

# Reflections on Tibetan Buddhism and Action Reflection Learning

*An essay written by Lars Cederholm*

## **Introduction**

As time passes, it is increasingly important for me to bring the different pieces of mosaics of my life into one unified view or *mandala* to use a Buddhist word for it. The search for alignment of my professional identity as a designer and facilitator of ARL pedagogy and my search for the elusive idea of freedom from ego and attachment are constantly on my mind. To bring together a unified mission and vision will allow me to operate from the strength of clear values and minimize doubt and confusion in what I do and how I communicate with the world around me. It would be both arrogant and false to claim that I have found the perfect point of convergence hidden behind an illusive unified concept and the search for clarity. This essay is a part of the search.

## **Personal role models and experience**

During the last twenty-six years I have studied with the great Tibetan Tantric *Nyingma* Masters Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche (1942 – 2010) and his younger brother Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche. They always choose to look at me as a potential and unreleased Buddha hood. My gratitude to their love, compassion and patience with my turbulent mind cannot be expressed in words. During the same time span I have been a program director, coach and special resource person to well over fifty different ARL programs. This article is very much based on my personal insights into what happens in ARL programs as well as my own experience as a Buddhist practitioner and a member of a Buddhist Sangha or group of practitioners.

During all these years it has been a great privilege to receive professional support from Lennart Rohlin, the founder of the Mil Institute and all my friends and colleagues at the Mil Institute in Sweden as well as Ernie Turner et al. who started LIM in the US together with me. Victoria Marsick and Lyle Yorks both professors at Columbia (TC) University and their research on Action Learning have greatly influenced me.

## **A personal view**

The usefulness of ARL as a method of balancing strategic dilemmas and leadership development is deeply convincing to me. My professional life is focused on the application of ARL principles to the development of people, organizations and myself. The evidence for useful results keep piling up, thus reinforcing the practice. Likewise, my compass towards enlightenment has been informed through ongoing effort to understand the Buddhist view and doing the practice according to Tibetan Buddhist traditions. One simply has to pay homage to a lineage stretching through thousands of years of insight through a combination of courage, commitment, wisdom and skillful means. Slowly I notice in myself a little less anger, ego clinging and attachment, enough to make me want to continue on the path in spite of all the obstacles of the mind.

# Action Reflection Learning

## Some philosophical influences

In this paper I attempt to describe the basic ideas in Tibetan Buddhism and Action Reflection Learning (ARL) and highlight some similarities and connections. Both perspectives are rooted in the potential of the human being and view the individual as a creative, innovative and responsible being who's potential will flourish given good circumstances, good guidance and understanding as the person moves from dependence to independence to the recognition of interdependence. Both views use reflection as a key to generative learning and development. The goal for both ARL and Buddhism is to help people to find the authentic self-expression that creates value for themselves and others. This does not come about as a result of memorizing concepts and ideas that others have expressed but rather as result of taking in ideas and making them ones own through the process of reflection or meditation. Both are acknowledging the importance of finding and departing from the right question, knowing that the "obvious" question often is a deceptive hiding place for other and more relevant questions. The discipline to question the question leads to clarity and better results.

## Socrates create wisdom by questioning the existing paradigm

For *Socrates*, wisdom resides with his paradoxical understanding of his own ignorance. His claim was that the process of questioning oneself and others is the highest form of human excellence. Likewise, the learning mind is central for the practice of Buddhism as well as engaging in the process of an action-learning program. In this time and age of rapid change and adaptation of new technology the ability to question old knowledge and open up the mind to new kinds of questions to discover what hides under the horizon seems more important than ever in the evolution of life on earth and the present threat to our human existence. Socrates antagonized the state and the power holders through his questions and was sentenced to death for being the gadfly of Athenian holders of power. In the mid 70s, Mills departure from traditional academic teaching to a new understanding based on question driven creative action learning resulted in animated and even angry exchanges about "the right way". Using the rear mirror, one can safely make the statement that academia has approached ARL more than the other way around and the debate goes on albeit with less intensity.

## Reginald Revans

The central value in ARL is humanistic psychology with its firm belief in the centrality of the human values and the free will. People who feel part of creation tend to feel responsible for results. *Reginald Revans* conceptualized Action Learning after WW II having made the observation that women and children managed to learn new skills in record time by doing complex tasks in service of the war industry. At the time, obvious and observable results upset all fixed assumptions and traditions of how people are motivated to develop new skills and learn. Reg Revans generalized these observations to management and opened the door to what now is a worldwide movement for learning and change. So simple! So obvious and yet so illusive and hotly debated. Designing development based on action and reflection is the most natural way of learning and we have been engaged this way since the beginning of life on earth. In fact most of our lives are informed by actions with its trials and errors and that is where most of our learning comes from.

## **Social Constructivism**

The development of ARL is clearly informed from the philosophical view, which is referred to as social constructivism. Around the 1960s and 70s the view of realism as a way of understanding power and influence and how learning a development takes place was challenged head on. The MiL institute of Sweden was formed in the late seventies as a counterpoint to traditional academic teaching models building a base with strong influences from both Revans and Social Constructivism. Business people, consultants, academics were invited to develop a program that would meet the dual goals of solving business problems and management development based on the process of discovery and not from using teachings from so called experts as foreground.

## **Philosophers arguing in the spirit of social constructivism**

*Sartre* made the claim that we as human beings identify ourselves through our actions and we consist in nothing beyond our actions. He confronts systematic academic philosophy and claims that their proponents have secluded themselves behind abstractions, which are adding nothing to concrete human experiences. The French philosopher Foucault, one of the most influential post modernist philosophers argues that language mirrors reality and shapes the world and **is** action in and of itself. The use of language is the way we lead and the way we handle power and influence. An example of language as action would be “I hereby declare you husband and wife”

The fundamental argument coming from social constructivism is that we are always in the process of creating things and meaning and that nothing is fundamentally separated from us. Social phenomena are created by the actions of individuals in groups and social structures are dependent of situations and circumstances. The individual is willing to take responsibility and be a co-creator if there is a clear opportunity to have an impact on results. Everything takes place in interactions and is by nature instable and fragmented. The idea of self is not a unified self but rather a complex weave of different selves as we move in and out of roles and situations. As will be discussed in this paper, social constructivism is deeply related to the Buddhist view of inter-dependent coordination. Every thing is interdependent and nothing exists independently and is therefore illusory in the absolute sense. However as my teacher once informed me: “if a brick is falling from a house you should move away!”

## **Realism**

In contrast to social constructivism, the traditional educational agenda has been informed by realism in the sense that things in the world exist independently from our selves. Clear and defined knowledge of these things is possible and provides order and clarity. Social structures are natural and social phenomena have a real and stable existence. Our inner selves are held together and exist in and of them selves. This view helps to describe the world of boundaries, linearity, order and predictability, which in turn gives us humans the sense of a determined place in the universe and some kind of safety. With this view, one can understand the rise of bureaucracies and other control systems designed to bring stability to individuals and organizational behavior.

## **Some stated MiL Values**

People are committed learning actors, driven by good intentions to create results, in cooperation with others for the better of the larger system as long as they share the values of that system, experience appreciation and respect, and are trusted with meaningful responsibilities. In a MiL book with empty pages one can read on the only page with writing: “No experience is more important and no theory works better than the one you yourself

experience, create and reflect over – especially in dialogue with others.

### **Learning by doing, design and tools**

The fundamental hub for the design of an ARL program is, that the personal experiences and questions from the participants guide the content of what is under investigation. Theory is in principle discussed in response to questions and curiosity (learning) from experience and not in anticipation of an experience (teaching). It is important that the participants engage in action and apply their own analysis and common sense first. The next step is then to reflect on what can be learned and to articulate personal insights and, if useful, set it in the context of available and relevant theory. The main thing is that the insight can be generalized and transferred to new and related dilemmas, so called double loop learning. Instead of the traditional classroom, curriculum approach the participants are challenged with questions emanating from real strategic dilemmas given to the program by managers in the participating organization(s). The answer is not know, the stakeholders are many the way forward can be debated and the outcome is hidden in the basket of complexity. The participants, mostly line managers with significant responsibilities, are divided into project teams of four to six participants according to certain principles such as diversity in gender, skill sets and functional expertise. The design and process of learning is informed by the assertion that it is better to act oneself into new ways of understanding than to be taught with the hope that people will understand how to act in new ways. A central task for the learning coach is to keep the participants in the creative space squeezed between order and chaos until consensual clarity takes the place of confusion.

### **Fresh environments promote learning**

To create ideal conditions for learning (an inner environment) it is important to depart from the ordinary, everyday life to a physical place free from everyday and familiar distractions and habits. Seminars in ARL programs are in principle held away from the home organization. MiL argues that the physical space and virtual environment for working together is a very important consideration to build the right working climate. This is the reason for designing six different conference centers under the umbrella name “Milgårdarna”.

Project teams are not working with familiar task although exceptions are made and new ways of program designs are constantly emerging. Ideally, each team member is assigned to a project team in an organizational unit other than his/her own. In internal ARL programs, participants work within the boundaries of the larger organizational context, preferable in projects where the individual expertise is not directly applicable or where old expert knowledge has lead the organization into a dead end. As the saying goes: “What got us here will not get us there” The purpose is of course to promote fresh, curious “out of the box” perspectives and active search for relevant information found in unexpected places.

### **Trust is the basis for learning from each other**

The participants themselves constitute a central support structure to help learning and promote understanding. In order to maximize the opportunity to learn from one another in action, a good deal of time has to be spent building trust between the individual and fellow participants and program staff. People know instinctively that the group and the staff will be engaged in actions where outcomes are unclear. To embark on such a journey most people would like to know whom the fellow “travelers” are and trust that the staff is competent to hold the space together, should things spin out of control. Good relationships and trust gives rise to good information sharing, analysis and decision-making.

## **The Guide – The Learning Coach**

In a typical MiL program, a learning coach is assigned to each of the teams. Over time, periodic seminars of two to four days are held to discuss the opportunities of learning and the search for solutions to complex strategic questions. The process (how) of the project teams and the task (what) are investigated and balanced as the individuals, the teams and the whole program group engage in the events and questions, as they arise in the process of the work. The learning community of twenty or so participants together with the program director and the learning coaches are the central resources for personal and organizational development.

The learning coach is not restricted to make just process observations and guide reflection but, may at times contract for periodic membership in the assigned team, always staying clear of the trap of assuming leadership over the team. The role of the learning coach is demanding and tricky and requires great maturity and personal grounding. Often the role requires the ability to help the teams to reflect on the inherent tension between extreme positions in dilemmas as the teams are making difficult choices between right and right. At times the road will lead to situations where some stakeholder will be in favor of a specific action and others will be against. The deepening of thoughts in the search for right solutions is a crucial part in developing good judgment in the participants moving them from management (objectives, supervision, rewards and reviews) towards leadership (clarity of purposes and mission, courage and clear articulation of values and an authentic balance between EQ and analytical logics).

The learning coaches and the program director take on the responsibility to make sure that the content of the program does not develop into the more traditional cataloguing of knowledge. The focus is instead kept on creative problem solving and actions that lead to value added in the form of innovations and the development of personally grounded change theories and team skills extracted from experience. It is not enough for the project teams to come up with a report of their investigations. The form is of minor importance. What is important is that the teams manage to have some demonstrable and positive impact in the project host organization and that they are reflecting and building their own authentic base for leadership.

In ARL project teams it is not uncommon that one or more team members "know" the solution to the challenge posed by the client. They recognize the situation from past experience. This type of "knowing" leads to a tendency to ignore other people's points of view and thereby diminish the potential for fresh solutions and diminish the power of team synergy. Such expert attitudes tend to create conditions for conflict and power struggles. Awareness of the force field of paradoxes and different perceptions increase sensitivity and the ability to tread lightly and kindly as one shows respect for other aspects of the dilemma. This is an important skill for learning coaches, change leaders as well as the Buddhist practitioner. The soft skills are indeed the hard skills. The favorite Swedish word "lagom" (not too much, not too little) helps to accept this view of balancing forces away from the extreme positions.

# Buddhist perspectives

## The right place

Most practicing Buddhists periodically go to retreat lands and practice privately and together in groups. In Tibetan Buddhism this group support structure is called *Sangha*, which is a set of personal relations and spiritual friendships coming together under a common vision to grow and learn and ultimately to seek enlightenment. In this environment (incubator) one has the opportunity to observe thoughts and emotions in one self and others and practice love, compassion and understanding in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. To create ideal conditions for learning, Buddhist take refuge in the *Buddha* (he who had the courage and showed the way) the *Dharma* (the way) and the *Sangha* (fellow practitioners)

## Religious aspects of Tibetan Buddhism

There are certainly many elements where comparison between ARL and Buddhist is not relevant or even appropriate. For one thing Tibetan Buddhism, besides being a philosophical view of life, is also a religion. Buddhists believe in reincarnation and the real opportunity to reach enlightenment, which cannot be subject of scientific scrutiny. Enlightenment is said to be highly personal and liberated from conceptual constructs and therefore does not lend itself to descriptions or explanations. This is simply a vision for life that one has to embrace without demanding hard scientific scrutiny. Enlightenment and reincarnation can be described best by talking about what it is not, rather than what it is. The one statement, which can be made, is that *Nirvana* is a mental state of absolute freedom, beyond hope and beyond fear. The difference between *Samsara* (the cycle of death and rebirth) and Nirvana is in essence ones own perspective. Two people can sit side by side and look at the same thing, one being in agony and the other in the state of bliss. Enlightenment is a vision that gives life a deeper sense of purpose, which must be discovered as a matter of personal effort. The practice becomes a part of every living moment, including sleep state, and is not confined to "a once a week activity". Some tools and ritualistic practices to approach the vision have been developed over the last 2500 years and deserve our attention if enlightenment is the life goal. Prayers, mantras and intricate rituals, honoring of historical persons who have reached Buddha hood through their courage and commitment are all important parts of the religious practice.

## Awareness

The physical (outer) environment and its boundaries and limits have a deep influence on what we tend to pay attention to. What directs ones mind in New York City and in the Buddhist retreat land in the mountains tend to be very different. In ARL programs, participants learn to pay attention to personal traits and reactions to their thoughts and feeling as they become increasingly aware of the many boundaries in the program. The boundaries and the way they are interdependent are many; between self and others, between the team and the client and his/her organization, between the different teams, between staff and participants, between the program and invited resource persons and between the formal and informal relationships which develop during the lifetime of the program. The awareness of all these, mostly invisible, boundaries and the energy, which develops at these boundaries, tend to mobilize personal energy and interest in managing the social aspects of leadership. How can one create positive conditions for learning and understanding across all these boundaries? And how can insights be transferred to the work place and life in general? These are some of the challenges to each of the participants and the staff. To make the invisible visible is as central

a task in Buddhist practice and in an ARL program.

### **Sharpen your senses**

In Tibetan Buddhism, awareness of the now is a central idea. The past consists of hazy memories and the future is merely speculative. The only real moment is awareness of the "now" which *is* the Buddha. This is why just in time learning (JIT) is such a precious and powerful opportunity in ARL programs. What is happening in the "now" is the opportunity to learn with all the senses on full alert and being relaxed at the same time. Like playing a string instrument to make it sound good; not too loose and not too hard. Or like the cobra; attentive on full alert and relaxed in the same moment. To be in the now is rich, full of luminous intelligence reaching out in the ten directions. To be in the now is to have presence. The ability to stay suspended between different polarities and dilemmas such as good and bad, valuable and useless, ugly and beautiful, low and high without getting invested in either side gives a much broader view of the different forces at work.

The art of staying neutrally alert in the present moment, i.e. not choosing sides before the whole picture is in focus, is a powerful tool in consultative management and facilitates access to the whole system. It is also a good way to practice Buddhism! All complex situations confronting us have forces driving change and forces holding us back. To stay with both allows the positive to emerge. To push for premature closure will most likely create other types of problems later on, particularly in the way solutions are implemented.

The connections to Buddhism, Humanistic psychology, Sartre, Foucault and the ARL are obvious and well intertwined.

### **Absolute and relative reality**

The Buddhist practitioner realizes that boundaries are mostly artificial, social constructs and do not exist from an absolute point of view. Culture, as an example, is a set of social constructs. Nothing more than a set of collective agreements and habits designed to form group identity and provide security for its members. In reality, there is nothing to get attached but, as the Buddhist saying goes, respect the ways of the village. Don't explain that you have trained your mind to see multiple realities and respect the reality of others. The practice on different levels of reality gives the Buddhist practitioner a chance to take a dispassionate look and not rush to get invested in "this or that". This is also at the core of the practice in an ARL program. The stability and skill level of ARL Program Directors and learning coaches are critical to the learning process. They must know when and how and when to slow down the action and reflect on the integration of task and process thereby helping the participants to dissolve the rigidity at the boundaries. In Tibetan Buddhism practitioners are using teachers [*Lamas*] to help them be aware of how to walk patiently on the path in the right direction, one step at the time with compassion in the heart. Like the *Lama*, the learning coach must allow the participants to draw conclusions from personal experience even if it implies getting out of the way when the way is obviously leading away from the goal, all in service of increasing maturity and the curious mind. The personal experience is sometimes more important than doing the right thing. There is a striking similarity in roles between a good Buddhist teacher and the guiding role of the staff in ARL programs.

### **Reflection from an ARL perspective**

Reflection is closely related with learning and understanding. What did we do? How did we do it? Why did we make the choices we made? How can we improve?

In any situation where there is pressure to complete the task there is also a tendency to avoid reflection on the process or how work gets accomplished. Time is a powerful player (we say time is money) and since reflection on the process requires time and often induces discomfort it tends to get pushed to the side at the expense of relevant data gathering, quality in analysis, decision-making and execution. Reflection and learning involves both the willingness and the skills of receiving and giving feedback. Without a feedback, a culture for change is difficult or perhaps impossible to develop.

We are constantly challenged to handle the difficult paradox between navigating our lives based on old knowledge and safe methods on the one hand and creation, renewal and change on the other. We need others to see how we make these choices since we are often unable to see the chair we are sitting on.

Reflection and feedback takes place in all parts of an ARL program. Individuals write in their learning logs. Teams take time out (often with the help of the learning coach) to reflect on both their accomplishments and their mistakes. Peer coaching is a standard design element of most programs. The community of learners is routinely taking time out to reflect using dialogue and conversation. Open dialogue is a kind of group meditation in the sense that every personal reflection is not to be countered and processed but rather deeply listened to until higher awareness and meaning is realized.

### **Meditation, a form of reflection**

Buddhist practitioners reflect through meditation and through dialogue and conversations with the Lamas and the *Sangha* members. The Buddhist practitioner receives feedback through observing the reactions and the behavior of the teachers (*Lamas*) as well as receiving advice to support and make corrections in the practice. The *Sangha* has a similar role in helping the practitioner gain perspective on individual progress. Feedback must be given and received in the spirit of helping and caring for the growth and the development of the individual. This is a fundamental attitude in an ARL program as well as in a Buddhist *Sangha*. Look for the best in people and you may well find it, look for the worst and you will most probably end up with less than satisfying results.

One way to meditate is to sit on the chair or on the pillow and allow the mind to focus on certain objects or themes and to work without "running" after every thought and emotion. The trick is to stretch the space between the different thoughts and emotions, thereby taming the mind to gain increasing stability. You can describe the process of preparing for Buddhist meditation but the meditation itself defies explanations. The personal experience of how insight into new perspectives takes place is not readily dressed in words. One often hears the frustration of ARL program participants as they have been trying to give justice to the impact a program has had on them. How do I put words to deep personal experience of growing self-awareness, empathy and a better social radar? The link between awareness, systems thinking and mind control is not a neat management model and yet most people intuitively understand the importance for leadership. This "lack of hard edges" is sometimes a source of frustration for CEOs and people in organizations who are responsible for management development. They often request a business case, hard statistical evidence and cost factor analysis to justify investment in managers and organizational development. How do you throw up some metrics towards wisdom and good judgment? In a world defined by order and strong structures the impulse is to set draw boxes and concepts around whatever is hazy and hard to grasp.

People who come in contact with Tibetan Buddhism often experience similar frustration for

related reasons. Lack of dogmas, ready-made answers and hard edge prescriptions create uncertainty and confusion at first. The loneliness to be left in the limbo of ones own mind without anything to hold on to except the love and compassion from the Lama and the Sangha or the optimism and hope that must be the attitude of the program staff when the process is foreground.

### **We learn from action but also from theory**

In Tibetan Buddhism, like in ARL programs, practitioners do not rely on action as the only basis for learning. There is an extensive learning philosophy, which is shared and discussed to give credence to ARL as an approach to management development. Over the years we have come to understand the importance to refrain from explaining ARL concepts too early since it allows realism and debate of intellectual constructs to be used as a diversion from action. The participants are invited to discuss the theory and test it in relation to their own personal learning styles. Likewise in Tibetan Buddhism, the study of theory (the view) is woven together with a general contemplation of meaning followed by settling the mind in meditation of the meaning to make it into ones own personal insight. This being said, practicing Buddhism in action is where the meditation takes on its real meaning. Meditation ((reflection) without action is like a dry twig that can easily be broken. The same is true for ARL.

### **Taming of the mind**

The mind jumps around. Some people describe it as a constant, uncontrollable chatter or a chicken coop. When people start to practice meditation they are surprised and even scared to experience this chaotic state of the mind. To realize how little self-control we have shakes many self-perceptions but that inner revolution is the doorway to deeper understanding. That is the Buddhist view. To find the diamond in the rough is to learn that the difference between suffering and happiness is really only one's own perspective. Just be aware, observe the stirrings of the mind and gently bring it back to the focus of the meditation.

The meditation on a specific object is called peace (*shamata*) meditation. This would come close to the personal reflection in the learning journal where the reflection is focused on specific observations and the related thoughts and emotions. Just allow the thoughts to flow without a clear idea where it will end and without too much editing. The aim is that the reflection will lead to insights into the difference of what is real and what are merely projections and fantasies, which can be checked when sharing impressions with other participants, much like the use of personal meditation and the support of the Sangha.

The more difficult and advanced type of meditation is called *Vipashyana* and, unlike *Shamata* meditation has no object. It is meditation on emptiness. Here emptiness must be understood as total freedom from grasping and attachments. The vastness of the sky is the metaphor and the thoughts and feelings are passing through like white clouds across this emptiness. No need to hold on or chase after these clouds. No matter how busy and cramped our physical world may seem to us, there is always the presence of the sky and the vastness of universe above. The object is to realize the absolute freedom of the mind once the practitioner can see that nothing exists in and of itself. Everything is interdependent. Perhaps dialogue where participants stay alert and deeply listening, letting go of inner arguing, comes close to the idea of *Vipashyana*. Let it come and let it go and new awareness and understanding will emerge. This quest to dissolve habitual patterns leads our thoughts back to fundamental ideas form Social constructivism and Foucault.

## **Multiple Perspectives**

The paper that this is written on is certainly just paper but on another level it is also water, soil, sun, pollinating insects, temperature, labor, machines, intentions, stock markets and so forth. To truly understand systems thinking one must understand the complex symphony of all phenomena. Upon close examination, there is no "stand alone" reality. Likewise, the awareness of the complexity of an ARL program and the immediate world around it as related systems will help the participants to think in systems terms. This is also the purpose of meditation.

The realization of complex interdependencies will appear easier when one learns to relax the mind rather than forcing it to understand or as the T-shirt says: "Meditation is not what you think" One has to understand the importance of dissolving every thought to the freedom from grasping or holding on to any singular object and phenomena. The view is that nothing is reality in and of itself and the resulting insight is freedom from the extremes. We must come to see that we as persons are not the solid center of the universe but just a part of the ever-changing process of change. Every learning coach is well aware of the danger of pre mature decision making and the importance of staying in the middle of extreme views as long as possible. Perhaps ARL should be replaced by ARU, the U standing for understanding.

## **Foundations of (Tibetan) Buddhism**

What is then the essence of Tibetan Buddhism? Is it a religion or is it a philosophical system to help us understand the world around us? The answer is that it is both. Tibetan Buddhism holds out a promise of a world free from the tyranny of the poisons of the mind. What we need to defeat are emotions such as anger, hatred, jealousy, fear, dualism and the clinging to our egos as if ego is something solid and separate from the natural world around us. These emotional poisons are consequences from actions during past and present life times. Fortunately these poisons contain hidden transformative energies, which through diligent practice will manifest in both wisdom and compassion and kindness towards all life forms. Paradoxically, we can only become the masters of our own ego-centered world when we are willing to give it up or let go.

## **Love and compassion, the true nature of the mind**

Tibetan Buddhism is a vision of freedom and happiness. It is a view of the world built on faith in the unlimited vastness of the mind beyond literal, scientific reasoning.

The foundation for this approach rests on the union between love and wisdom. Love being compassion and kindness and wisdom being the understanding of the relationships between all phenomena as well as a sharp understanding of every object and phenomena in and of itself. It is said that love and kindness is what remains when we have removed all the filters that stand between the true mind and us.

## **Focus on the secrets of the mind**

For a time span of over 1300 years Tibetan meditation masters have devised different practices to obtain the freedom and the favorable conditions of the human birth. When much of the rest of the world was busy with the science and technology as means to explore the world order, the Tibetan practitioners focused their efforts on the mind, sheltered from the pressures to admit "mind" or "experience" or "intelligence" into the realm of hard sciences. The insights from their meditation practices in their isolated and unique environment are indeed worthy of serious investigation in this high-speed world of ours. It is important to add that other religions and philosophical systems have been developed with similar interests and motivations and have attracted huge followings through the power of the promise they

hold. Tibetan Buddhism will never try to preach or diminish other's religious beliefs or life philosophies.

### **A tradition based on faith and devotion**

Tibetan Buddhism is both a practical guide for everyday life as well as a religion with devotion to the great, and courageous Buddha and the great lineage masters of India and Tibet who have upheld the teachings for over 2,500 years, ever since the time *Siddharta* became The Buddha (the enlightened one). To follow the Buddha's way, devotion and faith are vital elements. Using the intellect alone makes the teachings meaningless, unsustainable and brittle like a dry twig that can easily be broken. At the very root of the Buddhist faith is the possibility of enlightenment in this lifetime. Every one of us has the Buddha mind or the seed for enlightenment but this seed must be nurtured to realize its full potential. The notion that enlightenment is indeed possible rests on an unrelenting faith, devotion and various forms of meditation practices. Since conceptual understanding is not enough to harvest the fruit one must strive to understand inner reality through a state of mind beyond the obvious world around us. This state of mind can only be personally experienced. Reading books and listening to learned teachers is not enough to get us to the goal.

### **Its right there in front of us**

This understanding is said to be simple and perhaps humorously obvious. We can't see the truth simply because it is too close to us. Since it is beyond conceptual thinking it cannot be described for what it is by ordinary means. It is easier to describe the fruits of the Buddhist practice by what it is not rather than what it is.

Tibetan, Tantric Buddhism uses images of wrathful and peaceful deities far from Western imagery and rationality. All meditation practices on spiritual imagery must be understood as temporary structures, or representations of the psyche, which devised to help the journey towards enlightenment. They exist in the relative world but in the absolute sense they do not exist at all. This is another difficult paradox that cannot be understood by rationality alone. As the mind becomes gradually free from the cobweb of the five poisons these helping structures are no longer necessary. After all, you don't need to carry the boat on your shoulder after you have crossed the river.

### **Understanding is your personal responsibility**

Tibetan Buddhism has a morale code of conduct (*Vinayas*), a philosophy (*Abidharma*) and different systems to guide meditation (*Sutras*). It is important to have an accomplished master/ teacher to help guide the practitioner on the road towards the enlightened mind. The discovery and realization of the great and hidden potential of the mind is up to each and every practitioner. Buddhism puts the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the practitioner. There are no absolutes, no fundamentalism to rest on and no external God or Devil to blame for ones possible misfortunes. Heaven and hell exists right here inside and around us and not in some imagined physical space in the afterlife. The law of *karma* is that the results of virtuous and unvirtuous actions are inevitable. If you plant corn you get corn and not a rose. Likewise, all actions, good and bad will have consequences, if not right away then later.

### **Discipline and patience - practicing what you have learned**

Buddhists need to practice diligently and the positive results will definitely emerge. It is not enough to go to church or temple on holidays and be done with it. The practice must be moved into every aspect of ones life, even into the sleeping hours. The results of practice may initially be hidden from our view just like butter is hidden inside the milk. The butter

cannot be seen just by looking at the milk but with the right understanding and action you will be able to extract the butter from the milk. Action and reflection is necessary and Tibetan Buddhism without action is a road to nowhere. We learn through studies of the right view and we take our insights into the world by being in the world with love, kindness and compassion. From this practical experience we go back to meditate and reflect on what we learned and in this way we cycle through the development of our progress and realization

### **The dance of change – how change unfolds**

From a Buddhist practice point of view everything, the whole universe, is constantly changing even if the movement cannot always be seen by ordinary perceptions. Every natural phenomenon is a constant dance of atoms. In fact, Tibetan meditation masters realized the existence of atoms and subatomic particles more than a thousand years ago. If one atom stops its dance the world would collapse since everything is ultimately related in the dance of change. The very nature of life is change and we find ourselves naturally in this ongoing dance. We must learn how become masters of change and embrace it as the part of life itself. One can argue that change management is the real purpose of an ARL program even if different seminar modules appear under different labels such as team building, working with and through others, personal development, business savvy, strategic thinking, chaos theory and so forth. The participants learn to view change as opportunities rather than upsets. With increased information and understanding of the world around us it is becoming increasingly clear to managers and leaders that we all need to learn about change as fast or faster than the rest of the marketplace. How we deal with change and how much we are able to drive change is as important to an ARL program as it is fundamental to the Buddhist practitioners.

### **Resistance to change**

Resistance is essentially multi-directed energy and can be channeled away from obstruction and conflict through dialogue and allowing time for differentiation and clearing the way for integrative processes. Most resistance is as natural as chewing food before swallowing to allow the quality of the food to be fully appreciated. To understand the implication of change from a personal and organizational viewpoint needs reflection and awareness. That is true in Buddhism and in ARL.

As much as people have to embrace change it is equally important to come to terms with how change is resisted. Buddhist Tantric masters recommend that one acknowledges or labels every feeling and thought before letting it go. One needs to be vigilant and nip compulsive thinking before it goes back into the groves of habitual thinking and feelings. If something causes resentment or anger then stay briefly in the experience before releasing it back to freedom away from grasping and holding on. Changing circumstances is not primarily what is happening in the world around a person but change first and foremost implies a changing relationship to how someone experiences one self. Facing change is often times associated with feelings of fear, resentment, worry and hesitation. It is good to think of changes as having smooth edges rather than sharp turns. The mind much like the body requires analysis and reflection before the possibilities are exhausted and the right action is chosen.

The ARL program coaches must help participants to embrace and understand the nature of resistance. Change takes time and the work of understanding how change happens should ideally go from resistance or reality testing to understanding and commitment.

## **The quick fix syndrome**

There is a tendency in our modern society to talk about change as if it all exists in the same time/space continuum. In fact, the experience of the changing world around us is going on at a faster pace than change or adaptation on the personal level. This false view accounts for much of the quick fix, hard nosed demands on managers to sink or swim with all that is going on in the changing world around them. One can safely say that there is a tendency to stage one or two-day events, often-costly affairs complete with motivational speakers and leave the organizational investment in personal change at that. In truth the basic condition for committed change is, that the person involved in the change process experiences him/herself as being well differentiated from others in terms of input and creativity. Long term participation and change between program activities and insights and back on the job applications moves the participants from compliance to commitment, as every member in an ARL team will know. Alignment is the result of working in mutually respectful relationships. The work of the person considering change cannot be compared to an elevator ride but rather a series of steps. Under normal circumstances, old habits should not be thrown out the window but rather coaxed down the steps. ARL programs are designed over time to ensure that changes are analyzed well grounded in the affected human system and can be transferred to the life outside the program. In addition, much of the change around us is not under our control and will be a matter of our relationship to the inevitable. The Internet, globalization and the vanishing of political ideologies are examples of the times we live in which we need to adapt to rather than change. This is true for the Buddhist practitioner as well as participants in an ARL program.

## **In Summary**

This article has touched on many similarities between Action Reflection Learning and (Tibetan) Buddhism, some subtle others more obvious such as:

- The recognition of our vast human potential and inherent wisdom.
- Respect for the unique qualities in each individual and the fact that we are at different stages of readiness to change.
- Opportunities are everywhere once we move away from the bondage of the egocentric arrogance of having all the answers, which in turn makes learning hard.
- The central importance of understanding the world both in terms of inter-related phenomena but also with the ability to focus with singular attention.
- Mindfulness of the impact of inner forces as well as outer events and relationships.
- The central role of the community of learners.
- The importance of a guide/coach/teacher to support reflection.
- The retreat place as an important factor to support the level and quality of insight and osmosis.
- Trusting relationships enhance the quality of learning and understanding.
- The individual is ultimately responsible for inner work in relation to development.
- The questions (rather than a pre-constructed curriculum) are the key drivers for development.
- Action and experimentation as a foundation for how deeper and personal understanding can be realized.
- The importance of reflection and meditation as a way to develop wisdom.

For me the investigation continues. I have more work to do in arenas where human interactions determine the quality of the outcomes of life in organizations. Some of the questions and paradoxes I will continue to focus on are:

- How can I best use my time in the compressed world of change and instant communication trying to find the right balance between learning from experts and learning from my own actions and reflections. Physically one can only be in one place at the time and yet I must engage in actions in an exiting global community to reflect and gain transferable understanding from direct experience?
- How can I balance my need to bring my personal insights to be of some use in this tumultuous world and at the same time seek solitude and meditation away from that world?
- How can I simplify what seems turbulent, unbounded and chaotic?
- How can I become wiser as I grow older in spite of a failing memory?

For me as a practicing Buddhist it has been a blessing to be able to bring my view and the fruits of my meditation into the work in ARL programs. In fact, I am hard pressed to find anything in these two perspectives that are in direct conflict with each other. I hope that you, the reader will get some thoughts and impulses from this essay and if you do, please share them with me at my email address:

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