

**ANCIENT WISDOM, SOCIAL SCIENCE,  
AND THE VASTNESS OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT—  
An Interview With Margaret Wheatley\***  
Kathryn Goldman Schuyler

*Margaret Wheatley wrote in 2005, "I became Buddhist so that I could stay in this world and allow my heart to keep breaking. I work in many different places where people are suffering. These people live in third world countries, confronting a future that is no future. Or they live in modern organizations, confronting the loss of self and meaning. [And—after describing the political issues and challenges....] I became Buddhist so I could see this insanity and not go insane.*

*How do I bear witness to the unbearable?*

*Why are people so deliberately cruel?*

*How do I not bring more rage into the world?*

*This is why I became Buddhist. To be free from these and many other cries."*<sup>1</sup>

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** What led to your interest and connection with Tibetan Buddhism?

**Margaret Wheatley:** I have a lovely position in the world. I get to meet thousands of people a year, and many of them are in deep distress. My capacity to be available to them and to offer them something is what causes me to strengthen my practice. It used to be they were in deep distress because they were poor; now they're in deep distress if they work in any kind of large organization.

I've been an increasingly devoted Tibetan Buddhist practitioner since 1997. I have been good friends with Pema Chödrön since 1998, and there is a very deep heart connection between us. In July 2007 I asked her to formally become my teacher, and she has. In one of our conversations, I was telling Ani Pema how depressed I was over the state of the world, and she said "Well, Meg, we're just in kindergarten this lifetime; we're in the early phases of preparing ourselves to be Shambhala warriors or bodhisattvas, for what's coming," and that really helped me [laughs]. Instead of trying to resolve the present day experience in any way, I realized that this is just training, so "stop whining." It was a very helpful repositioning.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** What is it specifically in Tibetan Buddhism that you see as helpful or important, especially since you also know Zen?

**Margaret Wheatley:** It's my lineage; I can't say it any other way. One of the things that Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche said to his students a few years ago that has really impacted me is that *we* are now the lineage-holders, not only our teachers. We—Western students—are the ones who will continue the lineage. Western Buddhism now is the main place for the continuation of the Tibetan tradition, which I find quite inspiring personally, so I really want to act responsibly...

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** That's why you're doing intensive study and taking long retreats?

**Margaret Wheatley:** ... well in part. It felt like an impossible task (preparing for a 100 day retreat), given my schedule and work life, but I've discovered that it's possible, and extremely beneficial to me personally for the work I want to be doing.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** What is it about Tibetan Buddhism that is important for the evolution of how we think about leadership and how people lead?

**Margaret Wheatley:** For many, many years now, I have been introducing a new way of organizing, based on living systems and how life organizes, and it's a mode of organizing that relies upon people's

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creativity and their internal motivation and their generosity of spirit.<sup>2</sup> All of those qualities disappear when we're in a command and control leadership structure.

Over the years I've realized that the keystone is whether leaders actually believe in other people's basic human goodness: whether they believe that other people have creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, whether they believe that other people beyond themselves are capable of being dedicated and creative. It really came down to "what does this leader, or what does this leadership theory posit about human nature generally?" That has become more and more clear to me as I've matured in this field of work.

Right now I'm working a lot on how to engage community and how to bring groups together with minimal facilitation, and I keep bumping up against people's basic distrust of other people. Nobody believes that if you put a group of people in a circle with a good question that they'll actually be able to have a meaningful conversation without much facilitation. We're really at the end of a very destructive leadership paradigm, but it's stronger than ever because it's at the end, more vicious and mean-spirited than ever. It's all about fear of the other and not being willing to think that the person I'm trying to motivate is another human being.

I often try to startle people into paying attention by stating that we've forgotten that we're human beings. The rediscovery of human nature and the human spirit—what people are capable of—is where I find an even deeper grounding for that position in Buddhism, and especially Tibetan Buddhism, and especially Shambhala Buddhism. I think of the famous phrase by Thich Nhat Hanh that "you are perfect just as you are, and you could use a little work." That's the essence of it: how do we reclaim, rediscover, re-see the people who are working with us or for us?

I'll tell you a corporate story that's at the far end of corporate blindness. A woman told me she left working for a large pharmaceutical company (she was a mid-level manager), and she left when she realized that she was now described as an "income generating unit." And that, for me, in the extreme, is very telling of what's gone on. Leaders have a great need *not* to notice that people have emotions, that people have spirits, because that gets too complex; and then when they discard that, then they also throw out the fact that people can be internally motivated and generous, not avaricious. One of the things that I loved watching, especially in 2008-2009 when people were trying to hold onto their jobs and companies were trying to survive with the economic crisis, is there were constant reports of food banks—local food banks, neighbor-to-neighbor programs springing up, and a lot of coverage of a very common behavior in organizations, which is that people got together and sacrificed personally so their colleagues could keep their jobs. They'd go on a four-day workweek so everyone could keep their job, or higher level managers would give up part of their pay so that lower level people could maintain their jobs. Those stories were common for a while, and that's what we don't see when we put on this leadership lens, which sees people as motivated by greed, competition, and fear. Unfortunately, this seems to be the dominant leadership choice these days.

Buddhism in general reorients leaders to rediscover their basic nature—and to do that, we're really swimming upstream. The current view of human nature that's contained in Western mind is so negative. It's based on competition, survival of the fittest, social Darwinism, Calvinistic doctrines, angry gods, and a few righteous people. Buddhism re-grounds us in the understanding that human beings and our natures are fundamentally workable and generous, that we can become awake and aware, that we really want to be in relationship with other people and offer things to other people. I had to leave Western culture to discover this, by working in the third world, and then found an even deeper grounding for it in Buddhist theology.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** What can you say about either the concepts or the symbols or the stories about them, which might help people see what Tibetan Buddhism adds that's different? What's added by bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the mix?

**Margaret Wheatley:** Well nothing's added by naming it as Tibetan Buddhism, but everything is added by trusting that people are capable of more than their hatred, are capable of more than their prejudice, can get past their sense of fear and really discover that the stranger is like them. Tibetan Buddhism is my vehicle, but I've worked quite a lot with Catholic nuns, who I think are the strongest women leaders on the planet, and they are deeply grounded in their Christian compassion. I take strength

from certain practices, rituals, and forms of study, but that's only to give me confidence when I'm leading people or encouraging people to have a new encounter with the human spirit and with what people are capable of. I find that same clarity and confidence in people who have deep faith, like the Catholic sisters.

In addition, the recent history of Tibet and His Holiness the Dalai Lama modeling compassion in the face of terror and repression by the Chinese is very, very moving. They're embodying for the world what compassion really looks like in the face of people who want to destroy you. So for me that does give it a unique role. This isn't just talk. America would be really wonderful if Christians started to behave like Christians. Here we have Tibetans really practicing, embodying compassion towards the aggressor, and that for me is very evident.

I've done a lot of work at the level of paradigms, so I speak rather naturally about what happens when world views collide. Whenever people are in their world view and look at behavior from a very different world view, they just select aspects of it that will make sense within their current way of thinking and dismiss all the information that would require them to truly change their minds. So I look at the criticism of the Dalai Lama and the middle way path that he's chosen as people holding on to their old views; they believe that compassion is a nice thing when it works, but you have to get aggressive when it doesn't. That's the old world view. Look at all the criticisms of His Holiness and his approach to the Chinese. The criticism illuminates traditional ways of thinking about power politics and what you have to do. He's out there just walking the talk of what true compassion is like. Other people who have done this extraordinarily well are Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I think that we barely understand what such people are doing because they are truly sourced by different ground.

Generally people revert to "See, I told you it wouldn't work." "You have to fight force with force," which is still the dominant world-view. I'll stop talking about His Holiness for a moment and say this is also what I encounter in the realm of leadership. Leaders don't want to know, in many cases, that there is an alternative to command and control. They choose power over effectiveness, over and over again.

For me personally, the grounding in Buddhism gives me roots. It gives me a lineage, so that when I come up against this modern day western mindset that "control is the only way to make things happen," I have a different level of confidence. There's so much waste going on. There's so much dishonor and disrespect in our current leadership ways that it's horrifying, as well as sorrowing, to see how many people are beaten down and shrink and lose all sense of their own capacity. The notion of basic human goodness is so fundamentally important within the Shambhala tradition, and is something that I now know to be true, and therefore I work on its behalf quite differently in the leadership arena. When we know ourselves as full human beings, this leads to very different behaviors on the part of leaders and on the part of people, and so part of my grounding in leadership development has come from this ancient lineage.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** Can you speak a bit about the notion of lineage and how it contributes to our learning and understanding?

**Margaret Wheatley:** Part of Western culture at this time is that we think things are always getting better and better, that society is a state of constant progress. From this perspective, you naturally value the youth more than the elders. The elders are seen as being "out of date": Things have changed, and they don't know enough (as seen in everyone's joke about their grandchildren teaching them how to use computer or the remote control). In a society that has no sense of tradition and is always looking to the future and to future inventions, the whole idea of lineage is lost because people of the past are no longer relevant. For me and for many cultures, we find ground in ancestors—we come from people and traditions that give us strength. In my own work within the Berkana Institute, we've noticed that people who go back to their traditional ways to bring their ancestral knowledge forward have a very different strength than those who try to "get modern."<sup>3</sup> For me the root system of lineage is an undeniable source of strength.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** What can you say for social scientists, who know very little or only superficial things about Tibetan Buddhism and lineage?

**Margaret Wheatley:** For me personally, there's a sense of being held accountable for something beyond my own self. As a social scientist I've done research, written books, promulgated theories, but every time I've spoken about a new idea, people have said "Well, if you can just give me some case examples - if you just show me some organizations that are doing this successfully, then I will change my ways." When you are in work that is located at the level of paradigm or world view, you realize that when people are questioning you for evidence they don't really want the evidence—they're not going to use the evidence to change their minds. The real work is not to amass evidence as the means of changing people's minds. It's "how do I change this person's world-view?" I still use Thomas Kuhn's seminal work on scientific revolutions quite a lot.<sup>4</sup> He said that when scientists are confronted with data that disconfirms their world view or challenges it, they either select only the few points that make sense within the old world view or they manipulate the data so that it confirms their old world view, or in some cases, they are physically staring at the data, and they don't see it. Now we're in the era of "evidence-based" decision-making, but my experience has been that people interpret "evidence" in very different ways. It can be just garbage, when we look at the evidence and only take what we want from it. It doesn't change our minds unless we're really willing to move into that process of mind-changing. For me, that's the journey: changing people's minds. Where do I take the strength for that? It's not just from my current research, not from current evidence, it's realizing that I'm standing on very strong shoulders that stretch back eons—of people and communities that have embodied this and demonstrated this for a great many centuries. It's our own culture's desire to look for information only from the five senses that has put us in such a tiny narrow prison of understanding.

For me *lineage*, regardless of what the lineage is, but *lineage* means that we're not the first to come up with this idea, and even if our present way of understanding reality doesn't want to see it, there are generations and millenia of people who have taught us this. Within Tibetan Buddhism, I have problems with some of the spiritual teachers who are out there who have obviously had great awakenings personally, but don't have lineage, and so it becomes more of an ego expression. It's impossible not to get caught by your ego, if you think you've just had an incredible transformative spiritual awakening, and you attempt to teach it to people. When there's no ground whatsoever except your own personal experience, of course your ego's going to come in.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** Let's go into this little further. In university accreditation reviews, they're training educators to look for what they refer to as "a culture of evidence" and if we think of "No Child Left Behind" I see that as part of this paradigm. The people who promulgate it seem to really believe they are creating an evidence-based way of helping people move forward. How does this view of evidence differ from what you're speaking of, and how does that link with the contribution of Tibetan Buddhism?

**Margaret Wheatley:** When we talk about evidence-based decision-making, a key question is "What is the evidence we're using? What are the measures?" As a society, we are caught up in this numeric culture where we want very simple measures to describe very complex experiences. The fundamental flaw is the nature of the evidence we're using to make decisions. It would be so different if you asked the teacher how they would know if a child is learning—what they would look for, what changes would indicate that the child is getting curious, that the child is motivated, that the child likes coming to school—versus the current approach which is to tell teachers "here are the measures... this is what they need to accomplish in reading, this is what they need to accomplish in math, we won't even talk about creativity or the arts, and this is what you have to teach to." We're just not tracking the right evidence. I would want any child to be growing in curiosity, to develop a love of learning, to become more aware of the world around them. Instead, we have continued to turn schools into testing centers, where even some five year olds no longer want to go to school because of the pressures they encounter there. So the problem is the nature of the evidence we're using.

When we say "evidence-based" we don't notice that we are screening or filtering or denying; we're screening out what could be really useful evidence, and instead we're narrowing our measures to what's simplest to measure, so we're losing touch with reality by focusing only on smaller units of information. One of the principles from science that I think is helpful is that any time you settle on one piece of

information you're blinded to the rest of what's going on; I recall one scientist saying: "Every act of measurement loses more information than it gains." If we look at our five senses, and we think that's the only way we can know reality (and it doesn't even include mind and meditation, awareness and intuition and consciousness,) what kind of reality are we tuning in to? What I learned writing *Leadership and the New Science* is that the real science has shifted and is much more inclusive of things we can't explain through our traditional five senses.

Now I have to say a little bit about neuroscience at this point, because what I see happening with neuroscience is that it's being used in a very traditional scientific way to validate things that science has excluded in the past, but the trap here is that it's actually reifying traditional science. In other words, if you can find the location in the brain—if you can demonstrate its physical reality then it "proves" that it exists. So what about all those things that we can't prove exist through our technology? I'm watching this now with some curiosity and a fair amount of caution because ...

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** They are using a narrower, more traditional paradigm for science...

**Margaret Wheatley:** That's right. So it's not questioning the foundations of science as we currently construct it; it's just trying to use it to prove the material existence for things we know to be true in our experience. We're unintentionally continuing to make science the arbiter of our experience, maintaining its hegemony, even deification in modern culture.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** Varela was not intending that.... The part that's not getting heard from *Mind & Life* is the emphasis on the first person research.<sup>5</sup>

**Margaret Wheatley:** That's right. Because you can't do first person research within the existing scientific paradigm. It's not seen as evidence, but as being anecdotal.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** If we just step back from this conversation for a moment and pause and just sit and then see what else should we bring in at this point ....

**Margaret Wheatley:** I want to say one thing to close off a lot of what I've said. Social scientists and leaders may not know about what I've been calling "basic human goodness" or people's capacities, but *people* know. I want social scientists to recognize that they're part of the problem; and that when people relate to someone like the Dalai Lama, who radiates joy and self-effacement and compassion, that people see themselves also, that all people are capable of those capacities. I find in my own work that the way I bypass all of the worldview barriers is to just start conversations with people about their own experience. I ask questions like "When have you worked well with other people?" "What did that feel like?" "When have you experienced other people surprising you by their capacity?" "When have *you* become a leader and why?"

I'm trying to help people surface their own experience and use that, instead of getting caught in this or that kind of typology or "you're only capable of this because you're this kind of person" or "you're poor so you're not capable of anything." I want to bypass all of that and help people understand that as they've lived their lives as human beings, they have discovered a lot about themselves and about other people, and I want to emphasize the higher qualities. I really do feel that our whole mindset is embodied in "science is god," with social sciences as the poor cousins of that, and we're distancing ourselves, destroying ourselves by failing to recognize the power of the human spirit. Tibetans model that. Tibetans embody that often. People have a direct experience of "I felt really good in the presence of that monk" or the kind of contagious energy that can come from a meeting with Tibetans. I don't find it in us Western folk; we're often very serious and struggling, and deep into the struggle of being good Buddhists.

I have this experience over and over in Africa—when Westerners are blown away by how joyful people are in the midst of great suffering, of having nothing material. Yet as visitors, we feel truly welcomed by people who are happy to meet us—Tibetans or Bhutanese or in my experience Zimbabweans and South Africans. I just point out to them that this is what it feels like to be (in the case of Tibetans) raised in a culture where you don't have a focus on your own ego and (in the case of South Africa), where you're taught from childhood that you only exist within a community of other people—that this is all about being one. We need more of these direct experiences of getting out of the prison of our social science descriptions of reality.

It's painful for me to watch how startling it is for people to encounter joyful human beings or people who really welcome them instantly as part of the community. We're just not used to that. We are, I think, a truly paralyzed society in terms of relationships, in terms of connecting with each other, and it's only getting worse. I am not working any longer at the abstract level of what's in Tibetan Buddhism. Here is a whole culture that has been able to cultivate people who do not think of themselves first and who therefore radiate a sense of the delight of being with other human beings. As I said, I find this in Africa too: it's how I sum up my experiences in Africa. I learned what it feels like to be welcomed just because you're there, just because you're another person, and to really experience the fullness of human emotions. I'm filled with sadness that our particular culture has made individualism and separation the modus operandi of how we view the world, because I am so aware now in my own body of what we're missing by shifting into this very narrow way of seeing. For me the practice of Buddhism—exploring my own mind and opening my heart/mind, my *citta*, has connected me with the vastness not just of mind, but the vastness of the human spirit.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** To me this feels very core to why I'm doing the work that I am, Meg: This paradigm shift toward being in touch with deep experience—becoming aware of how that's different from daily experience, whether it's in science or leadership, and then how the practice connects one with the vastness of the human spirit or of basic goodness. In various ways, by sensing the Tibetans and their culture, by doing the practices, it seems that the shift may not actually require all of that practice, but the practice contributes to this process of change. What I think I'm hearing you say, and it makes sense to me, is that the practice allows us to stabilize and *ground* this perspective that is so very different from the Western one or scientific one....

**Margaret Wheatley:** I would say exactly that. The practice enables our hearts to soften and open, so that we become more open to what is and to other people's experience, so that we're not trying to fit them into a little box or a typology, we're just trying to be there with them. For me, the greatest capacity that I have developed from practice is not to be afraid to be anywhere with people who are suffering. I now know how to *be there* with them rather than turn away or feel I have to feel guilty or all of the other defenses that we put up. I am really happy just to sit with people who are sorrowing or joyful, but I'm not afraid of being with anybody. And that's definitely a consequence of practice—that real "tenderizing" and opening of the heart.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** When you said tenderizing I had this funny image of Buddhist practice as a heart tenderizer like a meat tenderizer—and it does have some of that ferociousness too! I don't know why I've been called to do all of this writing explicitly about Tibetan Buddhism—sometimes it really makes sense, and sometimes I feel so humble. I'm much newer in it than many of the people I know, but I want to shine light on the importance of what you perceive that many people don't: this whole culture that's been transplanted and is somehow living in our midst, while it's here. We or others will be the ones who carry it forward, but it's still there shining.

**Margaret Wheatley:** It's really the antidote for everything that I could name about Western culture and the boxes and prisons we've put ourselves in, including our sense of values, sense of Christian righteous God, sense of greed and consumerism and materialism. I heard a quote from His Holiness once when he said "America has really perfected samsara."

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** ...and marketing it.

**Margaret Wheatley:** Yes, exactly! We've got it down pat. Then along comes this culture that is truly opposite in all the important ways. On all the important dimensions, Tibetan culture and theology present the contrary view. I think that's important for those of us who are walking in both worlds to understand. I hadn't thought of that before—I like that thought. . .

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** Where I actually started on this project was the very interesting paradox that for the Tibetan culture to survive, it has to survive within this one, and either change this one or survive within it, but it can't survive outside of it. There is no "outside."

**Margaret Wheatley:** That's right, and it's not for the Tibetans, it's for us to do that. It's for us. They can lead us in the practice and in really understanding from inside our own beings and minds what the Tibetan worldview is, and then it's up to us to be ... not the translators, but to be walking that narrow line

between the two different worldviews that will hopefully lead in the next generation to something that's different. I do think that this is our work. You know one of the prophecies about the Shambhala warriors that Johanna Macy quotes from her teacher is that when the warriors return they are *inside* the halls of power, and they know how they work. This for me is also prophesied in the Incan tradition where they predict that the new shamans will come from the north, not from Peru or the southern countries, and I'm very inspired by this. It's those who know the culture best, who are inside it long enough to see its failings, who have struggled to renounce it, who can see it clearly—we are the ones who are going to bring in these ancient wisdoms. And we're not going to do it as social scientists of old.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** You said this was a new insight for you...

**Margaret Wheatley:** I have a stronger sense of realization that we're the ones who are bringing the antidote into the culture because we understand the culture. We're *inside* it and understand it profoundly well and have renounced it. It's not the Tibetans who are bringing it in, it's us, because of our position within the culture.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** I have been thinking increasingly that what's important is the fullness and rigor of the training that's possible through this process—through the various lineages—and I suspect that they give different colorations to how one is trained. The job is so big that simply being of good will is a prerequisite, but it's not sufficient. It's just too tough a job! One really needs a fuller training, and there are few things that provide that.

**Margaret Wheatley:** Absolutely... if you really think (if I can continue my imagery here) that we are the warriors inside the halls of power, the kind of grounding and depth this requires is just what I was speaking about earlier. You can't just float here on your own theories—you need to have a very deep grounding practice. That's the only way we can be strong enough for the task that is ours.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** That's what I think the Tibetan Buddhism brings, because it's come to us so complete. I suspect that there were or are many other cultures that train people in this, like you mentioned in Africa, but they've been so abused already....

**Margaret Wheatley:** I really want to keep the distinction of how Buddhism in all its different forms helps you know your mind, because I have not found that in any other culture, and it's critical.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** I know that we've run out of time, but please say a bit more how it helps you know your mind?

**Margaret Wheatley:** If you can see how your mind works and how you react, then you have that doorway into a much greater reality, and you can move beyond your own narrow mind. That for me is the essence of Buddhist practice.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** ...and then that lets you meet the “other” and not be afraid...

**Margaret Wheatley:** ...that's right, and to not get so overwhelmed by the current view of reality, because you know there's more than meets the eye. And then you move back into the social sciences and it's *only* what meets the eye that is considered useful.

**Kathryn Goldman Schuyler:** ... this is very important ...thank you so much.

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1. Margaret Wheatley, “To Be Free From”/“Four Freedoms” in *Mindful Politics*, ed. Melvin McLeod, 189-200 (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2006).
  2. See Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999/2006); Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998); Margaret Wheatley, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007); and Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).
  3. See <http://berkana.org/>
  4. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
  5. See <http://www.mindandlife.org>