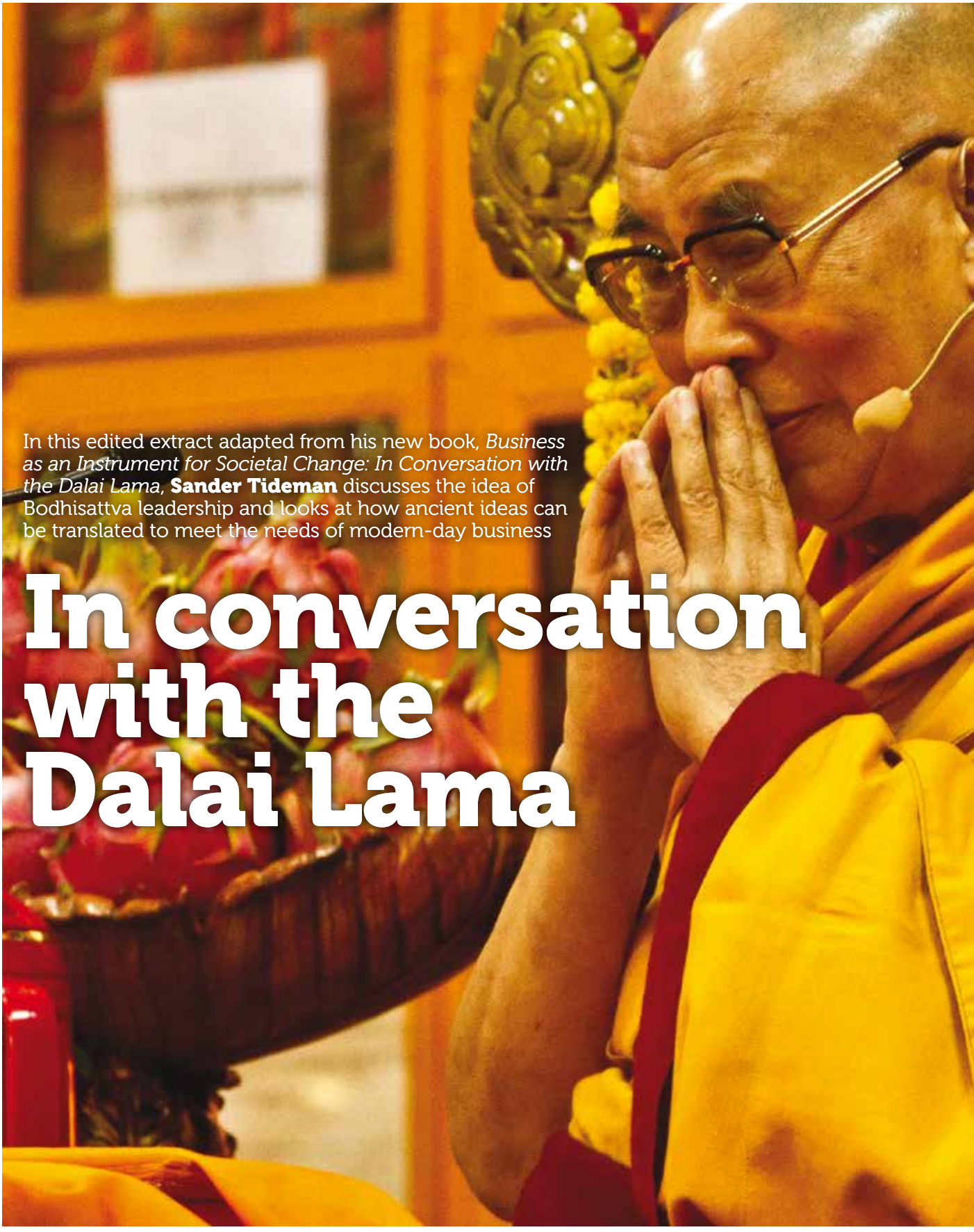


In this edited extract adapted from his new book, *Business as an Instrument for Societal Change: In Conversation with the Dalai Lama*, **Sander Tideman** discusses the idea of Bodhisattva leadership and looks at how ancient ideas can be translated to meet the needs of modern-day business

In conversation with the Dalai Lama

"Leaders are not born or made, but cultivated and developed. The best way to develop leaders is through the training of values."

The Dalai Lama

In Buddhism, someone who decides to take on the path of cultivating his mind to the fullest is called a Bodhisattva. Given the interconnected nature of reality, the Bodhisattva does not make a distinction between self and others. While the principal focus is the development of their own mind, they are equally concerned with the world around them. Given that we and others are interconnected and interdependent and that our happiness in the ultimate sense relies on the happiness of others, compassion is considered a natural state. The Bodhisattva, therefore, works on their mind to develop wisdom while practising compassion.

The Bodhisattva (literally "being on the path of awakening") can be described as a spiritual warrior: theirs is essentially an "inner warrior," someone fighting the *inner* enemies of ignorance, selfishness, greed and anger rather than fighting any *outer* enemies. Yet their purpose is serving the interconnected world at large. The Bodhisattva is the Buddhist metaphor for leadership, embracing both inner and outer leadership.

In Asian history, therefore, rather than merely renouncing the outer world, Bodhisattva warriors often intentionally took on roles in the outer world as statesmen, teachers, artists and writers, which allowed them to serve others while simultaneously engaging in an inner practice to transform their own mind. The Bodhisattva is the ideal of the Buddhist tradition that the Dalai Lama belongs too and in my mind, the present Dalai Lama represents and embodies this tradition to the fullest.

Since the Bodhisattva, unlike any other leadership archetype, is based on the wisdom that understands the interconnected nature of reality, I felt that the concept could serve as inspiration for leadership that has to deal with complex interconnected challenges such as sustainability, as the principles behind the

'07

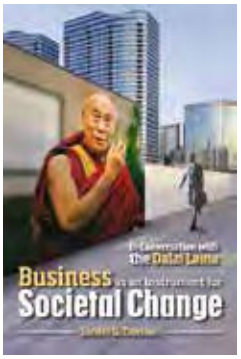
In 2007, Sander Tideman travelled to Eastern Tibet to engage in a two-week programme of leadership development using a combination of practices from Buddhism and the new schools of leadership transformation

Bodhisattva practice are similar to those driving sustainability. I therefore felt that the Bodhisattva could be a role model for the new type of leadership that we need in business: a modern-day warrior for sustainable system change at three interrelated levels: the individual, the organisation, and the collective, spanning both the "inner" and the "outer" dimensions.

How can we translate these ideas to the modern context of business? If a company's leadership is oblivious to the needs of its stakeholders, on whom it depends for its long-term survival, the firm is bound to experience trouble at some point in time. For example, customers will stop trusting the brand. In contrast, if the leadership of the company understands and caters for the needs of its stakeholders (in balance, of course) it is likely to be successful in the longer term, simply because this mindset allows them to see more and better adapt to future needs.

Wisdom is the firm's ability to see its interdependence with other stakeholders, while compassion is the ability to serve stakeholders' needs. Since the leadership of companies such

"Wisdom is the ability of a firm's leadership to see its interdependence with other stakeholders, while compassion is the ability to serve stakeholders' needs. Therefore leadership of companies that employ such "compassionate" stakeholder-oriented mindsets are likely to be more successful in the long run than those who employ more limited, self-oriented mindsets



as Unilever and Medtronics employ such "compassionate" stakeholder-oriented mindsets, they are likely to be more successful in the long run than those who employ more limited, self-oriented mindsets.

In this way, Buddhist principles of wisdom and compassion can make sense to business strategy. I started to envision the possibility of training leaders to become "sustainability warriors". While much of the current global sustainability crisis is unprecedented, it appears that the interconnected and interdependent worldview that solutions to the crisis are calling for has been recognised and practised by leaders in Buddhist-inspired civilisations such as Tibet. The preservation of the contemplative traditions like the Bodhisattva path suggests that the leadership practice we need to employ in order to deal with this new paradigm may already exist.

The only problem, I thought, is that the terminology used to express these ideas is cloaked in religious connotations. This does not work for the secular business mind. Expert translation between the two worlds is needed. It then dawned on me that perhaps I, by having a foot in both worlds, had a role to play in designing a theory and practice of leadership suitable for the system change that is needed and aligning it with proven concepts and methods from Buddhism.

I decided to experiment. One year, sitting on a mountain slope in front of a Buddhist monastery in Tibet, I conceived of a leadership journey to Tibet. The next year, in the summer of 2007, I travelled with a dozen business people to Eastern Tibet to engage in a two-week programme of leadership development using a combination of practices from Buddhism and the new schools of leadership transformation.

In the spirit of the Bodhisattva, the inner transformation process was designed for the sake of outer transformation. Inner and outer worked two ways: while traveling in the inspirational landscape, we asked people to reflect on their internal mindscape – the frames of references through which they look at the world – and how these inspirational outer experiences can bring inspiration to their lives and jobs. Through meeting with Tibetan Buddhist masters and nomadic farmers, and sitting silently gazing at vast skies or nightly campfires, several participants were able to create a new vision for their work and life. In fact, all participants enjoyed some sort of mind-shifting experience.

Rein Heddema, a former colleague and human resource director at ABN AMRO Bank who joined me on the first journey, wrote to me some years afterwards: "This journey created a profound positive change for me in my work and private life. Even many years later, I still experience the beneficial effects. It was a true turnaround, a once-in-a-lifetime experience".

I repeated this experiment every year. Later I added other destinations, including Bhutan, Mongolia and, closer to home, in the Swiss Alps. In Bhutan, we guided the participants in an exploration of the concept of gross national happiness. The culture and pristine landscape of Bhutan provided inspiration for participants to redesign their own life and work into a more positive and joyful direction. How could they as leaders, while learning from Bhutan's unique development philosophy, transform their organisations into a force for societal happiness?

Designing and leading these journeys was a very satisfying experience for me. Finally, I had found a professional expression of the many threads that made up my work—sustainability, leadership, business and Buddhism fused into one programme.

Business as an Instrument for Societal Change: In Conversation with the Dalai Lama is written by Sander Tideman and was published by Greenleaf Publishing in August 2016. The book (right) is available to order from www.greenleaf-publishing.com.

gf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sander Tideman became an expert in leadership and sustainable business after a successful career as a banker and business consultant. He has worked with organisations across the world and is Managing Director of Mind & Life Europe, a faculty member at the Department of Business-Society Management at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, and a co-founding partner of the Flow Foundation and Flow Impact Fund. After a meeting with the Dalai Lama as a young man, he developed a lifelong friendship that would prove to be very significant in informing his thinking.