

# Understanding *Avnivesh* for *Karmic* Model of Leadership Development

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## ***Abstract***

*This paper discusses the relevance of avinivesh which literally means the “fear of death” and the doctrine of karma in the context of developing leaders for the 21st century. It argues that avinivesh is the root cause of many decision-failures of leaders which have been attributed reasons like narcissism, hubris, greed, etc in prior leadership research. It also tries to present the “doctrine of Karma” in a more universal sense towards explaining how avinivesh leads to a leadership vision infested with fear, anxiety and insecurity which ultimately manifests as business and economic uncertainty threatening the perpetual existence of the organization or institution in particular.*

## **Introduction**

Leadership is the most discussed, debated and researched subject on this planet. Leaders are sought after everywhere. We need political leaders who can run the nation and address the various citizen expectations; we need social leaders who would keep alive the voices for addressing the social issues; we need business leaders who would run successful businesses that will create more jobs in the economy; and we need spiritual leaders who guide us during times of confusions in cultural transitions and through the vicissitudes of life when they give their Divine reassurances.

A leader is an individual who creates a vision which the followers imagine and see. Leader is an individual who creates a “mirror” where the followers see the image of their expectations and see the dream of their fulfillment through the leaders. In this way, the leader is responsible for not just showing the “mirror” but also co-creating the destiny of its followers or admirers.

However, since leadership is a concept which is looked more in an individual sense or we see leaders as an individual living entity which has a “thinking” aspect, so the various philosophies of mind especially the individual mind also hold for the mind of a leader as

leader is seen as an “individual” who has a distinctive identity in the “collective”.

In this paper, we will try to explain the relevance of avinivesh which literally means the “fear of death” in the context of developing leaders for the 21st century. Avinivesh is the least discussed but the most significant of all mind afflictions proposed by the ancient sage Patañjali in his Yoga-sūtra which is the holy grail of all Yogic practices in India for purging the mind of the impurities. Yoga-sūtra is not just a treatise on the practice of Yoga but is also the basis of an Indian philosophy of Mind. We would argue that avinivesh is the root cause of many decision-failures of leaders which have been attributed reasons like narcissism, hubris, greed, etc in prior leadership research. We would also bring in the “doctrine of Karma” in a more universal sense without any religious connotations, towards explaining how avinivesh leads to a leadership vision infested with fear, anxiety and insecurity which ultimately manifests as business and economic uncertainty threatening the perpetual existence of the organization or institution in particular.

### **What is Avinivesh?**

*Avinivesh* is a Sanskrit word which carries meanings that slightly differ upon translation but the core is the same. In some places, it means clinging to life or self-preservation (Hartranft, 2003); in other translations it means instinctive fear of death (Sharma, 1960); and it also means desire for continuity (Whicher, 1954). Shuddhaanandaa (2003) gave an explanation to it which is quite relevant to the contemporary times, when he said that –

*“The fifth affliction of the mind according to Patañjali is too much desire for life; too much clinging to life; too much attachment to the body, its senses, and all that senses give. Out of this comes a tremendous fear of death.”*

*(Shuddhaanandaa Brahmachari, 2003)*

From the above explanation, it is clear that *avinivesh* is the fear of death which comes from the insecurity about losing once position or once sensually gratifying elements of life, due to which an individual feels a sense of insecurity which leads to the pursuit of accumulation, mindless sensual gratifications, greed, narcissism, etc without bothering much about the consequences of such actions to the individual or to one's relationships or to the society at large. It actually leads to a state which is inconsistent to both the deontological or teleological perspectives to the ethicality of actions or decisions.

Fear of death, though on a much deeper subconscious level, surfaces on a more conscious level as a feeling of insecurity arising due to fear of one's sustenance and the fear to lose one's position. All these come under the affliction of attachment or *raga* according to sage Patanjali. The fear to lose one's position or the fear of sustaining the sensual pleasures of a

certain possession or position leads not only to bad decisions and actions but also enhances the risk of an unethical reality being a more acceptable norm while meeting the professional or personal ends. Leaders under insecurity or such fear(s) can go to any extent to retain their positions or to maintain their image of grandiosity. Such leaders create an atmosphere in an organization which breeds corruption or malpractices. Greed, narcissism, ego, etc are the pre-conditions for any ethical decision failures which ultimately put the institution's sustainability at stake. Leaders who are afflicted with any of these “pancha-kleshas” (or five afflictions) viz., avidya (ignorance), ashmita (ego), raga (attachment), dvesha (aversion) and avnivesh (fear of death); nurture the preconditions for institutional failure or collapse in the long run.

However, this doesn't mean that overcoming these afflictions is sufficient for making a successful leader but definitely it is a necessary condition for nurturing the right leader for an organization. Finally, the success of an organization and sustainability depends on the decisions and actions of a leader which of indeed are shaped by the “mind” of the leader. The actions and responses of a leader to the evolving contexts of business and society are fundamental for making a great leader that delivers results.

#### ***Avnivesh* and the reason for an “undying” fear**

One of the reasons for the “undying” fear of death is the absence of any clear scientific answer to what happens after death. Though modern science considers death as a phenomenon of abrupt end of life, but culturally there are different philosophy or myths that exist about what happens to a person after death. A study of the eschatology of various faiths or religions suggests that there exists a strong correlation between the actions a person performs during his/her life and the consequence that a person faces after “death”. So there is an “undying” element to fear about even after death in many of the faith traditions. Like in Hindu beliefs, the doctrine of “*Karma*” prominently influences the quality of rebirth a subject has after it dies in the present life. Death is not seen as the abrupt end of life but rather a preparation for the next life after rebirth and the quality of the new life after rebirth will depend on the quality of actions in the present life. Similarly, in other faiths, a person faces the Judgment Day after Death where the Almighty decides whether to confer a heaven of eternal bliss or a hell of unending suffering and pain. But in all faiths, we do have a notion of a certain consequence which is connected to the ethicality of actions; and the virtue or vices an individual possesses after death.

Another reason for the “undying” fear is the doctrine notion of every human being a perfectly imperfect living entity, who is bound to commit mistakes in the generally accepted notions of right and wrong actions or decisions. Due to this reason, suffering seems to be the most obvious end for any actions and so people normally want to the pleasures of heaven

right now through their very senses which cease to exist after “death”. And so in their pursuit for feeling the “bliss” through their sensory perceptions, they cling to all the sensual pleasures that life has to offer; and this is the pre-condition for mind to be ever-trapped in the affliction of ego, attachment and affliction. And all this happens because of clinging to life or *avnivesh*. And so we start believing “ignorance is bliss” but only to justify the actions that we take.

### ***The Doctrine of Karma – an alternative view for leadership development***

The word *karma* etymologically means action though in the Vedas it is defined as “a ritualistic action”. In Buddhism, *karma* refers to the intentional ethical action that determines the nature and place of birth, and this definition has influenced the many Hinduisms that came after (Obeyesekere, 2002).

It was in the conversation of the sages of Yajnavalkya and Arthabhaga, about the nature of senses, cited the Great Aranyaka Upanishads (*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*) that the relation between action, death and afterlife was explained:

“Yajnavalkya”, Arthabhaga said again, “tell me – when a man dies, what is it that does not leave him?” “His name,” replied Yajnavalkya. “A name is without limit, and the All-gods are without limit. Limitless also is the world he wins by it.”

“Yajnavalkya”, Arthabhaga said again, “tell me – when a man has died and his speech disappears into fire, his breath into wind, his sight into the sun, his mind into the moon, his hearing into the quarters, his physical body into the earth, his self [*atman*] into space, the hair of his body into plants, the hairs of his head into trees, and his blood and semen into the water – what happens to that person? Yajnavalkya replied: “My friend we cannot talk about this in public. Take my hand, Arthabhaga; let's go and discuss this in private.”

So they left and talked about it. And what did they talk about? – they talked about nothing but action [*karma*]. And what did they praise? – they praised nothing but action. Yajnavalkya told him: “A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action.”

(*Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.2.12-13)

Further Yajnavalkya adds that this “self” is conditioned by good and bad actions [*karma*]: What a man turns out to be depends on how he acts and how he conducts himself. If his actions are good, he will turn into something good. If his actions are bad bad, he will turn into something bad... On this point there is the following verse:

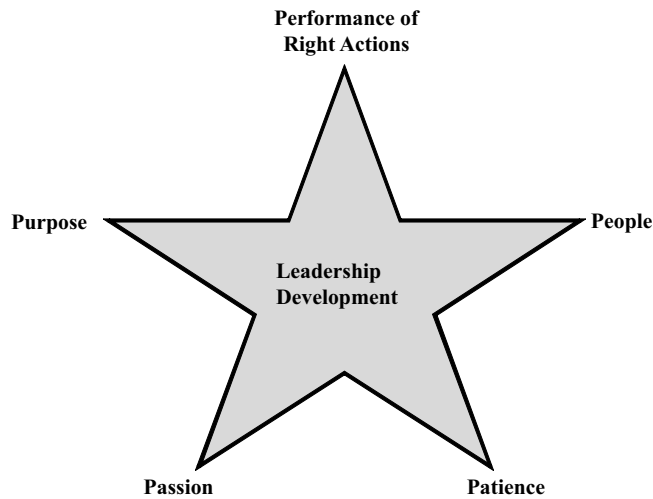
A man who's attached does with his action  
to that very place to which  
his mind and character cling.  
Reaching the end of his action,  
of whatever he has done in this world –  
From that world he returns  
back to this world,  
back to action.

(Brhd. Upan., 4.4.7)

Clearly, as we can see above that actions [karma] have a profound meaning in the ancient Vedic scriptures and is considered to be an “immortal” element that lives on. The only way to break the fear or insecurity and overcoming the mind afflictions is to focus on the present actions or decisions and their ethicality. In essence, the doctrine of karma, fundamentally states that good actions lead to good reactions; bad actions lead to bad reactions; and so we need to focus on good actions today to have a better future tomorrow. Actions [karma] are also the answer to the dilemma created by the deontological and teleological perspectives of the ethics. If we focus on the actions, we are focusing on the means and the consequences simultaneously. Proponents of both the perspectives (means / ends) might then argue about how to determine the ethicality of actions. Fundamentally, every action has an inherent intention. Good intentions always justify the ethicality of any action. And so we need to focus on the right intentions and then actions that follow will have more chance of being ethically correct.

To understand the importance of karma, we need to first look at the concept not as a *faith-based doctrine* but more as a *cycle of action-reaction* forming the cycle of causality of this Universe which includes leaders and institutions as a part of it. And so every institution and its leader, we argue should understand the importance of this doctrine in its long-term sustainability and understand its role more holistically as an interconnected entity in the cosmic whole. The *karmic cycle* in the present context needs to be extended into a cycle of Intention-Action-Reaction cycle which seems more practical is an institutional context.

The relevance of this *karma* in the context of leadership development can be explained through the *Karmic Model of Leadership Development* which is illustrated in Figure 1 below.



**Fig. 1: Karmic Model for Leadership Development**

As we can see above, in this model we propose the 5Ps of Leadership development which we explain as follows:

**Purpose** – Though this sounds a cliché word but still almost all leadership failure starts at this point when the leader loses vision or focus on their “internal compass”. Sometimes it could be attachment to position or power which may turn into *hubris* or the leader resorting to any means to justify its decisions or attaining the ends; both individual or institutional. Or it could be due to *ego* because of which the leader might ignore vital informational inputs or opinions which may threaten the institutions' sustainability or competitive advantage. Or it could be over hesitation or fear about experimenting innovative tactics in the competitive “battlefield”. But in any case, the leader might not be focused on the institutions' strategic purpose at its various levels and in the different scenario, context or temporal horizons (short, medium, long-term).

**Passion** – Most successful leader have a “*passion on their sleeves*”. The passion to put the relentless effort towards achieving the purpose defined above. However, most of the times business organizations harbor feelings of “insecurity” among employees by pushing their executives too much to the limit. The stretch and effort to exceed performance expectations and create unexpected results should be spontaneous. Great leaders have the habit of performing and performing consistently because their passion is not for what follows the action but in enjoying performing the right actions itself, consistent to the purpose of the institution. Such leaders never lose focus by short-run setbacks or ups and downs of business and their inherent passion helps them to “*steer the ship through the storms*”.

**Patience** – Sometimes external circumstances increase uncertainty in the industry and the stakeholders start questioning the future of the industry and so this may lead to temporary negative sentiments in the market. In such situation, leaders need to keep patience and show resilience. But many a times, leaders feeling a threat to their positions initiate actions to justify their mistakes or take decisions based on a myopic view. Patience is the first step towards managing turbulence in today's economic environment. Patience doesn't mean tolerating the wrong-doings or wrong actions. It also doesn't mean inertia. In a leadership context, it involves recalibrating ones approach and in this process of transition need to avoid any hasty decisions or actions due to heightened complexity or turbulence outside. “*Remaining calm at the eye of the storm*” can be the metaphor for the patience that we are explaining here. Turbulence is a natural process. Change is a natural process. The evolving complexity is a natural process. As a leader we should remain calm and be a witness to these changing contexts and then try understanding the “flow” and evolution of the contexts and scenarios; then, accordingly decide upon our approach keeping in view the long-term vision and mission of the institution.

**People** – A leader is not in isolation but is part of interconnected reality which includes his/her relationship with people; the living stakeholders. Institutions that nurture the right “people” both inside and outside their firms; and have sense of compassion towards the society have the greatest chance of surviving business turbulence and also maintain a positive image among the key stakeholders. In leadership, we talk of *charismatic* and *character-based leadership*. Charisma helps in creating a favorable image of the leader; character helps in sustaining that image through trust and belief of the stakeholders on the institution and its leaders.

**Performance of Right Actions** – The definition of “right” is based on principles of a leader. A leader who has a moral compass which is pretty well-defined and based on strong ethical principles will be mindful of the evolving scenario and context of the industry; and will always do the “right” thing in any situation of dilemma or confusion. Great leaders break the confusions by always being strong in ethical principles and being responsible for the actions or decisions made. Performance of “right” actions strengthens the stakeholders' trust on the leader and the institution.

The above 5Ps are important to develop leaders who can manage uncertainty and turbulence by being able to constantly manage the fundamental afflictions of mind, i.e., the *panchakleshas*. Today, contemplative meditative practices are acknowledged as important training components in many of the leading organizations as tools to manage the increasing stress and complexity in institutional environments and workplaces. Such meditative practices like mindfulness meditation, *Yoga*, etc fundamentally try to address the mental afflictions and facilitate both physical and mental rejuvenation for a more conscious life based on

mindful decisions and actions.

Further, the outcome of a *Karmic* approach to leadership leads to the right actions which again lead to organizations recalibrating themselves on the right action-reaction cycle which only leads to increased chances of concurrently achieving the objectives of wealth and welfare maximization through optimal utilization and nurturing of both the human (*people*) and the non-human capital (*natural resources, infrastructure, production systems, etc*). The *karmic* cycle in institutions can be illustrated with the help of the diagram below. As we can see in Figure 2, the belief in *karma* leads to *right actions*; *right actions* lead to *right reactions* by stakeholders; and finally *right reactions* lead to further *strengthening the belief* of the institution and leader *on the karma doctrine* which then starts the cycle again.



**Fig. 2 Karmic Cycle in Institutions**

## Conclusion

As we can see in the end, that for developing the right leaders and sustainable organizations, we can use the *Karmic* view as a promising alternative for –

*Purgation of Institutional culture*

*Creating stakeholder primacy in organizations*

*Leaders who maintain the markets' trust and belief in the institution*

*Creating a sustainable future for the institution*



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