courage to see and engage things as they are—as they are for *us*, because that is the only

experience we have. Not things as the Shambhala Institute or anyone else declares they are, but as they actually are.

I would argue that there's already clarity and compassion in the gesture of staying with the question. The only way we know we're confused is through the clarity to see it. If we're truly confused, then we're probably convinced that we're unconfused. The gesture of engaging confusion is also a gesture of real kindness to ourselves. We are not going for the easy habitual answer, but we are actually calling forth our own strength and courage.

Even though we use words like compassion and wisdom and clarity, the process I'm describing is actually messy. It is awkward and full of mistakes. At the same time, it's totally human. If we can assume our own humanity, that resonates with the humanity in others, and it inspires them to feel that they too can live in their own uncertainty and not settle for an easy answer. Then they are able to bring forth what is possible—what they have to offer that is authentic and true.

This notion of staying with the question could also be described as having an open mind. Open mind is a vigorous thing; it's not a wishy-washy notion of "it's all okay." That vigorous openness recombines essential elements that we have by habit separated. It enables us to hold ambiguity and paradox or seeming paradox, to hold the things that now seem to be opposed in our experience.

From a leadership point of view, whether we're leading ourselves or others, one of the greatest challenges is flexibility—the flexibility to respond with what situations really need. This is the quality that Danny Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence, and it is quite the opposite of imposing our will. If you're willful enough and skillful enough, it may have short-term benefits, but in terms of actually giving birth to life and strength, it's a losing strategy.

Situations are alive and unpredictable. Sometimes it's time to be visioning and sometimes it's time to get off it and implement. Sometimes the most important thing is to be able to say yes. And of course sometimes we need to abruptly say no. Sometimes we need to be accommodating and nurturing, and sometimes we need to be forceful and direct. As human beings we're built for ambiguity. We have our feet on the ground and our head in the sky. We're always working with these two. We have an ability to look out, to see possibility. The Chinese would call it seeing heaven—the great range of what is possible. And then we are standing on the earth, or practicality. How we join heaven and earth is the human leadership challenge.

There's usually a natural bias in our personalities towards either heaven or earth that supports the tendency to fixate on one of these elements in our experience. Some of us are stronger on the reflective, holistic, thoughtful, analytic side, while others are more action-oriented, seeing details very clearly and having a healthy impatience to see things moving. Generally speaking, a great problem for much of our contemporary culture is that those two approaches have become separated, as if they were different realities.

How to bring together a thoughtful, well-considered big-vision approach with decisive action is a very, very big question. If we're on the reflective side, action

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may seem scary. It's abrupt and highly energetic, and it's limiting or exclusionary by nature. On the action-oriented side, reflection can also carry a great threat. We feel that if we sit back and really look at the consequences, we will lose the ground and momentum of our action completely.

One of the core views of the Institute is that we need to rejoin these qualities, which have been mistakenly separated. We could bring together humility and a martial sense of warriorship. We could bring together an open heart and sharp intellect. And of course, we could bring together feminine and masculine approaches. In the Shambhala meditation tradition, that kind of joining is referred to as warriorship. It is about having the courage, the energy, and the vision to actually go beyond polarization and conflict.

Ultimately, it is our aspiration that the principles we're talking about this week could be held at the highest levels of society. Our vision is that an enlightened society—a society that is based on an appreciation of how things really work and of natural human empathy and intelligence—is possible. Why not? It is really common sense. So maybe together we can create a powerful wave of radical common sense.

That may seem ambitious, but it's absolutely necessary, needless to say, at this time. It is particularly in times of chaos and profound change that ambitious visions become possible. If we begin to look at our individual challenges, unravel them and see where they lead, we discover an ever-larger system of interdependence around us. This can become daunting. We are in the midst of seemingly intractable issues— environmental, cultural, social. At the same time, because of the Internet and globalization, the interconnectedness of these issues has become more and more obvious. By the same token, whatever we do, whatever change we make in our own lives and in our organizations and communities, will have unknown reverberations. We never know where the tipping point will be.

If we fix our eye on the big picture too much, we're going to get a headache and get depressed. On the other hand, if we experience the joy of engaging the challenge—the joy of warriorship that occurs when we can meet what arises with an open mind and a good heart—that is infectious and has an unknown effect on the big picture.

This particular dream has been dreamed for a long time by many, many people—by great warriors of all traditions and no tradition who have sacrificed their lives and their blood for the sake of trying to create a decent human society. Because of this we can take heart. In the Shambhala tradition, those of us who started this program have seen examples of this kind of warriorship, examples of real and fundamental humanity, and this has given us the energy and stubbornness to create this program. The Shambhala Institute is a container that is inspired by the Shambhala tradition but which now holds and welcomes many different traditions. I think we have all known examples of real warriorship, so we know that this dream is possible.

Thank you very much. I wish you a very productive and fruitful and humorous and cheerful week.

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Michael Chender is founding chair of the Shambhala Institute. He is also chair of Metals Economics Group, a leading strategic consultancy in the worldwide mining business, and CEO of Coemergence, a new competitive intelligence software firm.