

The Bright Triad of Mindful Leadership: An Alternative to the Dark Triad of Leadership

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In this article, we draw on Buddhist psychology to consider the three attributes of high-quality social connections in the context of work, which are ethical mindedness, loving kindness, and compassion, referred to here as the bright triad of mindful leadership (BTML). These components constitute the positive counterparts of the dark triad components of mindless leadership (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy). The research on the dark triad of leadership appears to “glorify” these qualities, through suggesting that high-scoring leaders are more successful in achieving business goals. We argue that this represents a too limited perspective and is one which poorly resonates with the increased focus on sustainable work and work conditions marked by well-being, fairness, security, and trust. BTML, however, taps into the call of the positive organizational scholarship field to focus on positive and virtuous practices, and to foster high-quality relationships and positive outcomes in the workplace. We, in conceptualizing BTML, furthermore use the concepts of cultivation, attention, and awareness to facilitate the leader’s presence in the moment, and we argue that these cumulatively are necessary conditions for the triad of ethical mindedness, loving kindness, and compassion to permeate all activities that leaders engage in.

Keywords: mindfulness, leadership, positive organizational scholarship, Buddhism, dark triad

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One thing many leaders often forget is that leadership first and foremost involves entering into a relationship with others. Leaders have no role without people to lead (employees, followers). Leadership is treated in this article as both a specialized role and a social influence process (Yukl, 2010, p. 26). Some may see this as being a point that is too obvious to mention. A large number of failed leaders have, however, forgotten this important aspect of leadership. The role of leader can, of course, where employees take responsibility for their tasks without conflicts or misunderstandings, be a light burden. Reality is, however, far removed from this perfect situation, leadership more often being extremely challenging from a relational (e.g., conflicts), legal/ethical (e.g., code of conduct), and operational/strategic (e.g., goals and visions) point of view. Leaders must, in addition, bear the internal demands of corporate heads, staff members, and the external pressures imposed by shareholders, customers, and other business partners (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Brummans et al., 2013; Chaskalson, 2011; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Low, 1993).

Recent corporate scandals have led to an erosion of trust in leaders and organizations. An investigative reporting team of Swedish public television in 2012 reported that Telia Sonera (now Telia) paid between 2007 and 2010 more than \$331 million in bribes to the Uzbek government to allow the company to do business in the country (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency revealed “Dieselgate” in 2015, 482,000 Volkswagen cars sold in the United States using an emissions defeat device that only activated nitrogen oxides emissions controls when under agency testing (11 million cars worldwide). Volkswagen’s stock price fell 35% in the week after this revelation, their market cap falling by more than \$25 billion. António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, declared in his opening speech in September 2021 for the 76th session of the General Assembly, that the world is experiencing leadership crises in numerous areas (global warming, political corruption, the unjust allocation of the COVID-19 vaccine) and that the root cause of all these crises was the lack of ethical mindedness. We argue that leaders need to adopt an ethical and compassionate approach to their work, and a specific set of cognitive and behavioral skills, if corruption scandals and other ethically questionable affairs are to be eradicated. This article therefore presents a novel model of leadership referred to as the bright triad of mindful leadership (BTML), which draws on Buddhist teachings, specifically the *Theravāda* school as explained later in the article, to address the need for this type of leadership approach.

Mindfulness training (known in Buddhism as *sati*) is a method that can potentially strengthen the leadership attitudes and skills required (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Brummans et al., 2013; Chaskalson, 2011; Dane, 2011). Mindfulness has, over the centuries and most notably in Asian traditions, been applied with great success not only by Buddhist practitioners, but also by political and corporate leaders in Asian countries (Bhatta, 2000;

Brummans et al., 2013; Dane, 2011). The research literature on mindfulness in organizations and on leadership is today quite well developed. Companies such as Google, General Mills, International Business Machines Corporation, Apple, and General Motors have also begun to introduce a mindful leadership approach in the workplace (Bhatta, 2000; Chaskalson, 2011; Waddock, 2001). Western leaders have, however, as yet not taken full advantage of mindfulness as an ethical guide, nor applied it as a common practice in leadership. The principal aim of this article is therefore to redress this shortcoming, by delineating the elements of BTML and its potential contribution to the development of a more ethical and compassionate form of modern management. This can provide an alternative view of successful leadership, the bright triad (BT; i.e., ethical mindedness, loving-kindness, and compassion), to this field which contrasts the dark triad (DT) of leadership (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, subclinical psychopathy¹). “Bad guys” are more often selected as leaders and often perform better. This is, however, more due to “getting ahead of” than “getting along” with others (e.g., Furnham, 2011). DT traits are generally perceived as being socially undesirable. Research into DTs does, however, tend to “glorify” these traits due to the advantages they can bring to organizations, and due to high DT trait scoring leaders being more successful at achieving business goals (Judge et al., 2009; Judge & LePine, 2007). The shift of focus to BT qualities aligns well with the ongoing discussion in the field of organization science on organizational ethics, empathy, and compassion (cf. Boyatzis et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2003; Hanson & Mendijs, 2009; Ruedy & Schweitzer, 2010; Tang & Posner, 2013). It also aligns well with positive organizational scholarship, which is defined as being the “study of especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members” and a “focus on dynamics that are typically described by words such as excellence, thriving, flourishing, abundance, resilience, or virtuousness” (Cameron et al., 2003a, p. 4). The term “positive” in positive organizational scholarship represents the application of a positive lens to the context of work

¹ Paulhus and Williams (2002) discussed Machiavellianism, narcissism, subclinical psychopathy as three conceptually distinct but empirically overlapping components of what they called the Dark Triad of personality. These components are called the Dark Triad, as they represent socially aversive personality traits. They are, however, considered to be within the normal (not pathological) range of functioning. Machiavellianism is typified by the manipulation and exploitation of others, a lack of sincerity, honesty, or ethical concern, and showing cold affect. Machiavellians aim, through disregarding others’ needs and conditions, to maximize their self-interest through using deception. They also tend to live by the motto of the “ends justify the means.” Narcissism is marked by an exaggeration of one’s self-worth (often expressed as being excessively in love with oneself), superiority over others, and attention-seeking. Subclinical psychopathy is typified by high impulsivity, callousness, manipulation, and exploitation, and therefore by low empathy and remorse. People high in subclinical psychopathy therefore express negativity toward others, and strongly tend to act anti-socially. The three components “share a common core of callous-manipulation” (Furnham et al., 2013, p. 199).

and leadership, difficulties at the same time being reevaluated and viewed as opportunities for building resilience through an explicit emphasis on “virtuous” practices and qualities. This positive take on organizational and leadership studies does not exclude the consideration of negative aspects, weaknesses, and deficiencies. However, the negative aspects are not the focal point of study and intervention. Following this approach, in this article we define three positive counterparts (i.e., BT) to the three components of the DT of leadership.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We start by briefly discussing the Buddhist roots of the model we propose. We will then briefly outline the basic tenets of four leadership theories that share the common feature of morality (i.e., transformational leadership [TL], authentic leadership [AL], ethical leadership [EL], and spiritual leadership [SL]), to provide a context for our conceptualization of BTML. The rest of the article focuses on defining BTML, describing the relationships between its components and how BTML expands previous leadership theories, and on providing recommendations for leadership coaching that promote leading “brightly” by being mindful. The article concludes with recommendations on the validation of the proposed model, and brief reflections on the aims and the usefulness of BTML compared with the DT model of leadership in connection with business performance and other organizational outcomes.

The Roots of Mindfulness (*Sati*) and the BT in Buddhism

In “traditional” Buddhism, the purpose of *sati* is to be master of one’s own mind disentangling oneself from chain reactions that usually keep on invading our minds. *Sati* for Buddha was to become liberated from the cycle of perpetual birth and death and attain the final aim of *nibbāna* (enlightenment). *Sati* is also conceived as a balancing factor set midway between four other faculties (*pancha bala*): faith (*saddhā*) and energy (*virya*), on the one hand, and concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*), on the other hand. In this view, *Sati*, therefore, aims to *balance* and monitor the other faculties and powers, by remaining aware of excesses or deficiencies (Nilsson, 2013). Thus, in the present context, a balanced life in general and a balanced leadership, in particular, signify liberation from the “dark triad” of Buddhism, commonly known as the three poisons of greed, hate, and delusion and could be reached by the antidote of the BT of ethics (*sīla*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*). The third purpose of *sati* can be regarded as being a part of the noble eightfold path: *right view*, *right thought*, *right speech*, *right action*, *right livelihood*, *right effort*, *right mindfulness*, and *right concentration*.

Although Buddhism constitutes a complex and diverse movement of spiritual and religious thoughts and practices, striving for enlightenment is

at the center of attention. There are three main routes to enlightenment, represented by three major schools of Buddhist thought (i.e., *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayana*, *Theravāda*) holding different ontological perspectives. Some scholars maintain that *Vajrayana* is based on the *Mahāyāna* philosophy and is as such best understood as an extension of *Mahāyāna*. Moreover, there are divisions and subdivisions within each school. Buddhist scriptures and texts exist in variety written in different languages. Thus, different schools of Buddhism regard different texts as authoritative.

Within *Mahāyāna* (the great vehicle), there are a number of divisions or traditions, one of which (zen buddhism) is of relevance here. Mindfulness or *sati* is recognized in zen buddhism as keeping one's consciousness focused on the present reality (i.e., mindfulness meditation). Also, this reality should be extended to include daily living mindfulness; informal mindfulness (eating, walking, talking, etc.; Dawson, 2021). Another tenet is called *kinhin*, walking meditation, aiming to release bodily tension by walking back-and-forth in a line, or round and round in a loop. According to the Vietnamese zen master Hanh (2012), walking meditation has the power to alleviate mental and bodily tensions and enhance inner serenity, joy, and present-centeredness (see also Nilsson, 2022).

Vajrayana (the diamond vehicle) emphasizes ritualistic elements. Within *Vajrayana*, the *Song of the Four Mindfulnesses* instructs the Buddhist followers to train their minds to encompass: (a) admiration and respect for the Buddha and/or the teacher, (b) compassion, (c) the divine subtle body, and (d) emptiness (Van Gordon et al., 2015).

Finally, *Theravāda* (The Way of the Elders) is the school that contains the earliest surviving record of the Buddha's teachings. Until the late 19th century, the teachings of *Theravāda* were little known outside of southern Asia, where they had flourished. In recent decades, the interest in *Theravāda* in the West has blossomed mostly due to its unique spiritual legacy. As previously noted, there are different divisions within each school, and one such division in Indic Buddhism, the *Theravadins*, emphasizes that worldly phenomena are characterized by impermanence (Pali: *aniccā*), suffering (Pali: *dukkha*), and the absence of an essential self (Pali: *anattā*; Shen & Midgley, 2007). More importantly and relevant to the purpose of the present article, *Theravāda* holds the four sublime states (i.e., *brahmāvihāras*; loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) as central contemplations within the *dhamma*. Two of these, loving-kindness and compassion, were early a central part of the *Theravāda* tradition much thanks to the *Theravādin* Buddhaghosa's (c. fifth century) extensive work with the *Abhidhamma* text that inter alia contains the four sublime states (Heim, 2017). Also, loving-kindness meditation (*mettā-bhāvanā*) is included as a central practice in the *Theravāda* tradition (besides *vipassanā* and *samatha*; Husgafvel, 2016) and as far as the term *mettā* is concerned, it is derived from *Theravāda* Buddhism (*Mettā Sutta*). Ethical

mindfulness (i.e., to be acutely aware of the importance of integrating ethical guidance into daily life), as an indispensable component of our leadership model, is part of a new and increasingly used definition of mindfulness based on teachings from *Theravāda* (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). Furthermore, the ethical conduct path, consisting of right speech, right action, and right livelihood, underscores that Buddhist *sati* is *not* an ethically neutral practice, but one that requires the discrimination between wholesome and unwholesome actions (Bodhi, 2011). Also, according to Dhammika (1990), ethical judgment is *necessary* to properly practice all forms of mindfulness. Notwithstanding, it is not our intention to appear as if we advocate an essentialist view of *sati* (mindfulness) and/or firmly assert that these concepts cannot be found within the two other vehicles. For instance, compassion appears to be central also in *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayana*. However, we argue that our understanding of mindful leadership and the BT in the context of leadership, as defined and conceptualized later in this article, bear closer resemblance to the *Theravāda* than to the other schools of Buddhist thought.

Extant “Positive” Leadership Theories

The field of leadership has, since the beginning of the 20th century, witnessed the emergence of a plethora of theories of different foci, all attempting to describe the determinants of successful influence. We therefore briefly describe here the basic tenets of four of these theories (i.e., TL, AL, EL, and SL), all four sharing a morality and concern for others (i.e., positive) focus (Brown & Treviño, 2006). The brief review of these theories aims to place our conceptualization of BTML in context.

The terms “positive” and “positivity” have their roots in humanistic and positive psychology. The term “positive” in our usage of leadership theories relates to the virtues of concern for others and integrity that is shared by the four theories. The emphasis on the cultivation of virtues is the very basis of what may be referred to as positive leadership which in effect aims at “unlocking capacities for ... meaning creation, relationship transformation, positive emotion cultivation and high-quality connections” (Cameron et al., 2003b, p. 10).

Transformational Leadership

James MacGregor Burns introduced the concept of TL in 1978 in his book *Leadership*. This notion was further developed and refined in 1985 by Bernard

Bass in *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. Bass juxtaposed TL with transactional and charismatic leadership. The transactional model of leadership, briefly stated, views leadership as exchange, that is, leaders offer rewards for task completion and performance. TL, however, views leadership as a process of transformation or change in followers to (a) viewing work from new perspectives and becoming aware of the greater “mission” or “vision” of their work; (b) higher order needs, higher levels of ability and potential; and (c) transcending their own interests, for the best of others and for the sake of the collective good. Charisma is seen as an essential component of TL. TL does, however, move beyond charisma through appealing to human values and the empowerment of employees.

The pillars of TL are referred to in the literature as the “four I’s”: idealized influence (the leader being a moral, trusted and respected role model who conveys the mission and the vision to followers); inspirational motivation (the leader communicates high expectations, inspiring, encouraging, engaging followers to excel in their work); intellectual stimulation (leader supports creative and innovative solutions to problems and stimulates followers to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs); and individualized consideration (through the leader caring for followers and listening to their needs and acting as a coach to help them to grow and realize their potential). The successful implementation of these affects follower perceptions of the organization and their role in it, this ultimately being expected to result in performance beyond expectations.

Authentic Leadership

Some scholars have viewed AL as a theory that is based on positive psychology and psychological theories of self-regulation. Some scholars of leadership also view AL as an extension of TL. AL does share some similarities with TL, but does at the same time have a number of unique features. The terms “authentic” and “authenticity” have echoed throughout the history of philosophy and psychology (Gardner et al., 2011; Novicevic et al., 2007). A renewed interest in the authenticity of leaders and their leadership has, however, emerged out of a number of widely known corporate scandals and leadership crises witnessed by the world in the past two decades.

AL can, according to Northouse (2019), be approached from three different but compatible perspectives: intrapersonal (emphasizing the leader’s self-knowledge, self-regulation skills, and life experiences and that authentic leaders lead from conviction), interpersonal (defining AL as a relational and

reciprocal process being cocreated by the leader and his/her followers), and developmental (stressing that authenticity is not a fixed trait but rather a quality that develops in people over time and for which critical life events play a major role). George (2003) found from the interview of successful leaders that authentic leaders have a deep passion for what they are doing, and that they, in addition to leading from core values and a strong sense of the right thing to do, are also capable of building high-quality connections marked by trust and the showing of compassion (i.e., being sensitive to the plight of others and demonstrating a willingness to help). Walumbwa et al. (2008) identified, in a comprehensive review, four components of AL: self-awareness (knowing your feelings, weaknesses and strengths, reflecting on your values, goals, motives, and the impact you may have on others); internalized moral perspective (using internal moral standards and acting in congruence with these without caving in to external pressures); balanced processing (avoiding favoritism/bias and considering all information available before making a decision, also information that contradicts your viewpoint); and relational transparency (communicating honestly and openly without using impression management, and through being your true self).

Ethical Leadership

Philosophical, normative discussions of ethics and leadership have a long history. Systematic descriptive–predictive approaches to EL in organizations have, however, only recently emerged in social sciences (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Treviño et al. (2003) used a qualitative methodology to identify two aspects of EL, that is, the moral person (the leader's personal traits, character in terms of trustworthiness, fairness, honesty, and altruistic motivation) and the moral manager (the leader's proactive efforts to explicitly communicate core values, be a role model, influence followers' ethical conduct and hold them accountable for deviance from ethical conduct). Northouse (2019) mentions respect, service mindedness, fairness, honesty, and community building as five pillars of EL (or skills and competencies of ethical leaders). Respect relates to giving credence to others' ideas, even though they are opposite to our own and is believed to be conveyed through empathic listening. Service mindedness refers to an altruistic attitude and the principle of beneficence. Fairness in leadership not only relates to the allocation of different types of resources to others, but also how allocation decisions are arrived at and explained to recipients (Kazemi et al., 2015; Kazemi & Törnblom, 2008). Honesty includes telling the truth, and that this is told

openly and as completely as possible such that it represents objective facts. Community building refers, simply put, to being attentive to the common (and greater) good. Brown et al. (2005) used a quantitative construct validation approach in the examination of the associations of EL with other closely related constructs in a nomological network. They concluded from this that EL was associated with “consideration behavior, honesty, trust in the leader, interactional fairness, socialized charismatic leadership (as measured by the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership)” (p. 117), but that the notion of EL was conceptually distinct and not subsumed by any of these constructs.

Spiritual Leadership

Fry (2003) notes that the rapid and accelerating pace of change in working life requires the transformation to a learning organization paradigm, in which employees learn together and expand their capacities to meet the challenges of change, a transformation that calls for a holistic leadership philosophy. One such philosophy is SL, which Fry defines as “comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one’s self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership” (pp. 694–695). These two elements are seen to be universal, and to provide meaning and a higher purpose in life. Calling, in this context, refers to making a difference by serving others, made possible by cultivating a “do what it takes” attitude, as opposed to a “not my job” attitude. Membership refers to all social and cultural structures that we are embedded in and through which we satisfy our fundamental need for belongingness, to be understood and appreciated. It is therefore argued that SL safeguards a deeper sense of meaning and fulfillment at work, of both leaders and followers, by developing and strengthening the sense of calling and membership. Other qualities ascribed to spiritual leaders include humility, honesty, and integrity, qualities that make a leader a person who can be trusted and respected. Spiritual leaders also demonstrate the compassionate and respectful treatment of others (Reave, 2005).

Conceptualizing Bright Triad of Mindful Leadership

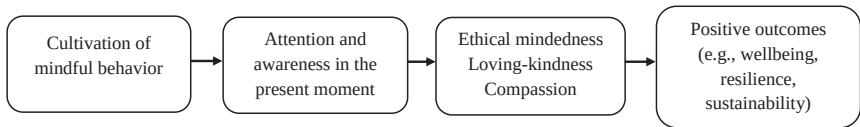
Our original idea was to identify and describe positive counterparts to the components of the DT of leadership. The BTML proposed here does not,

however, represent an extreme departure from the four theories discussed above. BTML instead, by considering the elements of moral, ethics, self-awareness, self-regulation, and concern for others (i.e., altruism), incorporates the best of the four theories, while attempting to go beyond them, at least in a few essential and original ways. None of the previous theories discuss or make use of the notion of mindfulness. BTML, by using the core elements of mindfulness, in fact provides a practical tool for leaders to strengthen the bright cluster of socially positive traits essential for building and sustaining high-quality connections between leaders and their subordinates. BTML specifically constitutes a highly comprehensive and positive approach to leadership, defined here as the leader’s ability to *cultivate* mindful behavior through *attention* and *awareness* in the present moment, to enact a leadership marked by ethical mindedness, loving-kindness and compassion. The terms are analyzed below (see Figure 1).

Cultivation

Cultivation of mindful behavior relates to how leaders should behave in everyday life—physically, mentally, and verbally (i.e., right livelihood). The physical relates to the leader’s body awareness, that is, the body as an object that is externally directed towards the world. The physical (embodied) dimension of mindfulness therefore involves consciously approaching the body’s different states of being, rather than being on “autopilot” (Anālayo, 2006). A leader’s mental activities relate to the perception of the self, which is an ongoing process (cf. “stream of consciousness”). It is therefore important that leaders reflect upon the mental processes that involve emotions, to identify those that are beneficial and those that are harmful in the organizational climate, and to know more before acting (i.e., right action). Mindfulness training can, in this way, help leaders to regulate their feelings when facing diverse life-stressors (Brown & Cordon, 2009; Chaskalson, 2011). Leaders in Buddhism should, in addition to stress management skills, also be kind and gentle in their thought and actions (Bhatta, 2000).

Figure 1
Bright Triad of Mindful Leadership



Attention

Attention is a cognitive ability that relates to the manner in which the brain perceives the surrounding world and selects from it. The brain is stimulated by surprise, and by facing new challenges and novelties in everyday life. Simply put, the more we learn, the more we exercise this plastic structure (Siegel, 2007). The reticular formation (RF), an important anatomical structure that extends upward through the brainstem, governs our attention and functions as a “gatekeeper” that directs outer stimuli to the thalamus, the brain’s “inner relay station.” All sensory information received from the outside world passes through the RF, which also regulates the rhythm and balance of our attention, cognitive status, preparedness, and ability to orient ourselves and scan the surrounding milieu (Hanson & Mendius, 2009; Siegel, 2007). It is said that internal feedback passes through the RF when sitting in an upright position and performing mindful meditation. This therefore makes the meditator stronger and more alert. Individuals are therefore able to train the RF’s internal feedback system, through the practice of this sort of meditation (Hanson & Mendius, 2009).

It is, however, not just the RF that controls attention and the ability to perform meditation. The sympathetic nervous system (as part of the autonomic nervous system) also contributes to the ability to pay attention to things in the surrounding world. Many day-to-day situations (e.g., deadlines, meetings, complaints, conflicts, and so forth) arise that can place stress upon a leader’s body, so activating the sympathetic nervous system and allowing an increase in the fight–flight mechanism (Shafir, 2003; Sutherland & Cooper, 2000). Research indicates that mindfulness, as a coping strategy, enables one to deal with challenging and/or stressful situations in a proactive, adaptive manner. Mindfulness is in particular thought to facilitate self-regulation and enable practitioners to respond to potentially stressful situations with greater equanimity and less rumination (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Dane & Brummel, 2014).

Awareness

The term “awareness” in this definition indicates the adoption of a consciousness (*vijnana*) that is in keeping with the ethical mind. A mindful leader is therefore, given this, one who is acutely aware of the importance of integrating ethical guidance into daily life. The absence of this sort of conscious ethical mindedness, as among DT leaders, increases the risk of harm being caused to others and the surrounding environment, as the present state of global affairs clearly confirms. Frankl also, in *Der unbewußte Gott* (2009), notes the

importance of a developed “superego,” that is, an intuitive function that acts as an ethical barometer in life (Frankl, 2009). Awareness is, for Kabat-Zinn (2013), a way of bringing a systematic consciousness to the experience of living, which makes life more real. It is, in short, a way of becoming ethically minded and more present in or mindful of the moment. Being a mindful leader requires the maintenance of a high level of attention and being aware of the pure experience of that which is occurring in the present moment. It also requires the leader to remain nonjudgmentally in the present moment, without evaluating the respective experience (Leventhal & Rerup, 2006; Sauer & Kohls, 2011). It is therefore important for a leader to be bodily and mentally mindful, and to have a protective awareness that is free from stereotypes and that is attentive in the moment, things therefore being seen in their proper perspective, as Thera (2010) has pointed out.

The enhancement of bodily and mental awareness could also be relevant in affect regulation and empathic processes, as shown in the field of neuroscience (cf. Hölzel et al., 2011). The literature on neuroscience indicates that some structures in the brain, that is, the insula, temporal-parietal, and prefrontal cortex, are not only just activated by mindfulness training, but also can grow and change cortically. This may in turn strengthen the ability of leaders to be ethically minded, empathic (loving-kindness), and compassionate in their work (Hölzel et al., 2011; Nilsson, 2016; Siegel, 2007). Mindful leaders, unlike DT leaders, possess a high level of ethical-minded awareness. This means that they can be more aware of the moral dimension of their everyday actions (i.e., right speech, right action, and right livelihood).

Present-Centeredness

The phrase “present moment” can, in the context of leadership, be understood as presence of mind (i.e., sustaining a high level of attention/awareness) as opposed to absent-mindedness (i.e., routine-driven behavior; autopilot; Anālayo, 2006). Presence of mind refers to a leader’s capacity to be (ethically) aware and intentionally situated in the here and now (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). Schmidt (2011) points out that mindfulness in day-to-day life simply means “to be present” in all of one’s activities (p. 9). This signifies that mindfulness is a way of being in the world, as opposed to doing. Being mindful in an everyday context means learning how to direct one’s awareness toward the lived body, this therefore representing a transference from a doing to a being mode (Anālayo, 2006). Chaskalson (2011) perceives “present moment” to be the opposite of autopilot (p. 17). Kessen (2009) stresses that we can practice mindfulness 24 hr a day by bringing awareness to every activity in our daily lives. We only need to focus on the present moment. This sort of

present-centeredness in everyday life should not, however, be regarded as an on-and-off switch. It is instead a description of a daily mode of being that has been integrated into the mind after years of mindfulness training, and that enables one to simply rest in the present moment, synchronized and attuned to life's circumstances. It is assumed that becoming more present in the moment and obtaining greater access to the consciousness and the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell), will lead one to act with a loving-kindness and a compassionate state of mind (i.e., BT-mindful leaders) rather than react with an acting out mind (i.e., DT leaders) to the things happening around her/him (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Ethical Mindedness

The term “ethical mindedness” is, in the Buddhist context, a mindset, free from the propensity to commit violence (in any form, e.g., physical, verbal, mental) toward others, to steal, to engage in sexual misconduct, to lie, and to indulge in intoxication. Four of these five resemble the Biblical commandments thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery, and thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Ethical mindedness is also one of three parts of the Noble Eightfold Path, namely ethical conduct (*sila*). Ethical conduct, as a path factor, consists of right speech (e.g., avoiding hearsay, rumor, and gossip), right action (e.g., a giving and caring mind), and right livelihood (e.g., moral values; cf. Nilsson & Kazemi, 2021). The word “right” assumes an important meaning in this context, as it underscores the fact that Buddhist mindfulness (*sati*) is not an ethically neutral practice, but rather one that requires discrimination between wholesome (doing what is ethically right) and unwholesome (engaging in unethical/immoral behaviors) actions. A degree of ethical judgment is necessary, according to Dhammika (1990), to properly practice mindfulness.

Loving-Kindness

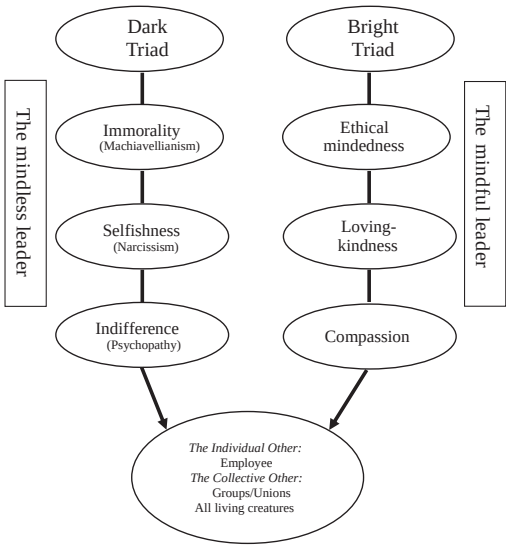
Loving-kindness (*mettā*) is, in Buddhism, a term that comes closest to the western notion of empathy. The term “*mettā*” is said to derive from *Theravāda* Buddhism (*Mettā Sutta*), and to be identical to empathy/compassion. *Mettā* meditation holds a vital place among the many meditational exercises in Buddhism (Anālayo, 2006). *Mettā* meditation practice is, according to Wallace (2006), especially helpful for balancing our emotions and for opening the heart. It is therefore a prerequisite for building sustainable relationships and

the antidote to selfishness (i.e., narcissism). The practice of *mettā* meditation calls upon the meditator to wholeheartedly contemplate the following four phrases (Kuan, 2008): (a) let me experience security and freedom from both internal and external harm, (b) let me become healthy, (c) let me know happiness, and (d) let me live a life of ease. Each of these phrases is intended to be first directed towards oneself, then towards a particular benefactor (someone that has made an important contribution to your life), then towards a close friend, then towards a neutral person, and then towards an enemy (a disliked or confrontational figure in your life). Each phrase is to be directed, in the last stage, towards all living creatures in the world. The person should be invited into one's mind at each stage of meditation, by saying their name and directing each of the four phrases towards them. The final stage involves the opening of one's heart as an invitation to all human beings, and then widening the circle to include all living entities in the world (i.e., a planetary sustainable thought!). Practicing *mettā* meditation therefore helps leaders to interact with others in a state of empathy and compassion, so opening the leader up to a new level of understanding of themselves and others. This brings us to the third component of the BT, compassion.

Compassion

A mindful leader, in addition to ethical mindedness and loving-kindness, also affords a compassionate state of mind. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is primarily an antidote to indifference (i.e., psychopathy), a distant and callous relationship toward the Other (Nilsson, 2014). Compassion in Buddhism goes beyond sympathy and empathy, Cooley (1998) hinting at this when describing "sympathy, in the sense of compassion, which means a specific emotion or sentiment, which has nothing necessarily in common with sympathy in the sense of communion" (p. 93). It is this sense of *communion* that characterizes the Buddhist understanding of compassion, and to some degree distinguishes it from most western notions of ordinary sympathy (e.g., Lazarus, 1991). It therefore becomes clear that the Buddhist notion of compassion, which contains the capacity for communion (the wish that others may be free from suffering and its causes, and an authentic feeling toward all living creatures [humans, animals, and plants]), is in some way a step beyond ordinary western notions of empathy, this including other living beings (humans). Buber, however, comes close to this conception when he defines "*real sympathy*" as "becom[ing] a part of another person's pain" (Buber, 1996, p. 37). Compassion therefore involves understanding the plight of others, and a willingness to help others. Figure 2 illustrates the difference between DT and BT models of leadership.

Figure 2
The Bright Triad of Mindful Leadership as Opposed to the Dark Triad of Leadership



Comparing BTML With TL

BTML and TL are both fundamentally based on paying attention to the surrounding milieu. Bass and Reggio (cited in [Smith et al., 2018](#)), however, note that “... transformational leaders empower followers and pay attention to their individual needs and personal development, helping followers to develop their own leadership potential” (p. 83). BTML shares TL’s preference for paying attention to followers’ individual needs and potential. It also calls for a present mind that acts rather than reacts to things/persons around them. The level of morality is another similarity between these two leadership styles.

Differences between the two include TL’s greater focus on high-order needs and visions. BTML indirectly pays attention to this, but does not expand on this in great detail. BTML can therefore be considered to be a more comprehensive model, because it embraces humanistic virtues such as ethical mindedness, loving-kindness, and compassion. ML also differs from TL in highlighting the importance of attention and awareness in the present moment. BTML is, from a cultural perspective, rooted in Buddhism, which can be viewed as a collectivist cultural model. TL is, however, a western-oriented individualistic culture phenomenon.

Comparing BTML With AL

There are many definitions of AL. One definition in particular resonates well with our notion of BTML. This definition describes an “authentic leader” as one who is: “(a) self-aware, humble, always seeking improvement, aware of those being led and looks out for the welfare of others; (b) fosters high degrees of trust by building an ethical and moral framework; and (c) is committed to organizational success within the construct of social values” (Whitehead, 2009, p. 850). There is a focus, in this definition, on being aware of one’s values, morals and ethics and being congruent. “Self-awareness” is one of AL’s more prominent features. Mindfulness training, according to Avolio and Wernsing (2008), facilitates the cultivation of self-awareness by teaching leaders to interrupt habitual, automatic reactions as a means of finding fresh, alternative ways of thinking and responding, based on insights gleaned from self-reflection, so enabling leaders to become more present in the moment. One of the more striking differences between these two theories lies in AL, and also TL (and, for that matter, EL and SL), strictly reflecting western thinking and values. BTML is, however, more eastern in its orientation. For example, both AL and BTML emphasize the importance of self-awareness, which is understood quite differently in a Buddhist as opposed to in a western context. In Buddhism, “self-awareness” is related to the five *skandhas* (i.e., form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness). In the western psycho-philosophical tradition it refers to a first-person “I” (see McKenzie, 2008).

Comparing BTML With EL

EL, as in BTML, places an emphasis on moral action and altruism, viewing ethics as a moral compass within leadership practice. Hunt (2017, p. 4) notes that “moral action and behavior create a foundation for EL,” an idea that mirrors the emphasis in BTML on ethical mindedness, as mentioned above. Both theories also, and as an extension of moral action, share a view of the leader as someone who treats others with dignity, respect, and compassion. We should also, as before, underscore the cultural difference between the two: compassion, for example, tends to take on a more profound and complex meaning in the Buddhist than in the western context.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines compassion as “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress [or pain] together with a desire to alleviate it.” Compassion (*karuṇā*) in Theravada Buddhism is, on the other hand, connected to kindness (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). This is one of the tradition’s four “divine abodes” (*brahmavihāra*; Gethin, 1998). It is therefore possible to speak of two types of compassion: an

internal (visualizing and affirmative) passive type (*mettā*) and an external (engaged) active type (*karuṇā*), the active type being an all-encompassing form that is directed toward all living beings.

Comparing BTML With SL

Becoming a spiritual leader requires, according to [Smith et al. \(2018\)](#), the development of self-awareness, self-esteem, decision-making ability, and communication skills. These attributes can, however, be also found in other leadership theories, for example, AL and BTML, this making it more difficult to comprehend the uniqueness of the SL model. Which characteristics of SL are more or less unique? At least three can be immediately mentioned: hope, faith, and altruistic love ([Samul, 2021](#)). Altruistic love is, of course, to some degree comparable to BTMLs loving-kindness. The notion of loving-kindness (which emphasizes *mettā* meditation as described above) tends, however, in Buddhism to take on a more broad and profound meaning than the western notion of altruistic love. Moreover, SL resembles BTML not only because of its emphasis on altruistic love, but also because of its focus on spiritual well-being.

Recommendations for Action: Coaching Leaders to Lead “Brightly” by Being Mindful

BTML is made up of two interrelated parts, mindfulness and the BT. Mindfulness is a form of metacognition and a self-regulating tool. It relates to awareness arising from intentionally paying attention nonjudgmentally in the present moment. Mindfulness, in other words, helps us to observe our thoughts and to be aware of them ([Kabat-Zinn, 2013](#)). We argue that these skills can be trained. We also consider them to be necessary conditions for the permeation of the triad of ethical mindedness, loving kindness, and compassion into all activities leaders engage in. We, in other words, use the core elements of mindfulness to help leaders to strengthen the *humane* aspects of their leadership.

A widely held belief is that today’s leaders operate in a tough reality characterized by fierce competition, shrinking resources and a rapid and ever-increasing rate of change that almost requires leaders to adopt the attitudes and characteristics described by “dark” leadership models. Immorality, selfishness, and indifference can therefore be seen to be central and decisive elements in leadership outcomes. Criticism can be directed, albeit unjustifiably, at leadership models which are seen to be too unrealistic and idealistic. This criticism is,

however, unwarranted, not least because the elements that constitute “good” leadership outcomes are rarely discussed and problematized, that is, good for who, and are good outcomes short or long term? Positive outcomes defined in terms of financial results, and that do not take into consideration the well-being of human resources and long-term sustainable societies, represent a too limited view of good leadership outcomes. We believe that the triad highlighted in our proposed leadership model appeals to and satisfies basic human needs such as the need for belonging, security and development, better than the DT model of leadership. The original idea behind the development of our model of leadership was to define positive counterparts to the DT qualities of leadership. We believe that the most important lesson that can be drawn from this, and the challenge, is therefore to educate headhunting professionals to expand their selection criteria to include the BT qualities. BTML also acts to remind leadership coaches to train leaders to lead by example (i.e., cultivation), the emphasis being on training their ability to *connect* (to self, employees, clients, and the larger community). Connection is about staying connected to our values, which in this context is our “golden” BT. The “brightly” mindful leader is therefore a leader who personifies presence by cultivating the three fundamentals of high-quality connections.

Cultivation refers in this context to fostering, the development and improvement of being in tune with people and the caring skills of leaders. Van Hooft (1999) states that “caring is seen as an overarching quality that gives action its moral character” (p. 189). Cultivation also refers to leading by example, and to a leader walking the line that you want others to follow. Or as Bhatta (2000) points out, “action speaks louder than words; what the leader does and values sets the ethical tone and creates the moral environment of the organization” (p. 106). A leader who wants to cultivate, should create a detailed code of conduct and hold regular training and discussion sessions to reinforce the idea that the values are central to the organization’s mission. The leader should also realize that followers will see the leader’s choices and values and adopt them into their own practices.

An effective way to cultivate the fundamentals of high-quality connections is to train leader awareness, especially *self-awareness*, through training leaders to pose questions to themselves. Questions such as whether the leader actively promotes a culture in which coworkers trust each other, and feel safe about talking and expressing feelings about their problems and sufferings without being judged by colleagues, feel encouraged and empowered to show their concern for each other’s problems, and feel that the leader cares and will try his/her best to help. A “brightly” mindful leader therefore promotes a company culture in which employees are free to express their issues and show their insecurities. This contrasts a company culture, which is characterized by competitiveness, insecurity, and toxicity, as promoted by DT leadership.

Active listening is another way of cultivating BTML. Leaders usually expect their followers to listen to what they have to say. Leaders should, however, also listen to their followers. Practicing mindfulness, through teaching leaders to become good listeners, therefore helps leaders to be more receptive to followers' thoughts and actions. This is achieved by teaching leaders to focus their attention on what is happening in the here and now. This will increase leader's attentiveness, and so make them more open and adaptive to the changes necessary to secure collective well-being in the workplace.

A "brightly" mindful leader embodies *leadership presence* by cultivating ethical mindedness, loving kindness, and compassion in serving others. Being fully aware of the present moment also helps leaders handle day-to-day issues with focus and composure. Focusing on the present moment furthermore helps leaders to slow down and see the bigger picture, that is, the long-term goals. Separating an observation (e.g., your sales are higher than average) from feelings and judgments (e.g., here we work as a team and no one should stand out) is a rewarding exercise in leadership presence. Being mindfully nonjudgmental about "mistakes" made by coworkers (i.e., making an observation without judging it) is also central to achieving the golden BT of leadership. Mistakes can be seen as learning opportunities, instead of inherently unnecessary and bad.

What Is the Next Step in Further Development of the BTML?

We hope that BTML can be a useful addition to the current set of positive leadership theories. We also hope that future research takes the much-needed step to operationalize the proposed components of the model and develop and validate a new measurement tool for use in research and organizational development projects. The new measure should show evidence of predictive and incremental validity, i.e., should be able to predict outcome measures, and account for variance not accounted for by extant inventories, based on other leadership philosophies and theories.

Another approach to assessing the utility of BTML is to design leadership interventions that can be used to experimentally or quasi-experimentally investigate the effects on a predefined business outcome of one or more leadership qualities proposed by BTML. Avolio et al. (2009) define leadership interventions as "studies where the researcher overtly manipulated leadership as the independent variable through training, assignment, scenario or other means." (p. 764). This is the only way to assess whether a leadership model has the intended impact on a certain outcome, and to what degree.

Concluding Reflections

The novel idea behind the formulation of BTML was the identification and definition of positive counterparts to the DT of leadership. We therefore compared BTML's strengths with the four related leadership theories that explicitly focus on the humane aspects of leadership. We have, for example, seen that BTML identifies self-awareness as an important leadership attribute. So does AL and SL. We have also seen that it emphasizes ethical/moral conduct, which TL and EL also do. We have, however, attempted to show that these concepts are more broadly and profoundly defined and understood in our Buddhist-oriented model than they are in the other western-oriented models, despite the similarities between them. Our view is that these differences enable the cultivation of a leader's idiomatic sense (in terms of word meaning, discourse, and context awareness), known in Buddhism as right speech. We have repeatedly noted, from a cultural standpoint, the important distinctions between our model's Buddhist-oriented notions and those of the other western-oriented models. These, though similar, do not carry the same sense of meaning. We are therefore convinced that models which incorporate the meanings and understandings of non-Western cultural perspectives (e.g., Buddhism) will enhance leaders' operational and strategic skills.

We have yet, as westerners, to fully adopt the Asian understanding of mindfulness in the field of management and as a common practice among company leaders. The research literature on mindfulness-based leadership has, however, just begun to expand rapidly. The number of companies that have begun to implement mindfulness-based leadership approaches in the workplace has also begun to grow (Bhatta, 2000; Dane, 2011; Waddock, 2001). Evidently, the need for mindful leadership has increased. It is expected to increase further not only because of scandals and unethical conduct, but also because the complexity of work and work conditions has increased. Mindfulness, according to Langer (2010), refers to the "simple act of noticing new things," which "puts us in the present, makes us sensitive to context, and aware of change and uncertainty. When we are mindless, we hold our perspective still, allowing us to confuse the stability of our mindsets with the stability of the underlying phenomena. Hold it still if you want but it's changing nonetheless."

To recapitulate, BTML, proposed in this article, refers to leaders' cognitive and behavioral skills in terms of cultivation, attention, and awareness in the present moment. We have argued that such leader attributes can increase their ability to function in an ethical manner, and with a spirit of loving kindness and compassion (i.e., the BT). A mindful leader attends to and is aware of the present moment, and does not mindlessly go through the motions of day-to-day affairs on "autopilot." Our interactions with others are, irrespective of whether we are leaders or followers, often judgmental. What others say and do therefore

often influences our feelings, mind and actions. The ability to adopt a nonjudgmental attitude is therefore a primary aim of mindfulness training (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Leaders for example, in their interactions in the workplace, sometimes quickly judge their experience of things, people, and actions as being good or bad. There is a need, in such situations, to calm down, stop, and make use of one's mindful sensibilities. Leaders can otherwise easily risk becoming mindless, passing either good or bad judgments in a reactive way (i.e., on autopilot). This will ultimately impact well-being in the workplace. Leaders continuously make assessments. They might, however, feel better about their role by stopping, stepping aside, and letting the positive/negative experiences pass without judging them. This means being able to see and think about a situation by considering the interests of others and separating this from one's own selfish needs. This is known in Buddhism as *cetana*, intention. As Purser and Milillo (2014) point out, "A radical management perspective aimed at emancipation can benefit from Buddhist mindfulness by reducing ego-based desire, anger, and delusion—the core defilements underlying power, domination, and callous indifference" (p. 16).

We believe that the BTML presented in this article is a more powerful tool in creating flourishing and sustainable workplaces than the DT model of leadership. The reason for this is quite simple. The DT is, in effect, mainly and almost exclusively focused on meeting business objectives, which reflect the financial and often short-term interests of the management and stakeholders. BTML, in contrast through its emphasis on ethical mindedness, loving-kindness, and compassion, strives to meet collective humane goals and interests (e.g., well-being). The sweeping vision of mindfulness presented by the peace activist Sivaraksa (2009) carries us beyond mere self-improvement, to the betterment of the world at large and the development of a sustainable future for all mankind:

On a political level, mindfulness can help in our work against consumerism, sexism, militarism, and many other "isms" that undermine the integrity of life. It can be a tool to help us criticize positively and creatively our societies, nations, and even cultural and religious traditions. Consumerism endangers the biosphere and strengthens multinational corporations that care more about profit than the wellbeing of people. We must be mindful of how we create and use wealth. (p. 83)

BTML can be seen as being eccentric and of little relevance to business performance. Research evidence, however, suggests that the BT qualities are positively related to crucial organizational outcomes such as quality of care in care settings (Goetz et al., 2010), organizational citizenship (Lilius et al., 2012), bonding between coworkers (Frost et al., 2000), affective commitment to the organization (Lilius et al., 2008), and staff retention (Fryer, 2013), to name just a few. The type of leadership that BTML represents, furthermore does not only solely focus on business benefit, but also on doing and promoting what is right and humane as a leader. We therefore believe that teaching the approach and

leadership qualities proposed by BTML can lead to fewer scandals in business, government, and sports, of which there have been many in recent decades.

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