

Changing How We Work Together

An interview with Peter Senge and Margaret Wheatley, conducted by Melvin McLeod and published in the January 2001 issue of the [Shambhala Sun](#)

Melvin McLeod: Dr. Senge, you talk to managers about the importance of "disciplines" and "personal mastery." You describe organizations as "communities of practice." There seems to be a strong element of spiritual practice in your approach.

Peter Senge: Increasingly, we're directly incorporating into our work different practices that have been around for a long time, such as various types of meditation. It started with the work on dialogue. We found that dialogue often involved silence, and so maybe we needed to actually cultivate the capacity to sit in silence. And guess what? That started to look a lot like traditional forms of meditation or contemplation.

So we've become more and more out front about this, although it's always been there. Though we were doing the work described in *The Fifth Discipline* for ten or fifteen years before the book was published, we didn't use the word "discipline." It was only in the writing of the book that it finally hit me that what we were talking about was discipline, in the very same spirit in which the word has been used in the creative arts or in spiritual traditions for thousands of years. That people might have a potential or a talent, but they can't cultivate it without discipline.

You know, organizations are embodiments of the human desire to affiliate and be together, and that desire brings us face to face with complex, multiple dimensions of our existence. I often say that leadership is deeply personal and inherently collective. That's a paradox that effective leaders have to embrace. It does depend on them. It does depend on their convictions, their clarity, their personal commitment to their own cultivation. And on the other hand, it doesn't depend on them. It's an inherently collective phenomenon.

You might say that organizations are one way for us to practice what it means to live as a collective being, not just as an

individual being. That's tough, but I think that's what the discipline of working together is ultimately about. There are issues and difficulties that only manifest when we put ourselves in a situation where we're vulnerable to being in a collective.

Margaret Wheatley: I love this paradox that Peter expresses. When I was working at Gampo Abbey, a Buddhist monastery, on their organizational processes, the principle we came up with was that everything we learned on the meditation cushion, we could take into the practice of organizing together. So much of what comes out of dialogue is actually a fairly weak imitation of skills that we learn in meditation—being aware, listening, letting go, not taking things as they appear. It was very fruitful to notice that all the characteristics of a good meditator can be brought into the collective experience of trying to run an organization.

McLeod: If I can summarize the view that both of you seem to present in your writings, it's that change is the fundamental reality, that organizations suffer because they solidify the situation, that they can achieve harmony if they work successfully with openness and uncertainty, and that there's a path of discipline and practice by which they can do that. It sounds like the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, just applied to organizations instead of individuals.

Wheatley: Well, you're not the only one who's noticed this [laughter]. I think that both Peter and I have both found there's great depth in understanding life from a Buddhist perspective.

Speaking for myself, my awareness of change and uncertainty came through my studies in biology, and just from growing older. That awareness of the continuous change called life led me to very ancient spiritual traditions, because our present Western mindset has forgotten that life is change. Instead, it promises us relief from uncertainty and the ability to control everything. It's like a 300-year-old case of mistaken identity: we actually thought that we could take over life and remake it according to our own needs.

Once I looked past the Western cultural tradition, it was a great

comfort and teaching to understand that most other cultures—not only Buddhism but all indigenous cultures—have well understood that life is a process of continuous change. Life does not organize according to our demands. There are great elemental forces of both creation and disruption we need to understand so we can work with them.

When we encounter change, we have to be able to understand our own habitual patterns and be willing to move into a different way of being. One of the dilemmas that hits us in organizations is that we might be quite willing to change, to deal with chaos and uncertainty as part of life, but there are very few organizational beliefs to support us. I don't find a lot of organizations where people at the senior level are comfortable with uncertainty. This is where the old Western mindset still comes in. We still want the people who lead us to save us from uncertainty. It's not only the leaders themselves who have to change, but also our idea of what we want leaders for.

Senge: One of the questions that has become central to my thinking is this: "Is it meaningful at this point to consider whether there is such a thing as collective cultivation?" I use the term "cultivation" in this context to mean deep development, becoming a human being. So, can a body of people working together—even the word "organization" can limit us a little, because it's starting to sound like a thing—be committed as a collective to this cultivation?

My understanding of Buddhism points to three aspects of cultivation: a commitment to meditation practice, a commitment to study, and of course, a commitment to service, to dedicating your life to something beyond yourself. It's a very evocative question to ask what these three dimensions of cultivation would look like in a collective situation. It's not the same thing as saying, "Everybody meditate," because meditation is just one of three dimensions of personal cultivation. As I say, this has become a very meaningful question in the last year.

McLeod: Isn't there also an effectiveness argument here? In Buddhism, it's said that you can be skillful only when you have

wisdom, which is seeing the truth that nothing is solid or permanent. Isn't that also true for the organization, that its intelligence or skill comes from seeing change, and if it sees the world as fixed and unchanging it won't be effective or successful?

Senge: The only problem I have with your question is the word "seeing." You don't get to *prajna*, wisdom, just because you want it. Again, cultivation is essential. Similarly, it's not enough for organizations to want to be able to change. It's not enough to just read the right books and adopt a new belief system that says, okay, everything is changing. The real question is, when all is said and done, can you really operate that way?

So it's not simply a matter of good intentions. As it would be in any discipline-based religion or artistic field, it's a matter of hard work and knowing how to do it. Do you have the tools? Do you have the methods? Do you have teachers or mentors? All the things that help a person along any developmental path.

Wheatley: It's a very big leap for organizations to move from the realization that they have to cope with change, to the understanding that if you're going to be in a continuously changing environment, then all of the ways in which you have learned to manage have to be examined. Do they give you the awareness and information and mindfulness that allows you to stay in the dance? Because as Peter said, organizations still don't have the tools, the analytic methods, that actually support people in this process of continuous change. As much as we say we want to change our organizations to make them more adaptive, we're still not noticing the things that would make us graceful dancers.

Senge: I think this a non-trivial point we're making, and I'll tell you why. It cuts against an awful lot of our approach in the West to learning and change. We have a tendency to think if we read it, we can do it. If we've got the idea, we've learned it. On another level, we know that's all nonsense: nobody learns to play the violin by picking it up and saying "By golly, I'm going to be a violinist." But we think people learn to manage change by going off to the two- or three-day seminar or reading a book. We're

talking about real, 180-degree change—instead of trying to control everything, we're learning to align our intentions with emerging realities. This is a profound shift in our way of being. You're not going to be able to do that just by having the idea in your head that it's something that you ought to do.

Wheatley: One of the important aspects of this practice is time—time to reflect, time to meditate. And time is something that has just disappeared.

McLeod: We've talked about the aspect of personal practice and the overall environment of change in which companies must operate. Let's turn to the nature of the organization itself.

Senge: Organizations arise because people are working together. Organizations are living phenomena in a very real sense and they were appreciated in that spirit for a very long time. It was only a couple of hundred years ago that our view of organizations—and particularly business organizations—really began to change.

This goes back to the roots of Western science, to people like Kepler, Newton and Descartes who conceived of the cosmos as like a giant clockwork. When we started to harness the power of machines in the early years of the industrial era, gradually we started to see more and more of life as machine-like. In fact, the "machine age" is what many people have dubbed the industrial era, because of how powerful the image of the machine has been in our lives. It leads us to see everything, including ourselves, as nothing but an elaborate set of mechanisms. This way of thinking has developed insidiously over a few hundred years, to the point where we no longer realize how captive we are to it.

Of course, this view includes seeing our organizations as machines. A company, in this sense, is literally a machine for making money. You have inputs, whether they're material resources, energy resources or human resources, and out the other end comes money. If money doesn't come out, the machine is no good and you throw it away or try to fix it. You fix it by getting new leaders, who can drive change or control things

better. In the machine-age world, "to manage" literally means "to control."

On the other hand, look at the literal meaning of the word "company." It does not mean a machine, it means a group of people, and we still preserve that usage when we speak of "a company of men." The word "company" derives from the sharing of bread, from the French word *compagner*. It's the same root as the word "companion." In Swedish, the oldest word for company means "nourishment for life" and the oldest symbol for company in Chinese means "life's work." So we have these much older ideas of what a company is all about: a group of people creating something together, and consequently being a kind of living force.

McLeod: If we view the organization in that way, what does it mean to be a leader?

Wheatley: The leader is one who is able to work with and evoke the very powerful and positive aspects of human creativity. You don't create these energies, but you do have to support them. You do have to have a sincere belief in the commitment and creativity of the people you're working with.

We still feel very badly about each other. In my estimation, we're quicker and quicker to take affront or to be affronted, to take umbrage, to feel insulted, to assume that other people are mal-intended, rather than well-intended. This is where we are as a culture. We're very far from each other; we're very far from believing in each other.

So I've been working with the idea that a leader is one who has more faith in people than they do in each other, or in themselves. The leader is one who courageously holds out opportunities for people to come back together, to be engaged in the meaningful work of the organization, whatever it is. The leader is one who relies on peoples' creativity and their desire to do something meaningful.

So the first act of a great leader, I believe, is an act of faith. It's

believing that human nature is the blessing, not the problem. That's one of the principles that I work with right now—that we are the blessing, not the problem. Then if you actually make that leap of faith, you go into these organizational processes that we've spent about ten years developing, and I feel good about a lot of them: calling the whole system together, finding ways for people to be in dialogue, noticing that people can be very committed to the work of the organization.

So I see the leader as the one who calls people together, who supports them with resources, who keeps the field clear so that they can do this work. The leader is the beacon of belief that we really are sufficient, that we really are talented enough to make this work. The leader displays that faith in people continuously.

Senge: That's lovely. It reminds me of Douglas MacGregor's epochal book, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, in which he says that we have a fundamental choice as our starting point: Do we believe that people are good? Do we believe people truly want to work? Do we believe people want to contribute? If this is not our conviction, then everything we do from that point on must be a kind of manipulation, to get something out of people which they otherwise would not bring forth on their own.

I think Meg has hit on something very central. These first steps set the direction of the journey. For instance, take this into a particular area, like hierarchy. There is hierarchy based on a belief in original sin, that people are fundamentally flawed, or to use Meg's phrase, that they are not sufficient. Then there are hierarchies based on the belief that people are sufficient.

There's been a tendency in recent years to make hierarchy a kind of whipping boy, to blame everything on hierarchy. But hierarchy is a set of social relations that we invoke. We create hierarchy, and the real question is what's going on in us in that creating. By and large, the hierarchies we have today, whether in schools or businesses, are hierarchies of obedience. Their fundamental modus operandi is obedience or compliance. But we do also have hierarchies of wisdom. We acknowledge elders and have for thousands of years. In this, we invoke a profoundly

different type of hierarchy. There's no obedience required whatsoever; it's only based on choice. If a person has lived longer or worked in a certain way to achieve something, we acknowledge that, and we say, I can learn from you. I'm more than happy to be your student.

Wheatley: This whole quest for obedience is another one of those things that takes us in the opposite direction from life. One of the fundamental characteristics of anything living is the freedom to choose. The organism chooses whether to notice something, then it chooses whether or not to be disturbed. If the organism chooses to be disturbed, it still retains the fundamental freedom to decide how it will respond. Obedience is not a natural life process.

Senge: Living systems, by their nature, resist being obedient.

Wheatley: And Peter, the consequence of not honoring life's intrinsic right to self-determination is that when we ask people to obey and they do obey, they become lifeless. They shut down. They disappear. They become automatons.

Senge: You get the obedience but you lose the spirit.

Wheatley: You lose the life.

McLeod: In that light, perhaps one could argue that the most spiritually deadening influence in our society today is the structure of the organization and the workplace.

Wheatley: I wouldn't say that. I would say that the greatest spiritual problems are these deep convictions, perceptions or beliefs in the Western mindset about what is valuable in life.

McLeod: Yes, but isn't their most powerful manifestation in the workplace, given we spend half our waking hours there?

Senge: I'll give you a way to say both. It's like what I said before about hierarchy. It's easy to blame hierarchy, it's easy to blame the organization, but we have to remember that we are

the ones creating all of these. We don't have workplaces the way they are because of the laws of physics. They are nothing but the results of the habits of human behavior. And unless we start to realize that, we'll keep trying to fix it "out there." We'll keep trying to fix the form of it. We'll reorganize or try to find the right leader to follow, rather than realizing that we have the leaders we have and the organizations we have because we've asked for them and we're causing them.

Having said that, I do think the growth in the number of large institutions over the last hundred years or so is a significant development. There have always been schools of many forms, but there weren't school systems. There have always been companies, there have been various forms of commerce for thousands of years, but we didn't have global corporations. This is a significant change in the human landscape. If we were to treat it literally as a living phenomenon, we could say that this new species of large institutions embodies and enacts this deep sensibility that Meg is talking about, or you might say, this "insensibility."

These institutions now embody on a large scale this way of being that is so out of touch with who we are and the nature of living phenomena. So I do think it's fair to say that one of the places that we might find a great degree of leverage in bringing about change is in this institutional milieu. But we have to be careful to realize we're talking about schools and non-profit organizations, just as much as we're talking about corporations. There's no one set of culprits here. It's all institutions.

Wheatley: I absolutely agree. What we really need to change are our fundamental organizing behaviors or habits. That's why this time is different in many ways. This is a time when very large institutions now exert an unparalleled power over individual behavior. I do feel there are more and more people trying to act out of compassion, but we still don't know we could choose a different way of organizing. So we get non-governmental organizations all over the world starting to manifest the same kind of institutional paralysis as the large governments that they grew up in response to. It's the great challenge of our time to

understand that the way we organize is increasing the problems we face.

Senge: People come together in organizations for, in some sense, a noble purpose, but are finding ways to constrict or even destroy life in the process. And when we really probe deeply into that way of organizing, we'll find ourselves. It's where we'll find our own fears and anxieties and beliefs played out. We won't find somebody behind the curtain who's causing it to happen.

The change must be both personal and institutional. It can't be one or the other. It's a little bit like Taoism, which basically works through the body. Taoists know that the self and the body are not the same and that distinguishing the two is a critical part of your cultivation. In a sense, we're trying to be organizational Taoists. We're saying we have this larger body we've created, called an institutional body. It could be a vehicle for cultivation, just as a physical body can be a body for cultivation, if we could start to see it that way.