# WHEN WORK BECOMES MEDITATION: A CASE STUDY OF HOW MANAGERS USE WORK AS A TOOL FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an empirically grounded process model for how managers can allow work to become meditation in order to further personal growth in mid-life. When managers actively engage with the challenging situations of everyday work with a meditative attitude, the process unfolds as the managers' focus shift from attending to suffering, to witnessing what is, and to responding with authenticity. The model is based on the qualitative analysis of data gathered during a two-year, in depth longitudinal clinical study of how seven CEO's and business owners of small and medium-sized companies integrate their spiritual development insights with their working lives.

Past literature suggests that traditional meditation practice provides people with a foundation for personal growth by increasing their capacity to explore their situation through a different light and change their perspective of life. This study shows that work can provide the individual with an environment where this capacity can be practiced and embodied in real-time in order to further personal growth. Consequently, if work is allowed to become a meditation, it can be a prime enabler of personal growth. Observations from the longitudinal study also indicate that a meditative approach to work can over time potentially lead to a more viable way of doing business.

## 1    INTRODUCTION

> "We have to see that [meditation] practice is not separate from our life, and we have to examine our life for the areas of conflict and unconsciousness"
> (Kornfield, 1989, p. 153).

In mid-life, many exhausted and stressed out managers turn to different kinds of personal development practices to better cope with the challenges of work and life and find a new meaning to it (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). Supported by recent advancements in neuroscience (e.g. Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Golkar et al., 2014; Wolever et al., 2012), contemplative practices such as

meditation and mindfulness have become popular ways to relieve stress and find new perspectives, energy and hope.

Over time, however, hope and energy tend to diminish for people attending meditation courses and retreats (Kornfield, 2001). This makes them crave yet another course, or resort back to their old and unwanted patterns. Another option is to integrate the contemplative life with the active life (c.f. Kornfield, 1989; Zajonc, 2009), i.e. to allow work to become a meditation and thereby continue the existential journey and further personal growth. This is in alignment with traditional Buddhist practice, which doesn't view formal meditation practice and life as two separate things. Kornfield (1989, p. 152) argues that in meditation practice, "one opens the body and mind and heart and in a way becomes more transparent, able more fully than ever to receive life with balance. Spiritual opening is not a withdrawal to some imaged realm or safe cave. It is not a pulling away, but a touching of all the experience of life with wisdom and with a heart of kindness, without any separation."

People may, however, have different intentions with their meditation practice. In popularized writings about mindfulness, benefits such as an increased ability to concentrate and more successfully cope with difficult situations at work are often emphasized. Using meditation to become more productive and efficient could be seen as an *instrumental intention*. In original Buddhist practice, however, the ultimate goal is to eliminate suffering (Purser & Milillo, 2014), which is a *spiritual intention*. The spiritual intention goes deeper than the instrumental one – since, ironically, the source of suffering might be one's drive to become more efficient at work. This creates a never-ending search for optimization. Since this paper is about personal growth it's the spiritual intention of meditation practice that will be the focus.

Thus far, empirical research on *how* people allow work to become a meditation in order to further personal growth has been very limited. Previous literature has focused on how simple activities, such as washing dishes, chopping wood, or writing e-mails may contribute to cultivating mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 1987; Tan, 2012). It can be difficult for a busy manager to identify with these kinds of tasks. Also, previous writings about work and meditation have to a large extent been based on various authors' experiences or conceptual ideas, rather than systematic, empirical research (e.g. McCormick, 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how managers can allow work to become a meditation in order to further personal growth and is based on a two-year, qualitative empirical study. Developing empirically based knowledge about this process is particularly important for several reasons. First, it can lead to a deeper understanding of how meditation can facilitate personal growth for working managers facing a mid-life crisis. Secondly, it

may help broaden the understanding of how contemplative practices could be integrated with work guided by a spiritual intention. This is particularly important since mindfulness meditation is said to require considerable effort to be developed (Rosch, 2007). Further, the work setting usually does not support this kind of development (Kegan, 1982; Torbert, 1976).

The paper is structured as follows. First, the phenomena of midlife transition and personal growth will be discussed, followed by a section on how meditation can further personal growth. Later, different kinds of meditation will be discussed and connected to work. A discussion of how suffering is linked to personal growth and meditation will conclude the theoretical part of the paper. The research design and method will be described before the findings of the study are presented. Finally, there will be some concluding remarks, followed by a discussion of the study's implications, limitations, as well as suggestions for further research.

## 2    PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN MID-LIFE

### 2.1    When a successful "program" suddenly stops working

The starting point of this research lies in the need for personal development that many people experience in mid-life. During youth and early adulthood, people deal with life's challenges by using a "program". This program is learned early on enabling people cope with life successfully (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). Using the computer metaphor, such a "program" is governed by a cognitive framework, which guides individuals as they "attend to some aspects of experience and, by implication, ignore others" (Bartunek & Moch, 1987, p. 485). This "filter" helps us operate in the world; we learn where to find directions, what to value in life, and how to pursue our purpose. These guidelines are generally found externally and performed within preconceived roles (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). They provide us with a recipe of how to act in order to be accepted and successful. Once established, they tend to remain (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

With time, however, life usually becomes more complex; responsibilities accumulate, and family, career and social life all increases the pressure on the individual. When the dynamics of life change and new kinds of issues arise, the "program" that was previously so successful may stop working and start producing unwanted consequences such as stress, conflicts, and a loss of meaning. As a result, an inability to combine work and life may arise.

### 2.2    First-, second-, and third-order changes

A significant challenge is that the individual often tries to find a solution to the problem within the existing "program". The example will help illustrate

the point. Steven is a manager in his forties who identifies with being an achiever. Recently, however, he started to suffer from fatigue and ended up in a situation where he found himself performing poorly for the first time in his life. Steven's programmed response to this is to work even harder, but that will not help him succeed since striving for achievements was the problem that originally caused his fatigue that is now stopping him from executing his "program". By trying to find a solution within the existing "program", Steven is caught up in a vicious circle.

Such efforts, which focuses on fixing the problem within the current framework, are called *first-order changes* (Argyris & Schön, 1995; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Einstein's often cited quote "we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them" pinpoints the challenge. While first-order changes are "incremental modifications that make sense within an established framework or method of operating", *second-order changes* are "modifications in the frameworks themselves" (Bartunek & Moch, 1987, p. 484).

For Steven, a second-order change would be to see that life is about well-being, which comprises both achievements and good health. He would, however, need him to question his "cognitive framework" and upgrade it with new beliefs, values, and assumptions that better serve his current situation, rather than the one for which the old "program" was created.

Kegan and Lahey (2009, p. 6) use an "operating system" metaphor to illustrate the idea: "[t]rue development is about transforming the operating system itself, not just increasing your fund of knowledge or you behavioral repertoire". According to Wikipedia, an operating system is "software that manages computer hardware and software resources and provides common services for computer programs …" Building on this computer metaphor, values, beliefs, and assumptions determine how individuals make use of their "hardware" (the body) and "software" (the mind), and provide services for "programs" (the behavioral repertoire). If a person can successfully upgrade his or her "operating system", it could help change that individual's ability to cope with the challenges and opportunities of life.

Consequently, when anxiety surfaces in mid-life and a growing dissatisfaction presents itself, an opportunity to question beliefs, values, and assumptions appears (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). Such qualitative shifts in perspective are sometimes referred to as an increase in "mental complexity" (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) , a change in the "personal paradigm" (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991), or the substitution of "schemata" (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).  In this paper, these kinds of shifts are equated with personal growth.

Thus, personal growth implies a process in which it becomes possible to "look at" the "filter", which one previously was "looking through"; in other words,

that which was previously seen as part of a *subject*, becomes an *object* (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). In Steven's case, this happens when he realizes that *he* (the subject) is not *the achiever* (the object). Such a shift can result in a sensation of tremendous freedom for the individual. When Steven disidentifies himself from the role of an achiever, he can deliberately use this particular role as a tool at work, rather than "being used by it", i.e. when he unconsciously performs the role in order to sustain his dysfunctional identification with being an achiever. Shifts like this happen in a process of "reperceiving" (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

While the logic of second-order changes is quite straightforward, it is not always easy to know how to create them whilst being a prisoner of one's own frame of reference. For Steven, it could be tempting to set up clear goals and set up some action points in order to work less, but that could easily result in yet another achievement. Hence, this would not imply a qualitative change in the beliefs, values, and assumptions that initially got him into the crisis. It then becomes crucial for the individual to make a *third-order change* - that is to develop "the capacity to change one's point of view, and therefore to explore one's situation through a different light" (Smith, 1984, p. 290). In the following section, we will discuss how meditation can help develop such a capacity.

## 3 MEDITATION AS A MEANS TO SUPPORT PERSONAL GROWTH

### 3.1 Meditation as a way to induce third-order changes

In line with the idea of third-order changes discussed in the previous section, Rosch (2007, p. 263) argues that "lives could be improved by changing the consciousness with which experience is perceived rather than the content of the experience". But how can such a shift in consciousness take place? Shapiro et al. (2006) suggest that *mindfulness meditation* supports the process of "reperceiving" since its core practice is to separate "the observing self" from "what is observed".

Mindfulness is often referred to as "moment-to-moment, nonreactive, nonjudgmental awareness" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002, p. 69). In this state, it becomes possible to watch the phenomena of the mind as something *distinct* from the mind itself. Here, the mind is just *witnessing* thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations as they arise and pass away. They are merely seen as temporary manifestations of an inner world characterized by continuous change.

By allowing a broader range of experiences to take place without judging or reacting to them, mindfulness contributes to expanding the practitioners' "working memory", i.e. a "limited capacity workspace within our mental architecture, in which different pieces of information can be temporarily held and processed" (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011b, p. 107). When that working

space is limited, for instance when a person is under the influence of compulsory thoughts or overwhelming emotions, the capacity to hold conflicting pieces of information is limited, making it more likely to execute the old "program". Through mindfulness practice, the working memory expands and makes it easier for the individual to integrate seemingly contradictory experiences into a wider understanding of a situation.

In other words, practicing meditation is a way to induce a third-order change since it enhances the individual's capacity to shift perspective and explore situations from different perspectives. Again, we can see that meditation is connected to personal growth. In the next section, will discuss how meditation is connected to work.

### 3.2    Meditation and work

The contemplative life of meditation and the active life of work can easily be seen as opposites. When taking a closer look at this perceived dichotomy, it's useful to make a distinction between to fundamentally different attitudes to life: the *everyday life attitude* and the *meditative attitude*. While phenomena are taken for granted without regard to the process with which they are experienced with an everyday life attitude, the meditative attitudes allows a separation to be created, which makes it possible to witness the phenomena with awareness as they are perceived by the conscious mind.

Meditation can be practiced in many different ways, but can be broadly divided into two general categories based on the quality of the attention. In *focused attention*, the attention is directed towards a particular object, for example the breath, a visual image, or a mantra; in *open attention* one is allowing and witnessing whatever comes into the field of awareness without doing anything (Kabat-Zinn, 2002; Zajonc, 2009). The latter type of meditation is sometimes referred to as "insight meditation" since "[i]nsights tend to arise naturally under such conditions, but on their own timetable … out of stillness, out of your willingness to sustain an open and spacious attention, with no agenda other than to be awake" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002, p. 69).

Another way to categorize different types meditations is by looking at *formal practice* and *informal practice*. In formal practice, the practitioner withdraws from the active life and adheres to a certain structure when meditating. With experience, however, the meditator usually lets the meditative attitude spread to more and larger aspects of the daily life (McCormick, 2006). Consequently, it becomes easier to practice meditation also in the midst of everyday life, for example while walking, eating, washing dishes, and writing emails (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Nhat Hanh, 1987; Tan, 2012). This paper defines *allowing work to become a meditation* as engaging with active working life whilst maintaining a meditative attitude. This is the opposite of engaging in the active work life with an everyday life attitude (*traditional work*) or withdrawing from the

activities of the world with a meditative attitude (*traditional meditation*). A fourth alternative, withdrawing from the world with an everyday life attitude ease into activities such as resting or going on holiday without any aspiration of changing the level of consciousness (*recreation*).

So far in this paper, meditation has been seen a means to induce third-order changes in order to support personal growth in the face of a mid-life crisis. It has also been suggested that it is possible for work to become a meditation by engaging in work whilst maintaining a meditative attitude – where thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations can be witnessed as they arise and pass away. In the following section, we will return to the spiritual intention, and see how meditation is connected to eliminating of suffering, and by extension to personal growth.

### 3.3   Suffering and personal growth

According to the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness aims to eliminate suffering. But what is suffering? *Suffering* covers a wide range of experiences "from the intense anguish we can suffer from physical or emotional pain, through to the subtlest sense of world weariness or existential unease" (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011a, p. 90). Hence, suffering may be what many of us may experience at work several times a day: the distress we feel before a challenging presentation, the feelings after a difficult decision was communicated, or a vague sense of unease stemming from a lack of purpose in life. For a manager experiencing a mid-life crisis, however, suffering may be the default mode, i.e. the "filter" through which the world is seen.

According to the Buddha, the cause of suffering is the reaction of the mind. When reactions are repeated, accumulating and intensifying over time, they lead to an aversion of feelings that are experienced as unpleasant and cravings for feelings that are seen as pleasant. Thus suffering is being actively created and re-created when a particular set of conditions are repeated over and over again (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011b, p. 104). Hence, suffering is inseparable from a judgmental attitude. Consequently, when witnessing phenomena with a nonjudgmental attitude, the fundamental mechanism of suffering is suspended in that particular moment.

The interplay between craving and aversion constitutes a "mental habit of insatiable longing for what is not, which implies an equal and irremediable dissatisfaction with what is" (Hart, 1987, p. 37). Thus, "[c]raving and aversion reflect a need for experience to be different from how it actually is" (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011b, p. 113). For a person who is not aware of his or her internal world, it may lead to an unwarranted urge to change things in the external world, even though that person may not be able to recognize where from the dissatisfaction with the current situation really came from.

The argument above has an interesting consequence: suffering in itself cannot be judged as either a good or a bad thing. At the same time, saying that misfortune is not a bad thing seems odd. Building on the work of Victor Frankl (1959, 1968), Driver (2007) shed light on this situation by distinguishing between two different kinds of suffering. Suffering, as an *objective phenomenon*, can never have a positive value as such, for instance by having a burnout or loosing a job. In situations in which we have to accept a given reality however, we are free to create meaning from the events that occur to us. A burnout may be a way for the body to signal that it needs attention and loosing a job could be an opportunity to pursue other goals in life than a career and money. Thus, suffering as a *subjective experience* can challenge us to find a new meaning and to ignite and sustain personal growth (c.f. Kegan & Lahey, 2009; O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). In other words, suffering may act as *a pointer* towards areas that are relevant to work on the path to personal growth (Kornfield, 1989).

By practicing mindfulness, the capacity to hold seemingly conflicting experiences simultaneously in the "working memory" increases. These can then be processed in a new light and integrated into a new understanding of a situation that no longer evoke suffering (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011b, p. 111).

To summarize, suffering can act as a pointer towards areas where personal growth is possible when one is facing a challenging situation. Mindfulness, in turn, facilitates personal growth by allowing one to create a more complex understanding of that situation.

While these sections have laid out a theoretical foundation for understanding how work is allowed to become a meditation in order to further personal growth, the following case study will empirically investigate how this takes place in the everyday life of meditating managers. First, however, the research design and the method with which the study was carried out with will be presented.

## 4    METHOD

### 4.1    Background

This research is the outcome of a longitudinal research project in which seven middle-aged business owners and CEO's of small and medium sized companies participated. A clinical approach was used in the study with the dual aim of helping participants integrate insights from spiritual development with their working lives, and developing academic knowledge about that process (Schein, 1987, 2001). The participants were all active in different

industries, including communications, PR, consulting, and the service industry.

About two years before the project started, the seven participants and I an extensive meditation-based program geared towards personal development. When the program finished, a number of business leaders felt that the way they related to life in general and to working life in particular had changed as a result of their new insights from spiritual development. They didn't want to continue working in the same way as before, being more aware of the risks of a burn out or crisis. They did want to continue working in their businesses, however, since it provided them and their families with financial security. Thus they were looking for a way of running their businesses that was more in line with their spiritual insights rather than just maximizing profit and beating competition (c.f. Purser & Milillo, 2014). In this particular paper, I will focus on data collected from five of the seven participants (as will be explained below). **Table 1** summarizes the background data of these five participants.

**Table 1 Participants' backgrounds**

| |
|---|
| **Peter** attended a prestigious business school in his twenties and has been CEO in various start-ups. Currently, he is a twenty percent owner and the CEO of a small and rapidly growing company that imports and sells equipment for swimming pools. After having experienced a burnout, Peter saw meditation and personal development as a means to balance his life. Recently, Peter also suffered from and recovered from cancer. This gave him a profound insight into how important it is for him to balance his strive for achievements with his well-being. |
| **Marie** has worked successfully with PR in the music industry for more than twenty years and has run her own company for the past 10 years. Previously, she worked hard to grow the company and develop the business. After facing a burnout, growth is no longer her only goal; rather, it is to have freedom in life while also working with her passion. In this journey she is challenged by her old patterns of meeting and exceeding customers' expectations. |
| **John** took over his father's ventilation company with 5 employees in the year 2000. Since then, he grew the business slowly and steadily in the small town together with a co-owner. After having conformed to the norm with a wife, two kids, and a beautiful house, a feeling of having lost the spirit of life brought him onto the path of personal development. While looking for a meaningful way to run the business, he finds himself challenged by his own history of finding things difficult to change together with the attitude "this is the way things are done here". |
| **Cecilia** took over her father's cleaning company together with her brother and transformed it into the largest family-owned cleaning company in Sweden. After successfully selling the company to a venture capitalist, she started to look for other business opportunities. A divorce and struggles in the earlier years of life to get herself on the path of personal development, and now, she is trying to find balance between her drive to create a business with her desire to be with her family as well as taking care of herself. |
| **Sara** is a trained nurse who now runs a cleaning and home-care company. When her mother suddenly passed away, she became the CEO and co-owner of the company together with her brother. Sara has always been very emotional, making her a very enthusiastic, intuitive, and inspirational CEO. However, these emotions can easily turn into anger, grief, and deep frustration. After a few intensive years as CEO and mother of two small kids, a deep and sincere longing for something else put her on the meditation path. |

Because of my own background in leadership and organizational development, both in executive education and as a consultant, I saw a unique opportunity to create a clinical and collaborative research setting (Adler, Shani, & Styhre, 2004). In this environment, I would be able to support the managers and whilst gathering data that could shed light on the process in which insights from spiritual development are integrated with working life. This was also a way for me to integrate my own insights from the meditation-based course with my working life.

### 4.2    Research approach

During the research process, each participant worked on a project within their own company aimed at forming an external situation and patterns of action more in line with their spiritual development insights. One manager looked the possibility of selling her company, hire a professional CEO and take on another role, or resign from an operative role but still own the business. Another one explored changing company strategy to pursue what she really wanted to do instead of only maximize profit. A third one worked on changing the culture of the organization so that it would be more in line with her new inner values rather than the old values that had guided her when she started the company.

The main bulk of data was collected during fifteen full day workshops over the course of two years. Workshops were mainly structured as focused discussions in which the participants got feedback on their projects from each other (see Torisson, Mårtensson, & Blank, 2003). This was mixed with thematic discussions about more general topics related to the current challenges in the participants' processes – such as self –compassion or using work as a meditation, contemplative practices, and theoretical input on personal and organizational development. Before every meeting each participant distributed a project report describing the current status of their project and how he or she had integrated the learning from the last session. When participants came prepared to each meeting, ready to give each other feedback.

### 4.3    Data collection

A three hours long thematic discussion on how work becomes meditation forms the basis of this paper together with observations, notes, and documentation from the process as a whole treating how a meditative attitude can be applied to work. The purpose of this thematic discussion was to give participants an opportunity to reflect on if – and if so – how they employ a meditative attitude in their work to further their personal growth.

During the feedback sessions and thematic discussions, I took notes that were detailed enough to capture longer quotes. Because of the sensitive nature and

the length of the discussions, as well as resource constrains, the meetings were not tape-recorded or video filmed. In addition to the notes, photos of whiteboards summing up main learning points, surveys, reflection papers, and status reports submitted to each meeting were gathered as data material. In total, the documentation comprises nearly 500 pages. The participants were aware of and agreed to having the data collected throughout the process be used for research purposes. The quotes in this paper have all been read and approved by the participants.

### 4.4    Research design, coding, and analysis

Since little is known about how managers allow work to become a meditation to further personal growth, a qualitative and explorative methodology was used. In order to frame the research effort, a case study approach (Yin, 2009) was selected. Each case consists of a participant's account; and in line with the case study approach, multiple data sources were used.

The whole data material was first coded using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), then, sections with codes connected to how the participants engaged in their daily work with a meditative attitude were singled out. Next, these segments where coded into three different categories: pre-conditions, practices, and results. The remaining coding process focused on parts of the material coded as practices. Practices used with the aim of growing as a person were coded as having been carried out with a spiritual intention. Instances where, for example, a participant employed the meditative attitude in order to be more present in a meeting with a customer and to deliver better service, were coded as – primarily or partially – to being connected to an instrumental intention. Finally, practices where, for example, participants took time off from work to practice formal meditation or walking in nature, were coded as "traditional meditation", as opposed to the focused phenomena of "allowing work to become a meditation".

The segments coded as the practice of allowing work to become a meditation for personal growth, i.e. with a spiritual attitude, where analyzed from a temporal perspective. Three different main focuses were identified in the process, and the process unfolded as the participants' focuses shifted.

In the end, rich and consistent data was found in five of the seven cases. One of the participants decided not to participate in the second year. Another participant focused on achieving balance between work and life during in the discussions, and thus, few instances were coded as practice but rather as creating pre-conditions for the process. This proved to be an important theme for other participants as well, but since it wasn't the focus of this particular research work, it was excluded from the main analysis.

Each case was unique, providing data from different personal perspectives with varying emphasis on the three focuses. Some participants, for instance, talked more about how reactions got triggered by different situations at work while others emphasized what they witnessed was happening after they have gotten triggered. Also, different qualities were emphasized in each of the five focuses. For example, some individuals were more engaged in witnessing feelings or physical sensations while others emphasized witnessing cognitive patterns and automated behaviors. The purpose of this research effort is not to generalize from the cases, but rather to bring forth rich data. By synthesizing the data, the process describing how managers allow work to become a meditation to further personal growth emerged.

## 5    FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, findings from the case study will be reported and discussed. The analysis suggests that allowing work to become meditation to further personal growth can be seen as a process with three separate focal points. The process unfolds as the individual's attention shifts from one focal point to another. The three focal points build on each other, and each one is a prerequisite for the other. However, the focal points don't have to be reached sequentially since it is possible for the individual to move "back and forth" between them as well as exit the process at any point in time. These focal points can be seen as different aspects of the same process, and I will therefore use the words "focus" and "aspect" interchangeably, rather than using the words "stages" or "steps", which suggests a greater necessity in the way a sequential process unfolds (c.f. Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

Below, I will first give an overview of the whole process. Then, in the subsequent sections, I will describe in detail how the participants engaged in the process and illustrate it with quotes. The three focal points are: attending to suffering, witnessing what is, and responding with authenticity.

*Attending to suffering.* This process starts when a person notices that he or she is suffering as a result of the mind's reaction to a real or imagined event. This may take the form of compulsory thoughts, overwhelming feelings or painful physical sensations that "hijack" the individual's consciousness. When this happens, the person can focus his or her awareness in order to create an "inner space" from where these reactions can be witnessed. Thus, the individual's focus shifts from being directed outwardly to being centered on the inside.

*Witnessing what is*. The next aspect consists in observing whatever thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations are present without judging or reacting to them. By doing this, the person can observe how these start transforming into other thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations without making any effort.

By allowing these transformations take place, a broader set of experiences can be integrated into a holistic understanding of the situations, based on the individual's concrete experience. The individual's focus remains on the inside during the witnessing phase.

*Responding with authenticity*. Finally, the individual draws upon this holistic understanding when deciding how to respond to the situation at hand. Thus, the individual's focus shifts from being directed inwards to being centered on the outside with a greater awareness of the inside. Sometimes, a new response can lead to new "situations", where suffering is once again actualized, and, subsequently, the process may continue.

The process is illustrated in figure 1 below. The pie chart-like figure emphasizes that each section represents an aspect of the process as a whole, and the arrows show how the focus usually changes as the process unfolds.
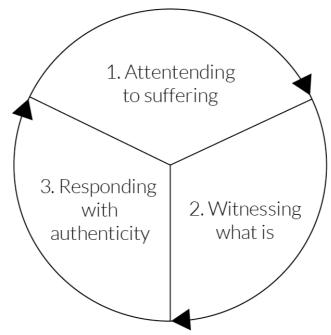


**Figure 1 A process for allowing work to become meditation in order to further personal growth**

### 5.1   Attending to suffering

This process starts when an individual recognizes that he or she is experiencing suffering. Participants describe moments of being overwhelmed by feelings, intense physical sensations, compulsory thoughts, or automated behavior – all of which "hijack" their consciousness whilst working. Sara, who leads an intense emotional life, describes it as: "*I go so into things that I drown. In the end, I cannot separate myself from that which is eating me. I am completely hijacked by my feelings and thoughts*". At this particular moment, there is no separation between Sara (subject) and her feelings (object); she looks at the world through her feelings as a special kind of filter.

The participants say that situations like these can occur when they are in challenging discussions with employees or partners, when they need to make uncomfortable decisions, have pressing board meetings, meetings with demanding customers, travel extensively, or other similar straining occasions. In other words, an external event – real or imagined – may trigger something in a person, such as a profound sense of insecurity or some deeply rooted fear. Peter, who has a strong drive to achieve in life explains, "*In these situations, my fear of failure is triggered and my pattern of not being good enough without my achievement is activated*". Marie, who has a history of satisfying customers' expectations at the expense of her own needs, describes how it happens to her, "*When I get triggered, I feel, my God, it is because I am insecure …*".

Suffering may also be evoked by a reluctance to "see reality as it is", as Buddhist philosophy puts it. John, who has gone from having an easygoing attitude at work to a more structured one, says "*lately, what has triggered me is my partner's mood swings and his inability to take on new routines - he has pushed decisions without discussing them first*". To summarize, suffering takes place when the participants experience that they need to perform according to others' expectations, or when the world doesn't confirm their own expectations.

For the process to take place, however, it is crucial to step out of this stream of reactions in order to consciously "look" at them. This is very different from taking immediate action to avoid unpleasant feelings or suppressing them in order to continue with the current task, as if nothing had happened.

"*I stop to feel what is going on inside me*", says Sara. Similarly, Peter says, "*I give myself time and space to meet what is going on inside and outside of me. I can take this time when I have an emotional or physiological reaction*".

To prepare this inner space, participants practice different kinds of focused awareness, for instance by concentrating on their breath or the sensations in their bodies. By doing so, they can break out of a situation in which they were previously entangled - allowing a gap to be created between breathing and feeling on the one hand, and the reactions on the other. Peter explains, "*Then, I can be conscious about the outer world. Otherwise, I am so directed outwardly that I am not conscious of my inside*". Marie concludes that when she breathes deeply, she cannot stress and that the "inner space" she creates gives her an opportunity to "*see things as they are*". Here, "to see things as they are" does not mean seeing them in an "objective" way, but to see them without the "filter" of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations that were previously hijacking them (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Attending to suffering is not always easy. Everyday working life tends to absorb participants' minds leaving little "inner space" for the shift in

perspective necessary to attend to suffering. Peter illustrates the challenge by saying, "*When I go into the unconscious state, I just fill up my time with more work*". The participants' formal meditation training has provided them with a foundation which supports them. After doing a few years of formal meditation practice, Cecilia says, "*I get into meditation very quickly because my 'meditation muscle' is so well trained*". With time, the participants have developed an increased sensitivity that helps them detect the pointers needed for personal growth at work. "*… previously, I had to go away in order to find stillness … Now, I can see that 'this triggers me' and I can find the feeling. Thanks to this increased sensitivity, I can see work as a meditation*", Marie explicates.

Building on the computer metaphor discussed in the introductory sections, this is like becoming conscious about – and taking seriously – the *"message boxes"* that appear on a computer screen saying, "an error has occurred". Rather than seeing these "message boxes" as disturbances and clicking "Cancel" in order to continue with the task at hand, these alerts can be understood as boxes containing important messages, pointing to areas where personal growth is possible. Along the same lines of the computer metaphor, creating an "inner space" is to open a "debugger". A debugger is a program that makes it possible to follow and examine the code in real-time as it is executed. This way, the individual can find out what actually caused the "messages boxes" to appear.

## 5.2    Witnessing what is

In this aspect of the process, the participants focus on observing the thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations triggered by the reaction of the mind. They do this with open awareness, i.e. from moment-to-moment, and without judging or reacting to whatever comes up. The participants describe how they for instance observe compulsory thoughts about failure and rejection, feelings of anger and guilt, as well as tingling sensations in their legs and pressure in their chest. The participants are trying to welcome whatever comes up. *"I take the opportunity to just sit with it and give myself time to observe the feelings. I have started to welcome it"*, Peter states.

With time and practice, the participants' sensitivity developed and a larger portion of their thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations have become available to them. While the increased sensitivity makes it easier for the participants to observe what is going on on the inside, it also poses challenges. In a moment of despair Sara said, "*I feel so much all the time. I can get tired of it and sometimes I wish that I didn't feel with such intensity. At the same time, I see it as a strength, something good, that can help me learn to balance things*". The participants often come back to the importance of being kind to oneself. Marie, who has high demands of herself and easily judges herself when she is experiencing intense reactions, is trying to mitigate these judgments. "*I calm*

*down, I don't listen to the impulses. I try to be a more gentle towards myself. Everyone can feel like this*", she then says to herself. The participants have also developed a sense of curiosity, which serves as a kind of anti-dote and propel them onto the journey of personal growth. John explains, "*Many times, I think this is difficult, but it is also exciting … I enjoy it and it gives me energy too*".

Another challenge – especially for achievers – is that the process may easily turn into something that resembles a performance. Peter says, "*I have pushed myself because I wanted to. I have been enormously active … Staying busy all the time. I have practiced being present and meeting myself in these moments of pressure and stress. It has been a kind of challenge*".

When participants start to meet and accept thoughts, feelings, and sensations like they are, without trying to avoid them or cling to them, they may start to shift to other experiences without any effort. "*I have previously not succeeded in meeting these feelings, but I have now started to meet them and then, they transform*", Peter says. Here, *transformation* refers to a shift in quality, rather than an increase or decrease of the same quality. For example, a sensation of fear may shift into a feeling of clarity or compassion; a physical sensation of pressure over the chest may transform into stillness; and a compulsory thought that "I must finish the report before I go home", may turn into the more relaxed thought of "I could finish the report before I go home", suggesting that other alternatives are possible.

Cecilia has for a long time identified with being somebody who works hard and achieves things. After selling her company, she found herself in a position where she didn't need to work so hard and experienced feelings of guilt. "*There is something that I don't feel satisfied with [the new situation]. I was burdened by the feeling of not being good enough, not delivering, not pulling myself together. However, when I sit down and meditate, and really go into the feeling, I can feel the guilt disappearing*", she explains.

After thus transformation took place, Cecilia could feel calm even though she wasn't working hard. Similarly, John was able to feel a sense of acceptance towards his co-workers' opinions and priorities. And Marie experienced what it felt like to follow her passion without hearing the critical voice inside her head.

By allowing these transformations to take place, a *holistic understanding* is presented based on the individual's own, concrete and embodied experience. I use the word holistic for two reasons. First, the understanding is not only based on thoughts, but also on feelings and physical sensations. Secondly, seemingly contradictory experiences may take place simultaneously, such as the joy and anxiety that one might experience whilst preparing a demanding presentation. Such a holistic understanding may challenge previous assumptions characterized by either-or-thinking and open up to letting go of

rigid patterns. This is rooted in an embodied acceptance of what is, rather than a comparison between the pros and cons of different alternatives. It synthesizes rather than analyses.

When John talks to his co-workers and finds out that they have a completely different opinion of a certain situation, he tries to stay with the feeling of frustration, letting it transform. As a result, a kind of non-dualistic, experience-based acceptance emerges where there is room for both perspectives. When guilt is transformed into stillness, Cecilia experiences that it is okay to work less, going beyond her intellectual understanding of it.

During the witnessing what is part, participants have managed to observe their reactions and allowed them to transform into something else, which brought about a new holistic understanding themselves and the situation as a whole. Returning to the computer metaphor, this aspect is about observing the "code of the program" as it is executed in real-time. It is about allowing new pieces of code – or "patches" – to simultaneously be written and executed in real-time. When these "patches" are integrated with the "operating system", an emergent upgrade takes place.

### 5.3    Responding with authenticity

After witnessing thoughts, feelings, and sensations, allowing them to transform, and getting a new holistic understanding, an individual is in a different position qualitatively to respond with authenticity to the situation than at the outset of the process. Here, responding with authenticity refers to drawing upon this holistic understanding and then deliberately choosing how to responding to a situation. Sara says, "*I choose to express what I am wishing for or what I need, but from a calm, sober-minded and good space*". By doing this she takes responsibility for what she finds important for the business as well as her need to be respectful and caring towards her employees. In other words, her "working memory" now contains thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations that – when "hijacked" – appeared contradictory and thus couldn't be contained at the same time (c.f. Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011a). This is a way of letting go of a kind of "either-or-thinking" that is characteristic of situations in which suffering is predominant.

Over the course of this longitudinal study, a clear shift gradually took place in the way the participants' minds reacted to different situations as they were able to better integrate experiences into a holistic understanding. Sara, for example, explains how her relationship with her brother and co-owner changed dramatically, "*I have honest and calm discussions with my brother after having worked out what was triggering me before. Now our conversations are much nicer and without any hurt feelings*". This shift significantly influences the way they run the company.

Many times, participants tapped into this holistic understanding to making business decisions, trying to get a sense what felt "true" to them. "*We have customers who are somewhat difficult. When I feel that something resonates with my inner values, I can fight for it even though it is tough and challenging. Other times, I feel 'OK, this is tough' and I don't go there. Still other times, I feel 'Yes, this is really tough' and I do go there*", John explains. Thus, responding with authenticity to a situation may also be about making oneself available for it, working through one's resistances and taking the opportunity to grow as a person – rather than finding "smart solutions" to avoid meeting one's own resistances. Sara says, "*I do tasks that I previously felt resistance to. The 'old me' wouldn't have written up time reports for the employees. The 'new me' will work through that resistance and do it. It makes me feel good because I end up knowing more about my company. I know that six people have worked far too much and that I can coach them to better manage the situation.*"

Data from the case clearly show that there are numerous ways of responding with authenticity. For a person with a pattern of overachieving, an authentic response may be to balance the effort with the actual situation. While preparing for a Mindfulness Day for a department at the town's hospital, Cecilia explains, "*I prepared myself a lot, read books, planned the day and thought about exercises when I was on holidays. Then I realized that I didn't need to prepare anything at all. I don't know what will happen when I meet these ten people. And what they want from me is a glimpse of what mindfulness is, not a thorough, fact-based lecture*".

Sometimes, this means not responding at all. Sara explains how she reacts when the middle managers approach her with a problem, "*I can hear it, I can see it, see that it is serious … then I leave it. After a couple of days [the middle managers] have fixed it themselves. It is good that I don't go into it with all my energy*". Over time, this allows her to save her energy, which can then be used for strategic purposes rather than fire fighting.

Finally, responding with authenticity may also include executing the old "program", but then using deliberately as a tool for a certain purpose. Cecilia says, "*Going at a high speed, there is also a lot of joy. I get many things done and feel a wonderful sense of satisfaction. Most of the time, the result is good; sometimes it goes a little bit too fast, but it doesn't really matter.*" Rather than judging herself for applying the old "program", Cecilia can see both the benefits and disadvantages of doing so. Subsequently, the nonjudgmental attitude makes the grasp on the old "program" weaker.

Nevertheless, responding with authenticity can be challenging. Firstly, the participants need to choose behaviors rooted in values previously given less attention. This is uncharted territory and brings about feelings of insecurity. When participants took responsibility for what they valued, they were

initially afraid of disappointing other people or loosing business opportunities. Over time, however, they realized that the people around them accepted their new behavior and in fact appreciated it. John says, *"When I stand up for my values and I am clear on the decisions I make, I feel that others are more relaxed even when we have a high work load"*.

Secondly, since automated responses are deeply rooted, it can be a long process to let go of old patterns. When Marie expressed her anxiety to the rest of the group at one of the meetings, Cecilia thought about what was happening and told the group, *"I think that the 'demons' are just an old habit, I don't think they are really there. I have the feeling that she is in such a flow, but she is not used to it"*. In Cecilia's perspective, it seemed like Marie had no real reason to worry given how well she was actually doing. Rather, it was her old operating system that still had such a tight grip on the way she experiences the world and herself, for instance by judging and diminishing her performance.

The authentic response represents a key part of the process since it is about externalizing new ways of being in the world, based on a holistic understanding rooted in a concrete and embodied experience. Consequently the authentic response is a gateway between the inner world and the external world.

Returning to our computer metaphor, this aspect is about letting go of the compulsory urge to execute the old "program" by employing the functions of the upgraded "operating system". As a result an individual can more freely choose what "program" to use. With time and practice, the new features of the "operating system", together with the broader repertoire of "programs", form the basis for a new way of operating in the world.

## 6    DISCUSSION

This paper set out to contribute to a deeper understanding of how personal growth can be furthered in mid-life by allowing work to become meditation. Accordingly, it also aims to broaden the understanding of how contemplative practices guided by a spiritual intention can be integrated with work. In the following sections, concluding remarks will be made, limitations highlighted, and avenues for further research suggested. Finally, implications for managerial practice will be discussed.

### 6.1    Concluding remarks

Literature suggests that traditional meditation practice increases a person's ability to change perspective, which is considered fundamental for personal growth to take place. Thus, by actively engaging in work with a meditative attitude, work may actually become a principal route to personal growth for middle-aged managers.

The process identified in this paper unfolds as the individual's focus shifts from attending to suffering, to witnessing what is, and finally to responding with authenticity. While traditional meditation practice provides managers with a necessary foundation for personal growth, it is not sufficient. A manager who wants to integrate the contemplative life with the active life needs to integrate the insights brought about by meditation practice into his or her daily life.

Since work accounts for the major part of a middle-aged manager's life, work may either become an obstacle to personal growth or an abundant enabler of it. This paper has identified one way of making use of the numerous situations provided by work to further personal growth.

The spiritual intention of personal growth enables a motivated person to stick to a meditative attitude - which is much stronger than, for example, wanting to reduce stress or becoming more productive at work. A powerful motivation is needed since contemplative practices are difficult to pick up.

Two examples of pitfalls on the journey are "being hard on oneself" and "making the process into yet another achievement". Both of these reflect the same judgmental attitude which one tries to remove in the meditative attitude. A third pitfall is to "become absorbed by work", which only leads to more work and, consequently, less time spent on the meditative attitude. Sliding away from "work as meditation" to "traditional work" increases the risks in the long run to shrink the "internal space" necessary for the process to take place.

In order to have enough "internal space", it is very importance to continuously cultivate the meditative attitude in ways that are feasible in one's life. This is the opposite of stubbornly sticking to a formal practice doomed to fail after a short period of time. This study clearly indicates that it is important to find one's own way. Traditional meditation can be complemented with other activities contributing to one's general well-being both at work and at home. This includes, for instance, taking pauses at work when tired, pursuing projects that give energy, making sure that one's office space provides a healthy environment, taking long lunches, going on regular holidays, spending time with friends and family, and – last but not least – having fun.

Last, but not least, it seems that the research setting and the workshops also has been important for allowing work to become a meditation. While the participants previous "programming" to a large extent was guided by external expectations, their challenge was to start listening to new values emerging from the inside. The collaborative setting provided a setting in which these sprouts of new values could be cultivated without judgments in a zone free from the "old voices". In this way, the research setting as such

provided a kind of "holding environment" for the managers (c.f. Winicott, 1965).

## 6.2    Limitations and suggestions for further research

The participants in this study are CEO's and owners of small and medium sized companies. As such, they have considerable freedom to work on their personal growth as well as to make changes in their organizations. This is a rather unique situation as compared to, for example, that of CEO's and middle managers at large organizations. Since the identified process is generalized, however, it is likely that the aspects of attending to suffering, witnessing, and responding with authenticity may be practiced by any manager, employee, or person. The nature of the events that triggered suffering, the reactions witnessed and transformed, as well as the authentic responses may, however, be very different.

The findings in this study build on a vast range of observations. The purpose of the analysis was, however, not to generalize these observations into other empirical settings, but rather to synthesize them into a general process, and to illustrate this process with the observations made (c.f. Lee & Baskerville, 2003; Whitehead, 1929/1969). As a result, the observed instances are not exhaustive, and one suggestion for future research could be to continue to identify and systematize such observations, in other words of how the different aspects of the generalized process manifests in different empirical settings. This could create opportunities for quantitative research aimed at identifying correlations between characteristics of the process and their varying outcomes.

During the study, it became clear that the process manifests itself in different ways for different people. Some participants, for example, were naturally in touch with – and expressed – their emotions. This was more difficult for others, who developed a bias towards cognitive aspects instead. Together, the current sample has provided a fairly rich basis for analysis. Since this study was carried out from a clinical perspective, the sample was guided by the potential participants' motivation in taking part in the research effort. In the future, it would be interesting to use interview-based studies as a more strategic sample, highlighting the differences between individuals.

## 6.3    Implications for managerial practice

This paper has discussed how work can be allowed to become a meditation to further personal growth for managers. This raises the question of what the consequences of such a process are for the business? The study suggests that allowing work to become a meditation has implications for managerial practice on several levels.

By having a more meditative attitude towards work, it becomes possible to make more sustainable decisions. There are several reasons for this. First, these decisions are grounded in more and larger perspectives, and combine "head knowledge", "heart knowledge", and "body knowledge". Second, the knowledge is rooted in the manager's own direct experience, rather than being based on *only* logical arguments or so called best practices derived from "successful" organizations. One consequence of the process in which these decisions are made is building relationships with stakeholders – these are characterized by greater openness and authenticity, and thus offer a greater capacity to handle difficult situations in a more constructive and sustainable way.

Over time, this can contribute to substantial changes in the way business is carried out. Observations from the cases include: More time spent on strategic work, changes in the business model leading to more focused project portfolios, a larger share of activities contributing to the greater good, renewed and healthier relations among co-owners, less "smart solutions" employed in order to avoid issues that one feels resistance towards, starting projects in order to address root causes of organizational problems, and a reluctance to start new projects that are not firmly rooted in the managers' passion and/or the company's concrete needs. Together and viewed from a long-term perspective, these changes suggest a potentially more viable way of doing business.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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