

Company karma

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Preface

The story begins far from chanting zen monks, incense and Tokyo's four-storey motorways. It starts an autumn day in Middelfart, Denmark, in 2006, where Steen Hildebrandt and Christian Stadil talk together for the first time. They have both delivered speeches at Castle Hindsgavl. Steen about people management, about how a manager can put a good team together by using brains and heart; Christian about company karma – about hummel's turnaround, about receiving by giving and about spreading positive energy and confidence in an organisation.

They meet afterwards at the buffet table in the castle's high-ceilinged restaurant. 63-year old Steen Hildebrandt, Denmark's most cited management professor, author, co-author of more than 200 books on the subject, editor at the publishing house Børsens Forlag and the business daily Børsen – dressed in a black suit, tie and polo shirt. 35-year old Christian Stadil, businessman, owner of the sports and fashion brand, 'hummel', media darling and active Buddhist – in mauve hummel pants, pearl necklaces and enormous white glasses.

They talk about the world becoming smaller, about boundaries being increasingly broken down between professions, sectors and internally in organisations, and that we as people and as companies are bound together. They talk about Buddhism and the individual's responsibility to progress and about the spiritual dimension in management. In the course of their conversation, an outline of a vision for modern leadership starts to evolve. They are interrupted – the queue behind them is growing – and they both drift off in their own direction.

The next time they meet is at Børsens Forlag. Christian is there to discuss the publication of his book about hummel's history – Steen has been invited in his capacity of editor. After a mere few minutes they pick up on their previous conversation and suddenly the idea arises. Why not write a book together? They realise that by speaking to one another they become aware of certain truths that are relevant for companies, managers and employees now and in future. That the meeting between the theoretic and the practitioner, the professor and the businessman yields new aspects with regard to understanding challenges and possibilities in leadership and management; that the concept of company karma, which originally was the title of Christian's speech, condenses the connectiveness and mutual responsibility that is so very central to our modern day conditions of life and which makes it necessary to think of leadership in an entirely new way.

They conclude that in order to conduct their conversation in peace and quiet they will have to go elsewhere – away from disturbing phones, business and other obligations, preferably to a place where thoughts about karma and spirituality evoke a response.

At a later meeting the choice falls on Japan, more precisely Tokyo, where zen temples inspire space and calmness of the mind even though development and economy continues noisily around you – literally with jingles, screeching sirens and pop music. Tokyo, where karma and career and Buddha and business never are far apart.

To ensure that their conversations and thoughts are written down and that their journey is documented, they phone me, a journalist. This is the story, or rather stories of Steen and Christian's outer journey to Tokyo and their inner journey into their own and each others personal experiences and concepts. The story of their discussions, their intuition and their truth process, which especially takes place through their

conversations with one another, but also through their excursions in Tokyo. These include surprising meetings with zen meditation and the spiritual advisor Yukio Yajima, who coaches and develops top Japanese managers and who prefers talking about kundalini yoga to running a business. Steen and Christian become open to new and sometimes distorted views on our general perceptions. They explore and ask questions – also to a number of prominent Danes, all with strong opinions about future leadership: Mads Øvlisen, Jørgen Mads Clausen, Pernille Ålund, Lahka Lama, Mads Kjær, Lars Kolind, Anders Laugesen and Mette Morsing. What does karma mean to them? What is their outlook on management today and that of the future? And which tools do they recommend?

The book *Company Karma* is Steen's and Christian's personal contribution to understanding the framework and life conditions of modern man and the modern company. It is a journey into management and personal development, and research into reflections and visions that point into the future. It does not give any answers, but an insight into their experiences. It consists of tableaux that give an account of their adventure and questions that you can take with you as a manager, an employee or person – if you so wish. Have a pleasant journey ...

Trine Beckett, Copenhagen 2007

DAY 1

Karma and Consequence

Our every act has a universal dimension.

DALAI LAMA

They stroll down the corridor. Christian in a lilac jumper, grey ‘hummel’ striped sweatpants, large sunglasses, bracelet and a couple of necklaces. Steen in a black suit and burgundy polo shirt.

They arrived late that morning at Tokyo’s Narita Airport and took the shuttle bus into the capital via multi-storey motorways, through suburbs and industrial areas that seemed to go on and on for ever. Now, however, they have arrived safely at the New Otani Hotel; one of Tokyo’s fancy hotels which offers a shopping arcade, business centre and its own zen garden where bonzai trees grow in clumps, a tea house offers daily tea ceremonies and fat yellow carps swim lazily among the stone islands in the pond. The garden is one of the oldest in Tokyo and it was actually here that Christian and Steen had, when planning their trip at home, imagined that their talks would take place.

But the rain is pouring down in the Japanese capital and the porch at the bottom of the garden is occupied by the traders from the hotel’s bottom floor, who are enjoying a break, smoking and talking. Christian and Steen will have to go for plan B and start by inquiring at the reception, then in the business centre, but the chances of finding a room suitable for their talks look bleak. A room that neither reeks of meeting room atmosphere nor has the humming unrest of people eating and drinking. It is then they discover the Ladies’ Lounge on the 21st floor.

The lounge is ”members only”, and only for women. However, it is empty so Christian and Steen enter the room. In here there is peace to work – peace to talk. Only the sound of subdued pandean pipes playing European classics from the small speakers in the ceiling breaks the silence. The walls have broad black and white stripes and a partition divides the room into two. Christian and Steen can sit here in peace without being disturbed if any women should arrive. Or rather, any women who were to arrive could sit in peace without being disturbed by the two men.

They sit down in a couple of white winged armchairs facing a view of Tokyo with their backs to the lounge’s Louis XVI furniture replicas where Japanese and international women’s magazines have been carefully arranged. They both have a stack of books resting in their laps. Modern classics on management, spiritualism and psychology, by authors who each in their own way touch upon elements of the company karma concept – without actually mentioning it.

Christian and Steen’s eyes wander and they gaze out the window. At the foot of the hotel lies the zen garden. Opposite is a park with a palace in the middle. The palace was built in the last century for the crown prince

but is today used by the diplomatic service. A one storey motorway cuts through the two green areas and behind the park, Tokyo's skyline is outlined against the grey sky.

In that way tradition and innovation meet right in the middle of the square glass section – a suitable setting, for Christian and Steen intend to investigate, in the present, how a karma concept from the past can prepare us for the future. By prefixing the small word *company*, the two of them have already modernised the concept a little. However, they both find it necessary to start their exploration of the concept by defining what the word, karma, actually means.

Here in the white winged armchairs in the Ladies' Lounge, Steen is the first to touch upon the subject.

The Law of Karma

– about the karma concept, impressions in the mind and about being reborn in the form of a peckish ghost

Steen: The most simple and basic approach to the karma concept is that karma is the law of cause and effect. This law says that when you do something, it has an effect, and that effect will come around to you, maybe. If you are good, you will receive goodness in return, and if you are evil, you will be hit by something similar. The word karma means *actions replicate*. Every action leads to a new action, in the sense that it is the cause of another action, an effect. A rather simplified Western form of karma thinking is: that you must bear in mind that whatever you do, it will have consequences – for other people and for nature c – and for yourself. Getting as far as to be thinking about cause and effect or in contexts such as individuals and as companies is an accomplishment in itself; to constantly be considering what consequences an action will have for animals, for nature, for the climate, for the company's reputation, for the world. And for the earth right next to you. Christian: Karma has to do with the entire interdependence and connectivity outlook. One of Buddha's final teachings was that all things are connected. Today, this is more relevant than ever before: the world has become so much smaller, especially due to new technology.

But karma can be interpreted in various ways; the concept is and has been used within several religious and philosophical creeds, including Hinduism, the more esoteric Christian traditions and in Buddhism.

What we do has an effect

Christian: I believe that karma should be interpreted as conditioned actions of sorts, conditioned thoughts or conditioned words. That is, actions, thoughts and words that leave impressions in the sub-conscious, body or energy – depending on how wacky you want to make it. This impression will have a consequence. You will experience a reaction or an effect in this or – in the traditional Buddhist sense – a later life. The more down-to-earth interpretation of karma is that everything we do, say and think makes a difference. If we change the way we think about and approach the world right now, it will bring about a change in our future as well.

The question is, can karma be interpreted as something that will always come around to you or your company? Or is it rather that everything we do affects something - and not necessarily yourself? Even though it will affect you finally ... You know, a butterfly flaps its wings ... Does it matter whether it comes back to you when it comes to giving and doing good? Isn't the karma thought strong enough, just in the sense that we know that what we do will affect something else? The decisive factor is not whether a certain action leads back to you. It is the awareness of our actions having an effect that counts.

Steen: Basically, that's what I think, too. Actually, it should be adequate to have that insight, maybe the experience which many people may have in their everyday life; that what I do has an effect!

The Law of Karma on the 21st storey

Christian: An example of the law of karma is: We are up here on the 21st storey and we throw a stone out of the window. It may hit somebody, and this is something we must acknowledge in a way that makes us abstain from throwing it, because in the worst case we risk somebody dying from being hit in the head by it. Do our actions affect us directly in this case? I believe they do. I throw a stone out of the window. I'm caught and get put in prison. This exemplifies that bad karma comes around to me. Or I throw the stone out of the window and feel guilty. I will remember it and it will leave an impression in my sub-conscience, maybe even in my body. The guilty conscience will shift my attention from the things I'm doing and will scatter my energy because that's really what a guilty conscience does.

However, in order for bad karma to hit hard, four basic conditions must be present of which intention is the most important. To use my stone throwing example from before, firstly, I must have had the intention of throwing the stone to hit somebody. Secondly, the stone has to hit somebody. Thirdly, I mustn't care about my action, and finally I must be unwilling to learn from it and be ready to throw another stone.

Steen: You can say that the way I think, feel and take action creates patterns, creates impressions within me, in my emotional life, in my brain, in my body ...

Christian: Yes ... we often talk about a person having good or bad karma. As I see it, bad karma is when you perform actions and think in a manner that is detrimental for others and you in turn are hit by negativity or negative impressions. In contrast, positive words, actions and thoughts towards others will come back to you in a positive manner.

Actions make impressions

Steen: In her book, *Buddhas lære* [The Teachings of Buddha], priest and author, Lene Højholt, actually defines karma as actions that create impressions in our minds. Meaning that every time we perform an action, we create an impression in the mind and these impressions are karma. Next time we perform an action, our actions will follow the same pattern. Actions are like water running in sand; they will always continue in the direction with the least obstacles. In other words, we do as we usually do and in that way we become more and more bound to a certain pattern of action. The smallest action is of importance because it contributes to creating impressions in the mind or to expanding an already existing impression, and the

deeper the impression becomes, the more difficult it is to do something different. We are bound by our past patterns of action and it takes great effort to change a pattern. She also says: "Karma forms human life, this one and the next ones. And karma decides the form in which the human being will be born the next time." Here Lene Højholt touches upon the concept of reincarnation which I don't think we need linger on now.

However, the thought of creating patterns or impressions is really interesting in relation to company karma. Something that the internationally acknowledged author and researcher within management, C. Otto Scharmer, also talks a lot about in his book *Theory U*. He calls it downloading. We download – meaning we repeat old patterns, old frames of reference and old notions; notions about management, about what a company is, what it may do and what it may not do.

Many companies are in the animal kingdom

Christian: Karma is a basic concept with different names – depending on religion and context. You see it for example in Hinduism and in some Christian traditions. In relation to reincarnation, as you mentioned, I believe it can be interpreted at different levels – which often is the case in Buddhist philosophy.

I myself am not entirely sure about reincarnation or rebirth. In the literal sense of the word, I see it as some kind of Buddhist folklore, as something out of the Old Testament from a time when your sense of reality was another and many pictures were used to explain. To be reborn as a peckish ghost it not something to be taken literally (I hope), rather as an image of the nature of desire – something which is very relevant in relation to the consumer culture we live in today. The fact that desire is never quite satisfied, that more wants more, like the ghost that is always hungry and therefore normally depicted with a big stomach. Or that you could be reborn in the animal kingdom as an image of you having a mind or a mindset of an animal. That you are ignorant, go through life with blinkers on and sticking to things that make you feel safe – a little like I perceive Scharmer's downloading concept – which could lead you to think that many companies are in the animal kingdom ...

Steen: I think you are right, your interpretation of or beliefs concerning reincarnation are not important for the essence of the karma concept.

Christian: Actually, we can perceive rebirth at various levels – just like karma. In the traditional sense reincarnation means that you die and are born again, with the twist that some masters, such as Dalai Lama, can themselves choose to be reborn or not. For if occasion should arise, as a so-called bodhisattva, to help others towards enlightenment, then there is the spiritual or personal development-based rebirth. You become, so to speak, a new human being having gone through a process of personal development. Furthermore, you can speak of rebirth from second to second – you are reborn with every new thought or feeling. With a scientific cap on, you can perceive rebirth as the body replacing all its cells every seven years.

The way I prefer to understand it is that every moment, every single 'now' gives you the chance to reinvent and develop yourself, to break out of the downloading and look at the world, yourself or your company with fresh eyes. The way we understand reincarnation is not very important because the concept is correct in its essence.