Chinese Management Studies

Emerald Article: New paradigm, a socio-spirituality research on succession in leadership: Consciousness, mind theory of Karmapas?
Check Teck Foo

Article information:
To cite this document: Check Teck Foo, (2012), "New paradigm, a socio-spirituality research on succession in leadership: Consciousness, mind theory of Karmapas?", Chinese Management Studies, Vol. 6 Iss: 4 pp. 539 - 567
Permanent link to this document: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17506141211280254
Downloaded on: 03-12-2012
References: This document contains references to 37 other documents
To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by Emerald Author Access

For Authors:
If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service. Information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald  www.emeraldinsight.com
With over forty years’ experience, Emerald Group Publishing is a leading independent publisher of global research with impact in business, society, public policy and education. In total, Emerald publishes over 275 journals and more than 130 book series, as well as an extensive range of online products and services. Emerald is both COUNTER 3 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.
New paradigm, a socio-spirituality research on succession in leadership

Consciousness, mind theory of Karmapas?

Check Teck Foo
Buddhist College of Singapore, Singapore

Abstract
Purpose – In the literature there is very little exploration on how the Tibetan approach in leadership may be relevant for management. Here, for the first time, the paper discusses the ancient yet continuing practice of succession in leadership of the Kagyu Karma School of Tibetan Buddhism within the context of management practices. In so doing, the author suggests a theory of continuous consciousness for succession in leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – A multi-method design is utilized in the research paper. First, the biographical literature on the 17 Karmapas is reviewed and content analyzed for insights: Who is the Karmapa? Second, the author, through a process of planned personal, activity-based research, including field visits of ritual ceremonies, gathers insights on the Karmapa leadership in action. Furthermore, he was invited to host for HH The 17th Gyalwa Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje a forum on, “Living a Meaningful Life in the Contemporary Age”. Third, comparative analyses of tenure of leadership are made of different succession approaches: Karmapa versus other systems of succession, for example Chinese dynastic system (Yuan, Ming, Qing and Chinese Communist Party) are presented. Fourth, traits in the leadership of the Karmapa are portrayed: symbolically, the divine parasol through a rare photograph. A parallel symbolism of leadership, especially the motif of the Sun is drawn between the Tibetan Karmapa and Han Chinese Mao Zedong. For this, the artistic method of montage is utilized to the findings. Fifth, drawing upon research on psychology (nineteenth century German psychologist, Ebbinghaus), the author suggests the memory tests employed by the Tibetans for selection of successor have some scientific basis. Finally, in discussion on corporate vision; from a review of past biographies of 16 Karmapas and for the first time a taxonomical portrayal of the visionary experiences of His Holiness is presented.

Findings – The continuity in the leadership of the Karmapas over almost 912 years (1100 BCE to present) is certainly one of the most remarkable in the history of mankind. It is the longest lineage of spiritual leaders within the Chinese minority, of the Tibetan culture. Among the theory of leadership, the case of Karmapa reinforces strongly the role of personality traits. Every Karmapa, including the present 17th has to manifest certain traits or signs to gain continuing acceptance as leader of the spiritual community. In a very sharp contrast to the very short tenure of American CEOs (statistically, graphically presented), the tenure of leadership for Kagyu Karma School of Buddhism is life-long. Indeed, uniquely as a Tibetan practices in succession, multi-lifetimes. In this paper, the author discusses how modern corporations may draw insights from this as unique case of institutionalizing the sustainability of leadership. Perhaps, there is a case for expanding the current paradigm of leadership research?

Originality/value – This paper highlights the value of management learning through research from ancient religious or spiritual traditions. In this case, the focus is on leadership succession and it is hoped this paper will foster inter-disciplinary (management and spirituality) research by scholars.

Keywords Leadership, Management succession, Succession planning, Buddhism, Tenure of CEOs and leaders, Sustainable leadership, Karmapas, Management and spirituality

Paper type Research paper
Introduction
One of the central themes in management is leadership. Despite the extensive and voluminous literature, often in handbooks and edited volumes on the theory and practices of leadership (Bass, 1997; Hesselbein *et al*., 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 1995; Northouse, 2004), none of the books, papers, articles or works within the Western leadership literature explore the uniquely, deeply rooted, heavily culturally influenced Tibetan system of, highly organized, systematic approach to renewal in leadership.

Given their high plateau, it is not surprising for Tibetans to be much devoted to ensuring the continuity especially of their religious cultural institutions. There is a deep concern among the Tibetan community for sustaining their cultural beliefs across the next and many generations that follow. For this the Tibetans have devised their own unique system of planning for succession in leadership. At the core of the practice is identifying the last leader’s incarnation.

Such a perspective is hardly even mentioned in the Western succession leadership literature due to religious differences. In prevalent Western, Christianity-grounded thinking, there are no past nor future lives. There is only a single, straight line vis-à-vis the Asian, mainly Indian Hindu and Chinese Buddhist and Taoist beliefs of many ever returning cycles of lives.

Much as American management gurus and practitioners are now advocating, the ancient Tibetans a thousand of years ago were already prepared to devote the necessary time, resources and efforts in ensuring their success. As Blackaby and Blackaby (2001, p. 278) in *Spiritual Leadership* have highlighted too, the preoccupation of leading Western spiritual leaders puts emphasis on:

[...] spiritual leaders are always investing in the next generation of leaders [...].

For the Tibetans, their interest is not in just one generation but to upkeep the succession for generation after generation. In traditional Tibetan history, the earliest “lineage” in leadership is the succession of the Karmapas or in singular, “The Karmapa”. Two possible definitions for the word “lineage” are in the dictionary[1]. One is for:

[...] the descendants of one individual [...].

And the other is:

[...] inherited properties shared with others of your blood line [...].

Both of these do not coincide exactly with the Tibetan concept of “lineage”. As will be discussed later, persons appearing sequentially in a line of Karmapas are neither descendants nor inheritors of genes. They are all just one and very much the same spirit, being, entity and person.

For up to almost a millennium, this concept has prevailed among the Tibetans: the same personage has being enthroned to the seat of leadership. The Karmapa had been the spiritual head of the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. His role is to be of service to mankind, one of enabling sentient beings to evolve to higher realms of existence. Again, for Buddhists, beliefs in realms of existence are as real as the moon.
Now, in classical Buddhist theory, there are six realms:

1. realm of devas or gods and heavenly beings;
2. realm of titans;
3. realm of hungry ghosts;
4. hell realm;
5. animal realm; and
6. human realm.

According to Buddhist teachings, it is only in the human realm is that there is the possibility of an entity to be reborn either as a man or woman of escaping out of this samsara. Samsara is often depicted as a wheel of existence[2]. Given such an onerous yet critically vital spiritual role for our human society as a whole, it is not surprising for the Tibetans across the generations to be striving to revive the presence and instill the leadership of the Karmapa.

Byham et al. (2002) elaborated their work as Grow Your Own Leaders: How to Identify, Develop, and Retain Leadership Talent. This parallels what the Tibetans are already practicing for such a long time: it is first to identify then to re-instill, reeducate, redevelop and redevelop talents that are already embedded in the Karmapa.

The model of leadership within Western theory that resonates well with the Tibetan culture is in the concept of servant leadership (Blanchard and Hodges, 2003; Greenleaf, 1977, 1998; Spears and Lawrence, 2002). This is where the focus of leadership is on the service of a leader for his community. In the case of the Karmapa, whilst his service may be performed in ceremonies organized by the Kagyu Karma community, he is trying to reach out to humanity as a whole.

Since the early, Mahler and Drotter (1986) work in developing a handbook on succession planning of CEOs, there has been a growth in literature on this aspect of leadership. For example, the building of leaders or high flyers for the next generation (Conger and Benjamin, 1999; McCall, 1998); succession for competitive edge (Fulmer and Conger, 2004); investing in leadership development for strategic advantages (Fulmer and Goldsmith, 2001) and emphasizing of talent from “within” the organization for continuity (Rothwell, 2001).

Yet there may be interesting parallels in the Western theory in leadership on succession with what the Tibetans have always been doing. For this purpose we take the historically, very well documented case study of the Karmapas. Tibetans have maintained the Karmapa’s lineage of leadership for more than nine centuries. Through this paper, the author wishes to develop some nexuses between the strongly rooted Tibetan Buddhist traditions in leadership with the extensive (surprisingly, even metaphorical) Western literature.

One example of the metaphors used by several authors on succession of leadership: construction of a “pipeline”. Presumably, it is a line of pipes to channel the inflow of leaders (Charan et al., 2001; Conger, 2003). Indeed for the Tibetans, there has indeed been a long, illustrious and remarkably successful pipeline of leaders: 16 past Karmapas with now two persons enthroned as the 17th Karmapa. The controversy: “Who really is the Karmapa?” This is outside of the scope of this paper[3] but it may well be the focus of a fresh new work. Suffice to say, is it possible to argue a case for one of two[4] rather than which one? In a recent forum (see discussion later) I argued perhaps
it is the intention of the 16th Karmapa for there to be two separate existences: one for
the Western, mainly English speaking audiences and the other for the Chinese in
mainland China.

In this paper, we take the concept of successful planning for continuity in leadership
from Rothwell (2001, p. 29):

[... ] a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity [...].

We ask: what are some of the key features within the Tibetan system for ensuring the
lineage of the Karmapas. The Tibetan Buddhists belonging to the Kaygud Karma
school of Buddhism may be said to be much like the owners, shareholders, especially
stakeholders of corporations. They too have realized this simple truth:

[... ] the continued survival of the organization depends on having the right people in the right
places at the right time [... ] (Rothwell, 2001, p. 8).

For the Tibetan Buddhists, it is by far much more precise than as put by Rothwell: it
is in having the right person, the one who possesses the consciousness of the Karmapa.
This however assumes the transferability of consciousness, something which we shall
be exploring next.

Transferability of consciousness
The Tibetans live in the high altitude of the Himalayas, their plateau often described
as “The Roof of the World” and at heights exceeding 4,500 m (14,800 feet). Living in such
a context, they are probably the most religiously or most strongly spiritually attuned
people of the world. This should not be surprising, since mountains (definitely not cities)
have always been associated with the spiritual or religious including giving birth.

Historically, the mountains are fountainheads where religious or spiritual verses,
wisdom or insights are transmitted, from God (or gods) to humanity. For example, in
Exodus, Moses received his tablets with the ten commandments from Mount Sinai and
in Islam, Prophet Mohammad had his revelations inside a cave (named Hira) up on
Jabal al-Nur Mountain. Indeed in Hinduism, Mount Kailash in the Himalayas is
considered to be the abode of Lord Shiva.

In China too, sacred places are often mountains such as: Putou Shan, Tai Shan,
Hua Shan, Wu Tai Shan, Jiuhua Shan, Emei Shan and others. Tibetans living up in high
places amidst the clouds must be more inclined to be far more spiritually minded. Of all
peoples, we can look to the Tibetans to evolve a more spiritually complex, mind-oriented
approach for ensuring the continuity in the leadership of their organization.

Most intriguingly, for the Tibetans, they see their leader of the Karma Kagyu school
of Tibetan Buddhism with in a somewhat different, perhaps more scientifically
grounded vision. They described their leader in a manner consonant with a quantum
physics view of the world[5]: focusing on the physical body but what it embodies:

[... ] The Seventeenth Karmapa is a tulku, the reincarnation of all previous Karmapas and
as such, he embodies the incarnate consciousness of all his illustrious predecessors [...]
(Lea, 1985, p. 68).

In other words, the Tibetans almost disregard the body or see it as merely, a conduit to
enable the working of consciousness. The present 17th Karmapa for all intent and
purposes is the exact same entity, the same person as all of the past 16 Karmapas:
[...] He is the Karmapa, past and present, the living result of their cumulative good works [...] (Lea, 1985, p. 68).

Figuratively, it is possible for us to imagine the phenomenon of transference as a transmigration of the Soul. “Soul-energy-consciousness” may be an adequate descriptor in what is being transmitted. A transmission which hints at the laws of quantum physics at work.

Tai Situpa[6], one of the highest ranking of the Lamas in the Kagyu Karma tradition has this to say about the changing of the human body from one incarnation to another, vis-à-vis the Karmapa:

[...] The only difference is the body: they have a different body, but they are the same person, same mind, same wisdom [...] (p. 178).

In other words, it is the mind or consciousness and ultimately wisdom in the person that truly matters. Implicitly then there is a transmission from the dead body of the former Karmapa into a new baby (Figure 1).

Of all the cultures, besides the Egyptian it is only within the Tibetan that you find an eighth century work *Bardo Thodol*[7], a work attributed to Guru Rinpoche Pamashabhava and discovered in the twelfth-century. In the West the work enjoys wide popularity and is better known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The book is a manual for guiding consciousness in the in-between state: death and the next re-birth. At the minimum, the work provides a theoretical basis for managing as human beings, our transmission of consciousness. It is the assumption in the possibility of transmission of consciousness that underlies the strategy adopted by the Tibetans to the renewal of leadership for their organization.

*New paradigm: a shift?*

Is it possible then that such deeply rooted cultural beliefs may well have some scientific basis? If so, we may well require a shift in our paradigm for research on leadership continuity and succession: that is one incorporating too the Tibetan approaches. Already, the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are making significant inroads in the West, especially in the USA.
Of all the religious traditions in human society, it is only the Tibetan monks who are being sought out for cutting-edge, frontier, collaborative, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) led research into interfaces of Buddhism and psychology[8]. The blend of very ancient, meditative practices (as mastered by Tibetan monks) with ultra modern science is unique. Integrating antiquity with science for the advancement of cutting edge knowledge of the human mind is itself fascinating.

In the next section, we shall discuss the antiquity of the institution of continuous transmission of consciousness of the Karmapa as part of the process of leadership succession.

The antiquity of the Karmapa

According to published literature on the 17th Karmapa (for example by Martin, 2004), the entity of the Karmapa is specifically mentioned across many of the ancient Buddhist texts. These include examples in various Buddhist sutras and tantras such as:

- The King Samadhi Sutra.
- Root Tantra of Manjushri.
- The Descent into Lanka Sutra (Lankavatara Sutra).

Specifically, the appearance of the Karmapa was described as having worn the robes of a monk but additionally, with a black crown. In Figure 2 there is the print of the third Karmapa with the black crown. He was, according to Tibetan records, to have made an appearance on the surface of the moon. This was said to have been seen by his followers.

The role of the Karmapa has always been to benefit humanity and to do this for as long as the teachings of 1,000 Buddhas. If so, the lineage, though already exceedingly long by comparison with say, the reigns of the various Chinese imperial dynasties (Figure 3), is only at the very early stages. Imagine there to be a serially numbered 999th Karmapa and we are now, counting at the 17th.

The era of his spiritual reign (if that is appropriate) began in 1110 with Dusum Khyenpa, continuing with Karma Pakshi, Rangjung Dorje, Rolpe Dorje, Dezhin Shekpa, Tongwa Donden, Chodrak Gyatso, Mikyo Dorje, Wangchuk Dorje, Choying Gyatso, Yeshe Dorje, Jangchub Dorje, Dudul Dorje, Tekchok Dorje, Khakyab Dorje and lastly, the most recent 16th Karmapa of Rangjung Rigpe Dorje who died in 1981. Remember always, many, many more can be and are expected to come. In the Hidden Predictions, a text of Guru Rinpoche, it is specifically mentioned as follows (Martin, 2004, p. 276):

[...] The teachings of my emanation, Karmapa will not come to an end until the teachings of the fortunate kalpa have come to a close [...].

Kalpa (or aeon) is a Sanskrit word and according to the ancient Indian Vishnu Purana (24:6; [9]) is equal to 4.32 billion years. It is interesting to be asking if there is any system of leadership succession that fosters and reinforces a continuity or longevity or sustainability of an institution or organization. Most interesting insights may be gained from the study of lineage of the Karmapas through contrasting the outcomes from different processes of selecting the next successor. For example, in an earlier paper (Foo, 2012), I have observed interesting contrasts between the USA and the Chinese continuity or longevity in the succession of leadership. The reign of spiritual leadership of the Karmapas stretches over such
an extensive period: specifically, 1110-2012 or more than 900 years. In sharp contrast to this, we find that far shorter imperial reigns of Yuan, Ming and Ching.

We extended that to compare with longevity too of the Chinese Communist Party, currently in power. The unique, Tibetan system in planning for continuity had endured far beyond dynastic models and perhaps even modern political party systems. Perhaps such strengths in sustaining the continuity of leadership may be due largely to the strongly embedded, deeply rooted, religious beliefs of the followers of the Tibetan Kagyu Karma Buddhism: unshakable belief by Tibetans of the Karmapa in fulfilling his predestined role helping the sentient beings.

Yet, there is a distinct possibility that these beliefs reflect the deep knowledge High Tibetan Lamas may already know, a thousand years ago, of the nature and working of the human mind. Instead of identifying the leader as just a bodily entity, they may have known living amidst the clouds, sensed, seen, felt, experienced, heard and intuited much more. For the Tibetans, what lies in the hidden levels or as part of or linked to or embedded in the body and beyond our ordinary vision, is the true, core essence of the leader: his mind or consciousness.
Originating from Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and others, an entirely new discipline of psychological analysis has emerged in the West. It is a discipline devoted to gaining some understanding of the nature of the human mind. Whilst the Western world is only at very early beginnings (roots in nineteenth century) in their search for understanding of the human mind, the Tibetan Lamas of Kagyu Karma may well have obtained much more: deeper, closer truths through their rigorous regimes of deep meditation.

Looking back, one ponders if there is a need for a complete rethinking on the overly scientific, experimental or perceptual measurement approaches utilized in learning about our human mind. Indeed there are now voices raised against the Western psychiatry, in particular in the underlying greed in marketing of madness[10] and painting
the horrors[11]. Next we turn to discuss a very fundamental doctrine underlying the Kagyus Karma lineage: the human mind.

Mind doctrine of Kagyu Karma

What distinguishes the Tibetan Kagyu Karma School of Buddhism from the others? It is their focus on what is known as the Great Seal or Mahamudra. This is clearly explained in Lopez’s (1997, p. 21) Religions of Tibet in Practice:

[... ] The defining doctrine of the Kagyu sect is the Great Seal (Mahamudra) [... ] is a state of enlightened awareness in which phenomenal appearance and noumenal emptiness are unified [...].

The theory subscribed to by the Kagyu Karma School is in postulating a unified state of mind. This is described in terms as:

[... ] state of enlightened awareness [...].

Where the world of appearances (phenomenal) is integrated with a mind emptied of thoughts.

This brings us to the core of Immanuel Kantian philosophy of the mind in Critique of Pure Reason. Whilst Kant keeps separate and differentiates the noumena from phenomena, for the Tibetan Lamas, their approach is to seek much like the Taoists, a unity of the opposites. Such insights are said to be obtained through realization via deep meditation. Often it requires the person to go for a long period of retreat for quiet in the mind. The idea is to go beyond the apparent duality of noumena and phenomena. In the Kagyu Karma (Religions in Tibet (p. 21)) tradition, the attribute of ordinariness inherent in our human mind is emphasized:

[... ] Great Seal literature exalts the ordinary state of mind as both the natural and ultimate state, characterized by lucidity and simplicity [... ] (italics added).

This is consistent too with Zen rooted philosophy that underlies Japanese management: the keeping of things uncomplicated, unadorned, direct and simple. Indeed Steve Job, the hidden Buddhist and great innovator and industry icon was inspired by The Beginner’s Mind, the work of Suzuki (2006). Very often, such a mind is depicted by a brush painting of a circle (Figure 4), emphasizing the emptiness within.

No mind can be simpler than that of the beginner. In design of products, Steve Job’s emphasis on simplicity is widely known among Apple fans. Yet on the other hand, for the beginner (or mind) the possibilities are endless. Anyone familiar with philosophy of Tao will see in the core teachings of Mahamudra or the Great Seal a conceptual correspondence. Quoting directly again from Donald Lopez’s book and reading especially those words that are now been italicized here:

[... ] In the Great Seal, the worldly mind is valued for its ultimate identity with the ordinary mind; every deluded thought contains within it, the lucidity and simplicity of the ordinary mind [... ] (Lopez, 1997, p. 21).

Reducing this concept to a very well known diagram of change that is at the heart of Taoist perception of the seemingly, so complex, ever changing, continuously transforming world.

The relationship of the insights from the theory from the Great Seal of the human mind with Figure 5 becomes even clearer:
Figure 4.
Circling reflecting of empty mind of beginner

Figure 5.
Symbol of Tao
[...] *ordinary* mind (say *white* in color) is contrasted with the *worldly* mind (for contrast, *black*) [...]. Compared to a mirror (ordinary mind) reflects reality exactly as it is, simply and purely [...]. (Lopez, 1997, p. 21) italics added by author).

Given their emphasis on the human mind within the Kagyu Karma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, it is only natural for them to identify candidates for succession, to be focusing too on the mind or consciousness of Karmapa.　

In the next section, we shall discuss the procedures in selecting the next leader to succeed as Karmapa.

*Process of selecting the next Karmapa*

Continuing with the earlier discussion on metaphors about leadership succession, Lombardo and Eichinger (2002) described their work as presenting a *Leadership Machine*. The authors then sub-titled their work as elaborating on *Architecture to Develop Leaders for Any Future*. Perhaps it is most timely for us to review some of the key “architectural” aspects in the Tibetan system of leadership succession. One that is so successful in sustaining for a long time the continual leadership of the Karmapa.

From the earlier review of the Western literature, planning for succession of CEOs is widely advocated. However, the Chinese and specifically here, the uniquely Tibetan approach is far less understood. Yet the process of leadership selection had deep historical roots and had endured for such a long time. What are the Tibetan procedures for selecting a candidate for succession? There are essentially the following key elements in the leadership selection process:

- Experiential, meditational insights from high Lamas.
- Oracular and other divinatory verifications.
- Validation through the conduct of tests.

In the popular work, *Tibetan Buddhism* (Farber, 2003, p. 65), this process is prescribed for the selection of a *Tulku*.[12] Candidates are often young children. Intriguingly, this Tibetan word *Tul-ku* has an etymological root to the idea of an emperor (*heavenly*, in the Chinese sense of heaven), taking birth as a human being. These are the relevant phrases:

[...] The authenticity of a tulku is determined according to a strict procedure which includes the meditational experiences of high lamas, consultation with oracles and other forms of divination and the direct testing of the candidate [...] (Farber, 2003, p. 65).

“What are the tests?” Here, the Tibetan Buddhist Lamas appear to be acting in the same manner for more than 900 years. Their approaches suggest that they are in a way more advance than the West in understanding of the nature of human memory. That is on the persistency (of at least) over one life of human memory. Due to differences in deep religious beliefs, few academics in the West explore, even remotely, the possibility of reincarnation. If they do, perhaps there may be some interest in research on the continuity of human consciousness. Recently however there has been interesting work on reincarnation by well established, reputable psychiatrists (Weiss, 1988). The Tibetan assumption is reasonable as well as logical: a true reincarnation of the Karmapa will remember his past. In other words, mental impressions are deemed to be integral to consciousness.

In Europe, it was the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850-1909) who pioneered the study of human memory system via experimental tests. From his work, he wrote: *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* (Ebbinghaus, 1885)
How? In contrast to nineteenth century testing human memory by psychologist through a self-experimentation, the Tibetans conducted these tests using as subjects (potential, often young children) potential candidates for selection as Karmapa. However, his contribution to the forgetting curve (Figure 6) may well be useful here given memory testing as one of the key Tibetan methodologies for assessing leadership. Of all the nine chapters, Chapter 7 is especially relevant here: “Retention and obliviscence as a function of the time”.

In a formula derived to “measure” retention, the above exponential curves are obtained. Now, $R$ is retention, $t$ being time and $s$ as the strength of memory and $e$ is expression for exponential:

$$R = e^{-t/s}$$

Now one of the key experimental tests of human memory (akin to psychology) is for the potential candidate for leadership to recall his past life, in a concerted effort to identify objects:

[. . .] In the test, a potential Tulku is asked to pick out articles that belonged to their previous incarnation from other similar objects [. . .] (Farber, 2003, p. 65).

Since Tibetan Lamas as monks own in their lifetime but a few objects (e.g. prayer beads), by their daily interactions with these articles throughout a lifetime, they should have a highly retentive memory of them. Thus, if we use the formula as derived through fitting forgetting curves, $R$ will too be high, perhaps with no obliviscence as $t$ through daily usage and handling the repetition will be very high (Figure 7). So among the trial of tests utilized to identify that candidate, the Tibetan Lamas emphasize the candidate’s ability to recognize properties of the late Karmapa. In another work, titled *Tibetan Buddhism* (Waddell, 1972, p. 247), the choice is said to be:

---

Figure 6.

Source: Wikipedia, forgetting curve
that one particular child who recognizes the properties of the deceased Lama is believed to be the real embodiment [...].

In relation to the Dalai Lama, candidates put forward for consideration are truly remarkable. In a footnote, it is mentioned there is to be something even more miraculous about these young infants (Waddell, 1972, p. 247):

[...] Circumstantial stories are told [...] that when only a few months old, the infants have obtained the power of speech for a few moments [...].

And there is a purpose behind this magical occurrence of speaking ability. It is for the young infant to deliver news to their parents:

[...] and informed their parents that Lamas have left Potala to come and claim them [...].

Clearly, in the case of the politico-religious office of the Dalai Lama, these tests for selecting the future leader of Tibet were all taken very seriously. Interestingly, historically it was recorded to even involve a Chinese Minister (or Amban; Manchurian word). He came in as a representative of no lesser than the Qing Emperor himself. Indeed as is described (Waddel, 1972, p. 247):

[...] Infant candidates [...] are subjected to a solemn test by a court composed of the chief Tibetan reincarnate Lams, the great lay officers of state and the Chinese minister or Amban [...].

Another very relevant trait of the likely successor is in his ability to recognize their past students (perhaps, older and probably in their fifties or more). Once a rapport is established, these former trainee Lamas are very likely to render strong support of the Karmapa, their teacher. Thus, it is written in Farber’s Tibetan Buddhism (p. 65) as follows:

[...] They often appear to recognize their students from their previous life [...].

The role of the teacher or guru is very important in the life of the Tibetan Lamas. It is the guru who offers them guidance on their spiritual journeys. Since their teacher has returned even as a child, senior Lamas will willingly render their services to the Karmapa.
So despite his junior status, the Karmapa remains there as the leader of the Kagyu Karma School of Buddhism. In that sense, his role as a leader has rich symbolism as well.

Here there is a sharp cultural contrast between the East and the West: can the reader from the West in flight of imagination, accept a child to be holding the titular leadership of an organization? Imagine a typical US corporation: can a Board of Directors ever accept as their Chairman, a child who is verified to be the reincarnation of the past founder of the firm? It will be revolutionary, if it ever happens. It requires a total change in mindset. Even in China, these practices of succession in leadership are limited to the Tibetans only. In the case of the Tibetans, the organization of Kagyud Karma will groom the reincarnation, now a child through a process of training and development. Yes, even in Tibetan tradition, there is a role for thorough education, training and development for the Karmapa-designate to succeed as the leader of the organization.

These practices of the Tibetans provide some, though indirect empirical support for the traits theory of leadership: followers wanting the same leader, possessing identical traits to continue on leading. The Tibetans in their search for the reincarnation of past leader as a child are hoping to find in that being, exactly the same traits as the past Karmapa. For the followers too, the body is just like, using as a metaphor, the car. They are seeking the same person who has been behind the wheels of the car, the driver. They are after the Soul (for want of a better word) or perhaps, better described as “a complex of spirit-consciousness-energy system” that has now flowed into and inhabits another body, living in this earthly realm as a child. In the hunt for the reincarnation of the Karmapa, “clues” or past traits provide a strong indication:

[...] Since he is perceived as the same entity inhabiting a new body, the Karmapas of the past offer clues to the Karmapa of the present [...] (Lea, 1985, p. 68).

In other words, the search party is seeking that same identical complex of energy-consciousness. Or to put it simply, they are looking to find the mind of the Karmapa.

**Mind of Karmapa**

As elaborated earlier, the special qualities of the mind of the Karmapa are all that truly matter. Such an approach is consistent with the teachings of the Buddha. For in Buddhism, the focus is always on the mind. Indeed recent Western scientists are beginning research relating not just to the mind, but the brain, as a basis to understand Buddhism (Austin, 1999). For Westerners still working from their scientific mindset, the mind is just too illusive: the brain is better, for there is a material, grey matter, as the basis to work with. In his work, Austin a neuroscientist as well as Zen practitioner explores widely and extensively, the nature of consciousness, Zen mind and the mechanisms (often hidden and embedded) of the brain.

Perhaps, it is timely for us who are doing research on leadership to gain too a deeper grasp of the mind. Turning to Farber (later, p. 65), distinguished, high Lamas who are spiritual leaders are themselves differentiated from others by virtue of the quality of their minds. They are very fast learners. Future brain research may uncover perhaps at the deeper, embedded multi-cellular levels some deeper insights. Perhaps patterns of firing may yield us insights to processes of thinking. One direction of inquiry may well be:

Hypothesis: Does the grey matter of our brains embed past-life learning?

Now let me quote the deep wisdom from Tibetan culture:
In an early age these tulkus demonstrate a remarkable ability to absorb and learn whatever they are taught, as if they had mastered these subjects before and were just being refreshed [...].

More specifically on the Karmapas, it is said of the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje (Martin, 2004, p. 47) as follows:

[...] His teachers remarked that his knowledge of these traditional sciences came to him with great ease [...].

Then there is the extensive process of re-learning by the young child. The child does not attend any university as such but grows up well-tutored, learned. Besides his study of Tibetan Buddhism, he is often skillful in the arts, sciences and philosophy. Through such an institutionalization of re-educating, re-training, re-coaching, re-instructing and re-guiding of the future leader-to-be, that ensured the survival of the institution of the Karmapa. This cycle had been repeated for at least the last sixteen incarnations for the Karmapa. Is it a wonder then that there is a continuity of Kagyud Karma Buddhist traditions over such an extensive period of time? Martin’s (2004, p. 47) *Music in the Sky* he explained as follows:

[...] each incarnation is reintroduced to the heart of his rich intellectual and meditative tradition. The Karmapa’s early years were spent working with these texts, which would become a major focus of his life and the basis for his future teaching [...](italics by author).

In other words, Tibetans long ago had appreciated how a complete, systematic process of learning, experiencing, debating, reading, spiritualizing through chanting and meditating develops a deeper, richer, more insightful mind. That a broad spectrum of these activities besides developing mind also works towards molding of character, strengthening the personality and thus enhancing the future Karmapa as leader of the Kagyu Karma Buddhist community.

Such a belief in the cardinal role of education in shaping a person even as a leader in business is evident too in modern day Britain. Every British will tell you about the “Old Boy Network”. The British society will be shocked if there is any disestablishmentarianism[6]. For the British, it seems “ambition, skill and flair for hard work” are just not enough for those who aspire to lead in the business community. It is utterly different in the American society. The Tibetans have taken this one step further, always re-educating the incarnation of the Karmapa to re-establishing, re-rooting, re-confirming the Kayud Karma traditions in the world.

Ever since my work that explores deeply the human mind (Foo, *Reminiscences of an Ancient Strategist: Mind of Sun Tzu*) (especially) I have focused in my workshops on transforming the rigidly, fixed mind-sets of managers. Typically the mindset of the manager is oriented to the short-term, ignoring the emergence of new trends in the industry. They tunnel their vision down to very narrow pathways. Instead they should be working towards having a more fluid, adaptive mode of strategic thinking.

Thus, it is intriguing for me personally to probe into the mystery of the human mind: how does the mind of Karmapa as the spiritual leader work? I often ponder. Once looking across into the eyes of the 17th Karmapa and I saw sparkles of light (see later discussion, forum). Despite his smiles, the 17th Karmapa is deadly serious about followers – many past life disciples? – practicing. For much of the last one thousand years, if transmission theory holds, he has very much been “present” in this mundane world. In his mind there must be embedded many impressions perhaps countless types,
classifications, categories, taxonomies. If so, then it is not at all surprising to read how the mind of Karmapa works.

The General Secretary, Tendzin Namgyal (Martin, 2004, p. 52) provides us with his own insights as to how the mind of the Karmapa works:

[...] The brilliance of the Karmapa’s mind allows him to comprehend the meaning of something by merely looking at it [...] (italics by the author).

In other words, one of the traits of being a Karmapa is in his ability to know just by looking or by sight. What many do not realize is the countless imprints the Karmapa must have from his past lives. If knowledge is largely pattern-based, then this observation is a logical outcome.

Then is another insight to why this is so. According to Tendzin Namgyal (same p. 52) Karmapa has an intricate knowledge of how the mind itself works:

[...] He knows the nature of his mind the instant it was pointed out and this increased his intellect’s ability to clearly distinguish phenomena [...].

If so, it suggests the study of the nature of our minds to be highly important in enhancing our intelligence. Such an exploration is outside the scope of this paper on the process of succession for leadership. Yet it has significance for leaders of any organization: the “ability to clearly distinguish phenomena”. A leader is often under intense pressure to make decisions based on his immediate perceptions of an unfolding reality. Thus, this quality is essential for leaders to develop in our age of rapid transitions and unanticipated changes. With this background information, it is interesting to ask of the leadership of Karmapa in our contemporary age.

Leadership of Karmapa in contemporary age
One of the misconceptions is in assuming there is a stark difference in leadership of a spiritual organization versus a modern firm. Yet with the world so immersed in materialism after the US subprime crisis, it may even be far more challenging to be leading a spiritual organization. It is a vastly different world from before. Hand-held devices now so pervasively available, everybody may instantaneously adapt to changes. Only your mind limits you to adapt at revolutionary speeds.

Gone are the days for example, when the Tibetans were able to conceal the death of the politico-religious leader, the Dalai Lama. The death of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) was hidden for such a remarkably extensive period of time: 15 years, a period that will see in corporate America, three or even more changes of a CEO. How? Through the remarkable ploy of pretending the Dalai Lama was in a long and deep retreat. Regent Sangye Gyamtso was skilled in inventing all kinds of stratagems to hide the truth. As described in Martin (2004, p. 124):

[...] all kinds of stratagems were used to give the impression that they were still alive [...].

There was even the employment of a Lama as his double, partially hidden through an eye-shade. Clearly, all the commands during this period had to be forged by the perpetrators. So for a decade and a-half, the region of Tibet effectively had no leadership of a living Dalai Lama.

Unlike the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa has no political role whatsoever. He is first and foremost a spiritual leader for his followers. What then is the essential core in the leadership of the Karmapa? Some insights as to the nature of his leadership may
be deciphered from a recent document. It is called the “Last Testament” as written by the late 16th Karmapa. It was given as an amulet to Tai Situ Rinpoche[6]. Therein, we are surprised to find key ideas on the principles for becoming a leader, whether spiritual or of organizations (Martin, 2004, p. 18):

(1) Pervasiveness as a principle: we translate this to be for the CEO to be all-round, in easy reach of stakeholders. The word, “sectarian” may be seen as paralleling stakeholders in corporate setting:

[...] Being non-sectarian, he pervades all directions [...].

(2) Equidistant, fairness and justice: that as the spiritual leader, he is there for everybody:

[...] Not staying close to some and distant from others, he is the protector of all beings[...].

Can one relate this part of the testament of 16th Karmapa to management, picturesquely? Figure 8 reflects our attempt to depict the concept via diagrams. We took randomly, a selection of stakeholders as represented diagrammatically. A montage is the result, visualizing the concept in its richness of variety. Personally I believe art has as much a role as statistics for use in presenting ideas, concepts, findings, insights in research for developing Chinese management.

What is even more interesting within the testament is the use of the metaphor of the Sun. The Sun has been across many cultures, seen as having a significant symbolic representation of leadership including China in the modern times (see later discussion). Here the 16th Karmapa drew an analogy of the Sun with dharma (truth or teachings of the Buddha:

(3) Beneficial as the Sun, reinforcing in a reaching out to all, each and everyone:

[...] The Sun of the Buddha’s Dharma that benefits others always blazes [...] (Sun,
This motif of the Sun for symbolizing leadership continues to be relevant even in recent times. Unlike in the West, the Chinese ideogrammatic language is rich in their pictorial connotations. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong in reasserting his role as the paramount is widely depicted in many, varied posters as the Sun (Figure 9).

Often these posters[1]-[3], [5] include short inscriptions emphasizing the various themes but all centered on Mao and the Sun. For example, in footnote [1] and [2] Mao is the Sun in our hearts[3] similarly but strongly emphasizing “[...] forever, never setting Sun” whilst[5] reminds us of the period of cold war, with a call for “[...] unity to defeat American doctrinal ideology”.

What then is the leadership role of the Karmapa in our modern, fast-paced, technological age? The web site of the 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje for example provides an overview of his activities in leading the Kagyud Karma organization[13]. The core of his work: interactions with sentient beings and like professors he also delivers talks, chats, lectures. For this part of the paper, I shall draw upon my own direct, personal experiences in encountering the modern 17th Karmapa and working through him. The current His Holiness, 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje was in Singapore, 2012 June. My role was to act as host as well as the moderator for a forum on the theme of “Living a meaningful life in the contemporary age” (Figure 10).

Clearly, the Karmapa has a very tight, intensive, annual schedule. Despite the many, regular Buddhist rituals, the Karmapa still insisted on interacting with the ordinary public. Perhaps it is through these interactions, that Karmapa seeks to provide spiritual guidance on the art of living.

Following the forum, a content analysis is made of the questions that are being posed to the Karmapa, often addressed by devotees as His Holiness. What are some of the central themes that emerged from the 2012 forum in Singapore? As to be expected, some questions are directed on and about:

(1) The Karmapa per se.
Then these topics reflecting modern lifestyle, Buddhism in context of society begin to dominate throughout the proceedings of the forum:

(2) Happiness, ego and mind.
(3) Essence of nature.
(4) Dharma practices.
(5) Worldly problems, Samsara.
(6) Living and dying even a concern for becoming enlightened.
(7) Enlightenment.

Some of the questions are posed in Chinese (Figure 11).

A sample of some of the questions are given in Figure 10, one each for a given theme. As can be seen, these reflect our modern society, for example, a theme like gross national happiness and the negativity of Western, materialistic culture (specifically Bhutan). In Taiwan and China where there are many disciples of the Karmapa he is addressed as 大宝法王 (pinyin as da bao fa wang) or Precious Dharma King. Then topics deeply psychological: conflict arising in our mind and action. Some followers seeing His Holiness Karmapa as role model, expressing the wish to be as “[...].” beautiful as you [...].” Then there are deceptively simple yet profound questions on existentialism as in: “[...].” Who, what are we? [...].” Also as to be expected, questions on specific Buddhist practices: for example, relating to 37 Bodhisattva Practices, based on a fourteenth century text by Tibetan scholar, Gyelse Tokme Zangpo. After having seen the Karmapa in action leading a forum, it will be interesting to explore the Karmapa as a role model for corporate CEOs.

The Karmapa as CEO
What are the personal statistics on CEOs? Are there any commonalities between the Karmapa and the typical US CEO? From available statistical data[14], the median age is given as 55 years of age. Of these 66 percent are appointed internally after a period of 12.8 years of working experiences (Figure 12).
Another set of statistics provides the median age of departing CEOs as at 60[15]. With the fast changing, more competitive environment, it is not surprising that the tenure of CEOs is becoming shorter. In sharp contrast to the four to six years of leadership at the helm, the reign of the Karmapa is very much longer. In other words, whilst the community of Kagyu Karma School needs to plan for succession once in a long while, for corporations, it is once in every four or five years.

So far nobody has asked for an assessment on the impacts of the current, relatively higher rate of CEO turnover. Will a longer reign of a CEO’s leadership be more beneficial
for the organization? This shortness of tenure is in a sharp contrast to the longevity in the throneship of the Karmapa. Perhaps more in-depth research may be undertaken to explore the empirical relationship on CEO tenure. For example, investigating, the impact of environmental turbulence on CEO tenureship. In the case of the Karmapa, the overriding concern is in continuity. For US corporations, it may simply be to ensure the survival of corporate organism. Indeed there are already some interesting data on the tenure of CEO of S&P Companies.

For example, those of Spencer and Stuart, say for 2004 as transformed into a graphical pattern (Figure 13) for delineating the dynamic in the tenure for CEOs. A quick, Chinese brush-stroke approach will suggest this statistical curve: 60 percent less than six years, 20 percent six to ten years and the rest 20 percent above ten years.

Why are CEOs chosen to lead the corporation? In the USA where the short term outlook dominates, there is a tendency to focus on the financial performances. In a forthcoming paper, Kaplan et al. (2012) explores the kinds of characteristics and abilities of CEO truly matter. Despite the extensive, factor driven analysis of 316 candidate CEOs, the insights gained are marginal. In their own words, these two mattered: general ability and execution skills.

Can further research yield a richer, deeper and meaningful of what makes for a good CEO in these turbulent times? Justin Menkes author of the Better Under Turbulence[16] argues for just three traits as:

1. realistic optimism;
2. subservience to purpose; and third, the most relevant
3. finding order in chaos.

The third is exactly what Sun Tzu instructs the General-CEO about turbulence in wars. Gone are those attributes once rated as being essential for a corporate savior, like charisma (Khurana, 2002). The search is on for what may be best described by Rosen (1981)
as superstars but in the economics sense. Perhaps the spiritual equivalence of the economics superstar will certainly be the Karmapa.

Returning to our discussion of Karmapa as spiritual leader, in a survey of long recorded, well preserved and verifiable biographies, it is clear that throughout the lineage, His Holiness is indeed a superstar. Only a snapshot is given here of the remarkable, repeatedly manifestations of various signs of his "superstardom". It should be emphasized however, for the Karmapa, these mystical events just happen during his presence.

As shown in Figure 14, three mystical aspects being characteristics of the Karmapa are grouped together under:

1. **Rainbows.** These lights of seven directions are recorded to be found especially during his birth.
2. **Weather.** In particular of the ability to bring forth the rain to a place affected by drought.
3. **Bodily.** As in the records of flying, body to become pure light, leaving rock and foot imprints, passing through mountain and with his finger turning water into milk.

These may be seen as an integral part of the characteristics and abilities of the Karmapa.

It was recorded of the Karmapas of the past and continues to be the most recent incarnation of His Holiness 17th Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje. The Karmapa has exhibited much more than what Valore-Caplan (1999) put as the magic of leadership, implying a mystique personality or certain mystical qualities. This is seen so vividly in the case of the current Karmapa. One specifically relates to the symbolic metaphor of the umbrella as an emblem out of the divine to signify the spiritual leader. This truly unique, privately taken photograph is now shown in Plate 1. Observers have noticed, the Karmapa seems as an enlightened being to be so naturally bathed in light\[4\], the exact words used:

> [...] He [Karmapa] wore maroon-and-orange robes just like the other monks in the gathering but there seemed to be a spotlight where he sat at the head table; in fact, there wasn’t [...] (italics added).

In Buddhism, this umbrella is the parasol.

Next we turn to discuss corporate vision.

**Corporate vision statement and visionary leadership**

The concept of vision is now so entrenched in corporate practices that it may be timely to be rethinking what essentially is corporate vision. The common perception is for the vision statement to provide a perspective on the future directions for the organization. Here we shall review a few examples of the well known corporations\[17\]. For example, Toyota puts it simply as a goal-oriented statement, perhaps by now, outdated: “To become the most successful and respected lift truck company in the US”. What underlies Heinz’s vision statement is equally product, food driven: “Our vision is quite simply, is to be the world’s premier food company, offering nutritious, superior tasting foods to people everywhere”. Amazon’s vision statement is strategy driven, focusing on customers: “[...] Our vision is to be earth’s most customer centric company [...]” Whilst that of Nike’s vision is directed to the customer, emphasizing: “To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. If you have a body, you are an athlete”. Toys R Us is hardly visionary, for it merely prescribes the role of the corporation as: “Our Vision is to put joy in kids’ hearts and a smile on parents’ faces”.

\[4\]
Can a statement be providing a vision yet lacking in visionariness? Now the free online dictionary puts the meaning of visionary (among others) as “characterised by vision or foresight” and negatively, “tending to envision things in a perfect but unrealistic form”. What is most relevant here, it is the meaning of a visionary leader: “One who has visions, a seer”. In other words, the test of whether a vision statement is indeed, visionary should be this: whether there is an imagined future embedded in those words.
Some practitioners for example, Lee and Hutchins, on CEO leadership argue for innovative companies to be led by visionary CEOs[18]. They described these to be the DNA of such corporate leaders as:

- empathatic (with customers);
- a challenger (against industry orthodoxy); and
- deep conviction and persistency.

These attributes seem to parallel that of Karmapa (in his role as “CEO leader” of an organization, spiritually oriented). Using His Holiness as benchmark in leadership, the Karmapa is by far deeply convicted, empathizing so persistently with his followers (read metaphorically, customers): for a vast expanse of time, towards 1,000 years, the Karmapa had been reuniting, again and again (now, 17 times) with his followers as their spiritual leader. Even more fascinatingly, the Karmapa is authentically a visionary, in a deeply spiritual sense of being a Seer. The figure provides below for the

**Plate 1.** Divine parasol (directly above), used with the special permission of the Karmapa
first time, a portrayal of the visionary Karmapa. For one characteristic attribute of the profoundly, spiritually accomplished is this quality: being visionary leader.

In Figure 15 is shown collectively as a chart, the visionary experiences that were documented in the recorded biographies of the Karmapa. The bracketed numeral reflecting the specific Karmapa in the lineage, for example the most recent and highly popular and well known 16th Karmapa is denoted as (16th).

Figure 15.
Visions of His Holiness, the Karmapa
In other words, despite its very distant antiquity, there has been continuity down to the present day in the lineage of Karmapas. A simple taxonomy developed out of content analysis of the recorded biography of each Karmapa is utilized here for grouping the visionary experiences of His Holiness:

- Kagyud lineage.
- Generic, higher spiritual beings.
- Popular Buddhas, deities and goddesses.
- Specific protectors (spiritual) in Tibet.

Indeed, ancient thangkas show clearly that spiritually, the lineage within the organization of Kagyud Karma school of Buddhism goes back beyond the first Karmapa himself, Dusum Khyenpa. These visions all relate to those who are connected in modern management terminology, of at least having a stake-holding in the organization. Figure 16 shows what is described as the family tree structure of inter-connections from the long distant past to the present. If anything else, it reminds us of our deep interconnections:

Figure 16.

past (however distant), present and of continuing these into the future. In this aspect, the Kagyud Karma school has done very well to sustain their spiritual traditions.

Towards a new sociology for research on leadership
Is there a need for shifting the paradigm, broadening our thinking to embrace wider possibilities, including the possibilities of cyclic existences? If one believes there to be a strong possibility of one returning to relive one’s life, this may certainly alter one’s entire outlook towards life. For example, making the Earth green and liveable takes on a far greater importance and different meaning altogether: for you are the ultimate beneficiary of any efforts to enhance the environment, not just the future generation.

Maybe it is time for us to reinstate what the Roman Emperor Constantine deleted in 325 AD for a purely politically motivated, not religiously or spiritually valid reason: the references to reincarnation in both the New and Old Testaments[19]. As scholars we need to realize how his imperial deletion of “reincarnation” may unconsciously have had direct implications in our approach to research on management. For example, in society we often find vast differences in intelligences, skills and abilities among different people. For me personally, one tenable hypothesis is the explanation of past lives.

Perhaps, research in management should also begin to shift from an almost blind reverence for what is measurable, especially the monetary variables to gaining deeper insights to managerial issues. It is healthy to find the scope of management research to be growing wider. Issues such as these should be part of management: ethics, social responsible behavior, sustaining the environments, concern for fairness in a deal, social equity, etc. and beyond that to incorporate aspects of spirituality that have a strong bearing on management.

Notes
1. www.elook.org/dictionary/lineage.html
13. www.karmapa.org/
17. www.samples-help.org.uk/mission-statements/corporate-vision-statements.htm
References


Blackaby, H. and Blackaby, R. (2001), *Spiritual Leadership*, Broadman and Holman, Nashville, TN.


**Further reading**


**Corresponding author**

Check Teck Foo can be contacted at: profctfoo@gmail.com

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com

Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints