

# The Mindful-Promise: Exploring the Links between Self, Organizational and Systems Change (SOS) for a Sustainable Future<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Sally Jeanrenaud<sup>2</sup> & Jean-Paul Jeanrenaud<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

This paper examines the notion that “*mindfulness has the power to change the world, one person at a time, from the inside out*”. It explores the benefits and challenges of adopting mindfulness practices, and how change from the ‘inside out’ is articulated at the level of **Self**, **Organization**, and **System (SOS)**. Change for good is often framed as ‘sustainable development’, but sustainability theory and practice traditionally prioritizes the outer, ecological, social, economic and technological dimensions of change. We examine the idea that learning to cultivate the inner-place from which we operate, through contemplative practice, is integral to deeper and lasting change. The paper draws on Integral Theory, and interviews with 10 well-established leaders, who have a personal mindfulness practice, and who are introducing mindfulness into a range of organizational and system-change initiatives. Our research suggests that transformations at the level of Self – Organization – System are interconnected and co-emergent. Transformation of these domains can be encapsulated in the acronym ‘SOS’ - an urgent ‘cry for help’. We promote the SOS concept as a holistic approach to leading with integrity, for a sustainable future.

## Questions:

1. Does mindfulness offer a radical way of leading with integrity for a sustainable future?
2. What are the leadership benefits and challenges of practising mindfulness?
3. What are the opportunities, benefits and challenges of bringing mindfulness into the workplace?

## 1.0 Introduction

Scientists claim we are facing a ‘perfect storm’ of interconnected social, environmental, and economic challenges.<sup>4</sup> And countless analysts are calling for responsible leadership and an urgent transition to a sustainable economy. These challenges relate to:

*Planet.* We currently use 1.5 planet’s worth of resources to fuel our economic growth, and consumption, which is unsustainable, and generates risks for business.<sup>5</sup> Our fossil fuel based, linear, take-make-waste economy creates climate disruption, biodiversity loss, water shortages, resource scarcity, and mountains of waste. The ‘ecological disconnect’<sup>6</sup> between people and nature is destroying our life support systems.

*People.* Wealth is not trickling down. Just eight men own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity.<sup>7</sup> Power and privilege is skewing the economic system, increasing extreme inequalities, and creating a ‘social disconnect’ between the rich and the rest. This is unethical, unjust, socially divisive, politically corrosive, and ecologically and economically damaging in the long term.

*Profit.* We have created a financial sector that favours speculation and ‘phantom wealth’ over investment in real wealth, which is unstable<sup>8</sup>. This ‘economic disconnect’ is driving boom and bust cycles, creating debt, holding governments hostage to financiers, and undermining efforts to invest in a sustainable economy.

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<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this paper, entitled “The Mindful Promise: Leading with Integrity for a Sustainable Future”, was published in Mabey, C. & Knights, D. (Eds) (2017) “*Leadership Matters?*” *Finding Voice, Connection and Meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. London, UK: Routledge

<sup>2</sup> Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Business School, University of Exeter, Devon, UK. EX4 4PU. [s.jeanrenaud@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:s.jeanrenaud@exeter.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Director, One Planet Wisdom Ltd, and Senior Advisor, WWF CH. The Gallery, Lymptone, Devon. EX8 5EY. [jpjeanrenaud@gmail.com](mailto:jpjeanrenaud@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Jeanrenaud, S. Jeanrenaud, J-P., & J. Gosling (2017) : *Sustainable Business: A One Planet Approach*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

<sup>5</sup> WWF (2016): *Living Planet Report 2016: Risk and Resilience in a New Era*. WWF Gland, Switzerland.

<sup>6</sup> Scharmer, O. and Kaufer, K. (2013): *Leading from the Emerging Future. From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies. Applying Theory U to Transforming Business, Society and Self*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publi

<sup>7</sup> Oxfam (2017): *An Economy for the 99%*. Oxfam Briefing Paper. January 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Korten, D. (2010) : *Agenda for a New Economy : From Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth*. San Francisco : Berrett-Koehler.

*Power.* Corporations spend billions of dollars a year on lobbying governments, international trade and financial institutions, and influencing decisions relating to taxes, subsidies, trade deals and legislation. These support private gain at the expense of people and planet, and threaten democratic processes.

*Person.* Rates of stress and depression are increasing worldwide. Some 1 million people die by suicide each year, and it is the leading cause of death among young people.<sup>9</sup> Materialistic values and consumerism generate chronic dissatisfaction, do not help fulfill our human potential, and create a 'spiritual disconnect' from our inner selves.

A 'better world' is often framed in terms of 'sustainable development', 'sustainable business', and 'sustainable economy'. But sustainability, which addresses the environmental, social and economic 'problems out there', is struggling to achieve lasting results at scale. Are there any new ways of thinking and leading that can make a difference?

## 2.0 The Mindful Promise

This paper explores the 'mindful-promise' in the context of leading with integrity, in the transition to a sustainable economy. This is the notion that "*mindfulness has the power to change the world, one person at a time, from the inside out*" (quote attributed to Joseph Goldstein).

The mindful-promise shifts the focus of **WHAT** we need to change, to transform the world for the better. Sustainable development is all about change for the good, but sustainability theory and practice traditionally prioritize the outer, ecological, social, economic and technological dimensions of change. While such approaches have generated many innovative ideas (e.g. ending subsidies to fossil fuels to support renewable energy), they usually only address external conditions. There is nothing wrong with this outward focus – it is crucial. But this paper makes the case that it is only part of a deeper story. We believe that leading with integrity for a sustainable future needs to explore the 'inner dimensions' of change.

By the inner dimensions we mean the innate human faculties of mind, heart and will, and their powers of consciousness, aspiration and intention. We rarely examine the content of our thoughts, longings and purposes in the sustainability context; and we lack an understanding of their role in manifesting and shaping external conditions. Inner change involves the discovery of the power of these innate faculties, and the pursuit of higher, universal ideals of truth, beauty and goodness. We are not alone in proposing the need for engaging these inner dimensions and cultivating higher values. There is a growing sense that this interior work might provide the missing link in the quest for a sustainable future, see Box 1.

The mindful-promise proposes radically different technologies of **HOW** to change the world. It emphasizes the role of contemplative practices in transforming individuals, organizations and systems, rather than promoting technical fixes, economic reforms or political revolutions. Mindfulness, which is a form of meditation, has been defined as "*paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally*"<sup>10</sup>. The word is used to describe engagement in a practice, as well as a cultivated state of awareness. Mindfulness techniques provide a key for opening the door to deeper levels of consciousness and presence, and for bringing the transformative power of this awareness back into everyday life. However, we lack an in-depth understanding of *how* change takes place from the 'inside-out'.

The mindful-promise provides a fresh perspective on agency, or **WHO** changes the world. It is founded on the premise that transformation starts with the individual, and then ripples out to effect change in the world. Individual-interior change involves people working on their own deep, inner structures of attention, attitudes and intentions, to develop more conscious awareness, compassion and higher purpose. This is considered a prerequisite, and enabler of social change for good, which could not take root without it. While the internal dimensions of human experience have long been studied (e.g. psychology and leadership), we lack insights and theories to help us understand the connections between the individual-inner dimensions of change, and organizational or wider systems change.

The mindful promise underpins the proposition of this paper, that leaders who realize the benefits of contemplative practices, and who introduce mindful practices into organizations and projects, help catalyze positive changes in cultures, which in turn may provoke changes in macro-economic systems.

It explores the benefits and challenges of adopting mindfulness practices; how change from the 'inside out' is experienced at the level of **Self**, **Organization**, and **System (SOS)**, and their interconnections. It

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<sup>9</sup> WHO (2014): *Preventing Suicide : A global imperative*. Geneva, World Health Organization.

<sup>10</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (1991): *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Bantam Books.

draws on conversations with 10 well-established leaders, who have a personal mindfulness practice, and who are introducing mindfulness into a range of organizational and system-change initiatives. Our group included 5 women, and 5 men from four different continents, see Annex 1.

### Box 1 Propositions

*"I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy. And to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."* (Gus Speth, 2013)<sup>11</sup>

*"Without deep change on yourself, how will you avoid re-creating your own internalized oppression in all that you do? So often we see the same abuses of power, the same organizational dysfunctions among social change activists as we do in the institutions they seek to change....Unless we have also done transformational work on ourselves, we will remain products of the very same civilization we seek to transform. We need to change our habits of thought, beliefs and doing as well as change our systems. Each reinforces the other".* (Charles Eisenstein, 2013)<sup>12</sup>

*"In the past, changing the self and changing the world were often regarded as separate endeavours and viewed in either-or terms. But in the story of the Great Turning, they are recognized as mutually reinforcing and essential to one another."* (Joanna Macy, 2012)<sup>13</sup>

### 3.0 Overview of Mindfulness

There has been a huge upsurge of interest in 'mindfulness' in recent years, both in the popular and academic literature. Advocates are promoting its relevance to personal wellbeing, leadership, organizational life, and as a driver of large-scale systems change; whilst others are critically examining the instrumentalist adoption of mindfulness, see Purser *et al* in Mabey and Knights (2017). A brief introduction to mindfulness is given below,

*Wisdom Traditions.* Mindfulness has its roots in the contemplative practices of many of the world's wisdom traditions, including mainstream religions - Vedanta/Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These provide inspiration and practices for inner transformation, and harmonious living. But, in its current form mindfulness is most closely related to the self-observation techniques of Buddhist meditation, although it is also considered an inherent human capacity,<sup>14</sup> independent of any particular religion.

*Practices.* Mindfulness includes both formal sitting practices, and informal practices that cover every aspect of life such as eating, walking, and bathing. Techniques include focusing on the breath and body sensations; labeling emotions and attitudes; witnessing thoughts; deep listening; deep looking; and compassion training. Such practices help reduce habitual 'automatic-pilot' reactions, draw attention to layers of conditioning, and facilitate connections to deeper sources of knowing and being.

*Scientific Advances.* There have been thousands of scientific studies assessing the effects of mindfulness.<sup>15</sup> Research into brain neuroplasticity reveals that the brain is more flexible, adaptable and resilient than previously thought; and mindfulness had been shown to positively affect its structure and function.<sup>16</sup> Even short periods of mindfulness can have significant impacts on attitudes and behaviours, and alter the epigenetics of the brain.

*Health Benefits.* The ability to gain perspective on thoughts and emotions has significant implications in a number of contexts. It is the basis of many new streams of clinical practice and research, such as

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<sup>11</sup> Speth, G. (2013): Former Dean Professor, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, USA.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenstein, C. (2013): *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*. Berkley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

<sup>13</sup> Macy, J. & Johnstone, C. (2012): *Active Hope. How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

<sup>14</sup> The Mindfulness Initiative (2016) : Building the Case for Mindfulness in the Workplace. The Mindfulness Initiative. Private Sector Working Group. [www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk](http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk)

<sup>15</sup> Brown, K.W., Ryan, R.M. & J.D. Creswell (2007) : Mindfulness:Theoretical foundations and evidence of its salutary effects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 18, 211-237.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson et al (2003) : Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65:564.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)<sup>17</sup>; and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)<sup>18</sup>. Mindfulness in these contexts plays a significant role in dealing with health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, pain, chronic illness, and in boosting the immune system.

*Leadership & Organizational Contexts.* Mindfulness is also being introduced into corporate, NGO and government institutions. It has been shown to have a positive impact on concentration, focus, resilience, creativity, emotional intelligence, and productivity, which are essential to good leadership.<sup>19</sup> However, the use of mindfulness in corporations is controversial to those who see it being coopted to serve the corporate financial bottom-line.

*Human-Centred Development.* Mindfulness has also been integrated into new human-centred development approaches, such as the U Lab projects facilitated by faculty at MIT, Boston; Caring Economics at the Max Plank Institute, and some Engaged Buddhist projects. Mindfulness and compassion training is known to affect human motivation, emotion, and social cognition, which in turn shape more caring models of economic decision-making.

#### 4.0 An Integral Perspective

'Integral theory' offers a helpful approach to exploring the links between mindfulness, and personal, organizational and systems change for sustainability. Integral theory provides a comprehensive map – known as the Integral Framework – of major disciplinary areas that relate to any theme or issue.<sup>20</sup> Through integral theory, disciplines that are usually considered in isolation from each other can be considered together, to holistically address particular issues and challenges.

At its most simple level, the Integral Framework proposes four lenses of analysis on different, but important dimensions of reality. These are known as the Four Quadrants and include the quadrants of 'I', 'It', 'We' and 'Its', which reveal the 'interiors' and 'exteriors' of individuals and collectives, see Figure 1. These areas are traditionally studied through different disciplines such as *psychology*, *behavior*, *culture*, and *systems*. The quadrants are not meant to be boxes, rigidly categorizing different parts of reality. Rather they offer four unique ways of looking at the same thing, revealing different dimensions or qualities of that thing, and their inter-connections.<sup>21</sup>

The Four Quadrants have been applied in different contexts, such as analyzing sustainable development.<sup>22</sup> This application reveals that most sustainable development theory has privileged the ecological, social and economic aspects of reality, or 'systems', in the Lower Right quadrant. Even the most influential and progressive sustainability literature neglects the psychological dimensions of change in the Upper Left quadrant. There is thus a gap in our understanding of how the 'I' dimension functions, how the dynamics between the quadrants are framed, and how they interact in particular contexts.

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<sup>17</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (1991): *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Bantam Books.

<sup>18</sup> Segal, Z., Williams, J.M.G., & J. D. Teasdale (2013): *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. New York: The Guildford Press.

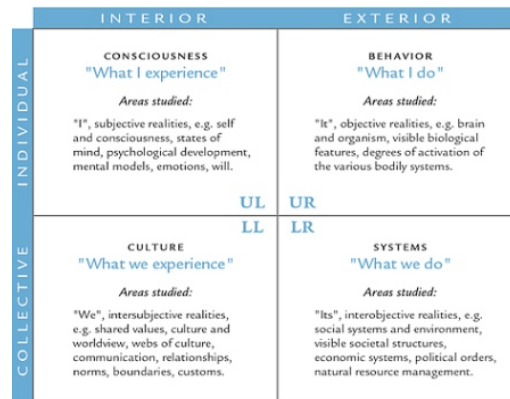
<sup>19</sup> Marturano, J. (2015): *Finding the Space to Lead. A Practical Guide to Mindful Leadership*. Bloomsbury Press.

<sup>20</sup> Wilber, K. (1997): An Integral Theory of Consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 4 (1): 71-92

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the quadrants, the AQAL (All Quadrants All Levels) Integral Framework includes development levels (or stages of development); development lines (intelligences); states (of consciousness), and types (e.g. personality or gender types). The other four elements are not explored in this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, B.C. (2005): Theory and Practice of Integral Sustainable Development: An Overview. *AQAL Journal* Spring 2005, 1 (2).

**Figure 1 The Four Quadrants of Integral Theory**



We use the Integral Theory framework to guide our analysis of mindfulness in our exploration of leading with integrity for a sustainable future. Our conversations with leaders aimed to provide insights into the dynamics between these quadrants; or in integral theory terms, how 'I' mindful practices are involved in, and influence the 'It', 'We' (organizations) and 'Its' (systems).

### 5.0 Transforming Self

This section focuses on the 'I' quadrant of integral theory, in the context of the mindful-promise. It highlights the subjective experience of mindfulness; how it alters states of mind, heart and will, and how this transforms our relationships with others. The sentences in italics and in the boxes are drawn from the interviews.

Mindful practitioners use many different techniques, involving both formal and informal practices (see section 3). They meditate for different lengths of time, from between a few minutes, to several hours. However, whatever the type or length of practice, leaders find it essential to commit to regular daily practice. As one put it: *"It's like training my mindful muscle. Having a regular practice helps me through the bad times as well as the good. Even when I least feel like it, spending time in meditation helps me come back to my centre, and see things in a non-judgmental way, making it easier for me to cope with personal challenges. If I didn't practice everyday, I think I would lose the ability to get back to my still centre"*.<sup>23</sup>

A key benefit of mindfulness is what is often described as 'waking up from automatic pilot'. This involves standing back from particular thoughts, emotions or situations, and giving oneself the time and space to skillfully respond, rather than react. It has been described as *"time slowing down"*; *"being able to witness emerging thoughts and emotions"*; and being aware of one's *"buttons getting pushed"*.<sup>24</sup> It is considered a huge step forward to be able: *"to look at their own experiences...and just ask the question what am I thinking? What's my relationship to my thinking?"*.<sup>25</sup> Being able to create a space between a stimulus and response – sometimes known as the 'sacred pause' – offers a moment of freedom or liberation from particular thoughts, in which new solutions, and perhaps less damaging reactions for oneself and others, can emerge.

While some leaders emphasized the value of formal meditation practice – what is sometimes referred to as 'sitting on the cushion' – others have chosen to focus on mindfulness in the context of everyday life (eating, walking, bathing, etc.).<sup>26</sup> As Jon Kabat-Zinn says "life becomes the curriculum. What emerges is the curriculum". Most practitioners recognized this as a major challenge. Embodying mindfulness in day-to-day routines, and particularly in encounters with others, was acknowledged as the growing edge of practice. As one practitioner reflected, it's: *"How do I treat my wife? Or how do I relate to my son when he tells me something I don't like?"*<sup>27</sup> Another agreed that: *"Meditating on the cushion is easy, practising off the cushion is more challenging"*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Interview 9

<sup>24</sup> Interview 7

<sup>25</sup> Interview 4

<sup>26</sup> Interview 3

<sup>27</sup> Interview 4

<sup>28</sup> Interview 2

One long-term meditator emphasized that mindfulness practices are not very well understood, particularly within corporate settings. The danger is that without an ethical dimension, and the right intention, mindfulness may just become ‘attention training’, which can be used for unethical ends. Thus, according to this leader, mindfulness practices need to be balanced with compassion or loving-kindness practices.

### **Box 2 Balancing Mindfulness with Compassion Practices**

*“Mindfulness practice and compassion practice are not the same. They are two different practices, and I think they have to be combined. Ultimately, if you come to a very high level of true mindfulness, then not only have you trained your attention, but you are also aware of the consequences of your actions; aware of what happens inside you and around you. You start to see the effect of ‘karma’ and things like that. But it takes a long time for people to achieve this level of awareness – where they can really have a perception of what the consequences of their actions on the world and others will be. While if you train mindfulness and compassion in parallel, you lay an ethical foundation of the right intention. Because a lot of it has to do with intention.... Somebody may start practising mindfulness with the intention to be more efficient at doing something wrong... A sniper has to be very mindful; otherwise he will miss his target... So a sniper has fantastic concentration but it’s not linked with an altruistic compassion motivation.”*<sup>29</sup>

Several leaders recognized that practising mindfulness can be quite disturbing at first: “... when you start meditating, it is deeply uncomfortable, and actually makes you much more agitated.... you start to notice all the things you’re doing... you start to notice your impact and notice what you do. I found that very hard...I think it’s one of the obstacles that people have around meditation”.<sup>30</sup>

Some noticed that their sense of ‘self’ had changed over time, as a result of meditation. They saw how their “egos calmed down”,<sup>31</sup> how they were “less reactive”,<sup>32</sup> “less blaming of others”.<sup>33</sup> They recognized how previously, their aversions, cravings, and attachments to outer things had made them feel more secure or important. Mindfulness had helped them develop perspectives to overcome what some described as the traits and patterns of “the insecure ego”.<sup>34</sup> As a result, many spoke of becoming more forgiving and accepting of themselves and others. These observations resonate with Mabey and Simpson’s idea that integrity and moral power may be derived from a reduced defensiveness (see Mabey & Knights 2017).

Many leaders mentioned a growing appreciation of nature. Long-term practitioners report that as the concentration stabilizes, the consciousness expands into a greater awareness of the interdependent nature of existence. As one practitioner explained, this does not mean that there is no experience of ‘self’ anymore. Rather there is a distinction between being egotistical and self-centred, and having a strong self-consciousness, which is more altruistic, compassionate and aware of our connections with other beings.<sup>35</sup>

Greater awareness and compassion, fostered through mindful practices, can translate into better relationships. It cultivates enhanced listening skills, more thoughtful use of language, greater understanding of others’ difficulties, more forgiveness, as well as a growing sense of interdependence between individuals. But improving relationships through mindful practice is challenging. It does not happen overnight, but requires dedication and discipline, and the integration of formal practices into the ‘tests of life’. Indeed, it is the practice in real-life situations that creates the transformational moments, which bring to life the abstract concepts.

To summarize, self-transformation, or the “definite need to sort yourself out first”,<sup>36</sup> establishes the essential foundations for human wellbeing, and for leading with integrity. By committing to regular practice, both formal and informal, leaders experienced ‘waking up from automatic pilot’, and ‘being in the present moment’. They became more self-aware, noticing patterns of thought, emotion and intention, and how these influenced their behavior, relationships with others, and with nature. By

<sup>29</sup> Interview 2

<sup>30</sup> Interview 6

<sup>31</sup> Interview 1

<sup>32</sup> Interview 1

<sup>33</sup> Interview 3

<sup>34</sup> Interview 1

<sup>35</sup> Interview 2

<sup>36</sup> Interview 4

cultivating compassion, for self and others, they developed greater emotional intelligence, and learned to relate to others more skillfully. However, like training any muscle, mindfulness requires regular practice to be effective.

## 6.0 Transforming Organizations

This section relates to the 'We' quadrant of integral theory, in the context of the mindful promise. It explores some of the motivations, experiences and challenges of bringing mindfulness into the workplace. Mindfulness in the 'We' quadrant goes beyond "*getting one's own house in order*",<sup>37</sup> to "*taking it on the road*".<sup>38</sup>

Several leaders were motivated to introduce mindfulness into their workplaces as a result of realizing its personal benefits, and wanting to make them available to colleagues, particularly as ways of coping with workplace stress.<sup>39</sup> However, several respondents discovered resistance to mindfulness when introducing it into organizations, and put this down to preconceptions about it.<sup>40</sup> The language of mindfulness usually has to be adapted to particular audiences, and leaders are often careful to make it secular, and avoided using words like 'meditation' in programme descriptions.<sup>41</sup> However, making it more appealing to business "*risks it becoming a means to end*", and getting coopted "*to serve business as usual*".<sup>42</sup>

Some leaders have delivered formal mindfulness programmes within their organizations, such as an 8 week face-to-face MBSR programme within a University;<sup>43</sup> an 8 week bespoke mindfulness programme for leaders within a corporation (which utilized on-line technologies to convene large numbers of participants remotely);<sup>44</sup> or a week-long, face-to-face business-leaders programme at a government institution.<sup>45</sup> Organizers highlighted how the development and delivery of such programmes involves much thought, time and commitment: arranging logistics, venue, technologies, cost structures, advertising, preparatory health interviews and/or questionnaires with participants, and the development of course materials, including feedback surveys.

Participants on their formal programmes reported multiple benefits including less anxiety, better sleep, and improved family and work relationships. However, formal programmes also generate a number of common challenges for course participants. For example, some people are so agitated that they cannot sit still.<sup>46</sup> Others find the whole inner experience emotionally challenging, and drop out.<sup>47</sup> Some expect a 'quick-fix', and are disappointed when they don't get it, and stop practising.<sup>48</sup> Others push back on the format of the courses, and the length of sessions.<sup>49</sup> It was important for leaders to continually adapt to changing conditions without losing the essential objectives of the programme.

Other leaders have taken a different approach, and sought to integrate mindfulness into everyday work practices, rather than introducing formal sessions.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interview 4

<sup>38</sup> Interview 5

<sup>39</sup> Interview 5

<sup>40</sup> Interview 3, 5, 6, 7, 8

<sup>41</sup> Interview 7

<sup>42</sup> Interview 8

<sup>43</sup> Interview 8

<sup>44</sup> Interview 7

<sup>45</sup> Interview 2

<sup>46</sup> Interview 8

<sup>47</sup> Interview 8

<sup>48</sup> Interview 7

<sup>49</sup> Interview 8

<sup>50</sup> Interviews 3, 5, 6 10

### Box 3 Mindful Work

“A lot of what I teach from a mindfulness perspective is very much about: How do you bring this into your day? How do you use informal practice even if you never sit on the cushion? How do you have mindful meetings? How do you eat mindfully? How do you walk mindfully? This is stuff you have to do anyway, so you may as well do it mindfully. And if this is all you do, that’s a big shift.... So while some people are purists around the 45-minute body scans... I’m not like that at all. I’m literally like one minute, when you sit in a meeting: ‘sit, feel into your feet, feel your hands’. That’s mindfulness you know, cultivating that tiny bit of awareness every single day”.

“In the corporate environment, it’s ‘how do I make it simple? How do I make it accessible? How do I bake it into their lives?’ It’s organic as opposed to: ‘Here’s one more thing that you have to do. You’re supposed to go to the gym. You’re supposed to eat healthily. You’re supposed to have everything done. You’re supposed to have a clearing box. Here’s another thing. Let’s put another thing on the end of your ‘to do list’’. People respond by saying ‘I’m sorry – but I don’t have time to meditate’. And I say: ‘You have to eat, right, so just eat mindfully. You have to go from meeting to meeting, so just walk mindfully. You go to meetings, you sit down, just take a breath mindfully that’s all you have to do, I’m not asking you to add one more thing on your ‘to do list’’.<sup>51</sup>

Integrating mindful approaches into meetings can help create more spacious, respectful and constructive exchanges.<sup>52</sup> Adopting enquiry-based approaches, and modeling mindful attitudes in group encounters (rather than imposing points of view or ways of behaving); helps create a safe environment in which people find “*the space to grow for themselves*”.<sup>53</sup> It can be frustrating for those people who expect to be given answers and told how to behave, but such exchanges are often transformative for both individuals and organizations.

Mindfulness also helps leaders cultivate inner strengths and new behaviours. It enables them to observe their patterns when faced with challenging situations, to set personal boundaries, have more assertive conversations, deal with interpersonal problems, and make difficult ethical choices.<sup>54</sup> Some leaders mentioned that dealing with these outer problems is an on-going process that is never ultimately solved, because each new situation generates different challenges. One leader emphasized that “*ethics is not always about being nice*”, but wisely “*doing the right thing*” - which can be tough and requires courage.<sup>55</sup>

Introducing mindfulness into business can also be provocative, since it may profoundly question dominant corporate cultures.<sup>56</sup> Although mindfulness has many benefits that are easily appreciated by individuals (helping reduce stress, improve focus, creativity and performance), the bringing of compassion practices into business can be threatening to the corporate work ethic. For example, some employees resisted practices “*fly in the face of the received wisdom that you have to be ruthlessly competitive to get ahead in the ‘dog-eat-dog’ corporate world*”.<sup>57</sup>

To summarize, our research shows that bringing mindfulness into work may involve delivering formal programmes, or weaving it into everyday work practices, such as the way meetings are run or staff are coached. Mindfulness can help create safe spaces for enquiry, facilitate skillful exploration of ideas, and nurture the collective wisdom groups. It can also foster courageous decisions and action, and challenge dominant corporate cultures. These are significant leadership practices, in the context of organizational transformation for a better world. However, there are many preconceptions about what mindfulness is and the language need to be adapted to suit different organizations, with the risk that mindfulness get coopted to serve the interests of ‘business as usual’.

### 7.0 Transforming Systems

This section highlights the ‘Systems’ quadrant of the Integral Framework in the context of the mindful promise, or in integral theory terms, ‘how the I and We influence the Its’. It examines how social and economic problems and solutions are understood from the standpoint of consciousness or mind, and explores the implications of this for system change projects.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview 6

<sup>52</sup> Interview 6, 10

<sup>53</sup> Interview 3

<sup>54</sup> Interview 3

<sup>55</sup> Interview 4

<sup>56</sup> Interviews 6, 9

<sup>57</sup> Interview 6



While some leaders reflected that they had not directly considered the impact of mindfulness on macro-level systems, many others saw obvious connections between self, organization, and systems transformation. From a material point of view, people talk about how mindfulness influenced their food choices, their consumption habits, their waste disposal, and the type of work they do, and their relationships with nature.<sup>58</sup> All these choices have an effect on wider systems.

From a more philosophical perspective, mindfulness is rooted in ancient theories of consciousness that gives the mind a role in shaping matter. For example, in contrast to the scientific materialism of much western philosophy and science – which assumes that matter is the only reality, and that the mind is merely an epiphenomenon of the brain – Buddhism sees the world from the point of view of the phenomenology of consciousness. Some adherents regard life as the creation of the mind, and the body as a form of materialized consciousness<sup>59</sup>. In other words, it is mind that creates matter, rather than vice versa. Significantly, a post-materialist science is also rediscovering the links between mind and body, and the importance of these connections in the conscious evolution of human civilization.<sup>60</sup>

This focus on consciousness has profound implications for how sustainability challenges and opportunities are framed. If material problems are manifestations of the mind, the most profound way of changing them, is to change the consciousness. From a Buddhist perspective, the main drivers of unsustainability are ‘the three poisons of the mind’: ignorance, greed, and fear. These need be transformed, through mindfulness, into their opposites: wisdom, contentment and compassion. Interestingly, this perspective chimes with systems theorists who claim that one of the most powerful levers of systems change is changing ‘mindsets’.<sup>61</sup> Changing mindsets is considered more powerful than transforming anything else in a system, such as resource flows, incentives or metrics.

#### **Box 4 Change the Consciousness, Change the System**

“Buddhist psychology starts from the inside-out. It begins with the mind. Whatever systems or structures we find, they are like a projection of consciousness. An economic system, political system or social system, are not God-given. They are a product of human consciousness and human interaction. As such, they reflect the way we think, speak, behave, and relate. Therefore, any change in structure that is not connected to a change in consciousness, will not have a long-lasting effect. You can have a revolution, but it just means that another elite is on top. The elite don’t do anything fundamentally different from the one before. The new regime can have different names and forms, but basically things like exploitation or inequality, things like that, do not change, if the consciousness hasn’t changed”.<sup>62</sup>

This inner focus also had profound implications for understanding the purpose of the economy itself. While the goal of western economics is to increase growth, measured by GDP, Buddhist economics seeks to increase human happiness and wellbeing over time. These reflect contrasting means and ends. In western economics people are seen as the means, and the increasing value of goods and services as the ends. In Buddhist economics, this instrumentality is reversed; the economy exists to serve the people, and not the people to serve the economy. Development is about people, and not about objects.

One leader explained how the Buddhist theory of causality (sometimes called co-dependent arising), makes a link between personal mindful practice and wider systems change. According to this theory, everything in existence is interrelated; everything continually changes and conditions everything else. Mindfulness enables practitioners to see the bigger picture, to bring awareness to the destructive tendencies of prevailing mindsets and values on systems. Envisioning new more harmonious forms of development emerges from purified intentions and higher purpose.<sup>63</sup>

The emphasis on ‘starting from the inside’ also informs several secular streams of new economics. To some, the history of the economy and of modern economic thought is the product of an evolving human consciousness. We need a new economic framework and narrative that is based on transforming the

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<sup>58</sup> Interview 3

<sup>59</sup> Govinda, L.A. (1960): *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*. London: Rider and Company.

<sup>60</sup> Beauregard, M., Schartz, G.E., Miller, M., Dossey, L., Moreira-Ameida, A., Schlitz, M., Sheldrake, R., & C. Tart (2014): Manifesto for a Post-Materialist Science. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 10 (5): 272–274

<sup>61</sup> Meadows, D. (1999): *Leverage Points : Places to Intervene in a System*. Hartland, VT: The Sustainability Institute.

<sup>62</sup> Interview 2

<sup>63</sup> Interview 1

patterns of economic action and thought from 'ego-system to eco-system awareness'.<sup>64</sup> However, we cannot transform systems unless we transform the quality and awareness that people apply to actions within these systems.

A social change process, known as Theory U, developed by faculty at MIT in Boston,<sup>65</sup> facilitates groups of people to co-sense and co-create future solutions to particular system problems. It uses 'open mind, open heart, and open will' techniques, which help people reclaim their attention and intention, and enable them to be more fully present in the moment. Such techniques draw attention to habitual patterns of individual and collective consciousness and behaviours that are involved in reproducing current negative system conditions. They help shift the inner places from which people operate, allowing them to outgrow habitual ways of thinking and reacting that are no longer effective. Such practices help evolve new mindsets, values and skills that are needed to develop wiser and more creative outcomes. These processes are thought to help shift system conditions as a whole.

## 8.0 Conclusion

In conclusion we offer a few reflections on the implications of the mindful-promise for leading with integrity, for a sustainable future.

*Leading with Integrity.* If practised diligently mindfulness facilitates deep reflection and generates more self-awareness – of body, thoughts, emotions, and intentions, and how these shape behaviours. Mindfulness helps people realize the impermanence of thoughts, emotions and even pain, expressed in phrases such as 'you are not your thoughts', 'thoughts are not facts' or 'learning to look *at* your thoughts, rather than *from* your thoughts'. Growing awareness helps free people from old reactive patterns, and patiently removes layers of psychological and social conditioning. It generates greater equanimity, presence and resilience, and creates the space for innovation. Combined with compassion practices, mindfulness can enhance emotional intelligence and help leaders relate more skillfully to others. We believe that these characteristics are essential ingredients of leading with integrity.

But there is another perspective on *leading with integrity*. In addition to its ethical dimension, integrity also implies *integrating* or combining self, organization and system perspectives, or 'seeing the bigger picture' and 'connecting the dots' between leadership decisions and their effects on wider systems (e.g. understanding the impact of a leadership decision on local community or ecosystem). The Integral Framework is a helpful guide to understanding the dynamics between mindfulness at the level of self, organization and system. However, more research is required to understand these currents in detail, and to model these connections in this context of the mindful-promise.

*Contribution to a Sustainable Future.* The 'mindful-promise' clearly embodies a very different approach, with a number of new contributions, and benefits for sustainable development.

- *Philosophical.* Mindfulness highlights the role of 'consciousness' in understanding systemic problems and solutions. It recognizes that sustainability problems are not 'out there' but 'in here'. Social systems are seen not as fixed in immutable laws, but as the products of the human mind, which can be changed.
- *Planet:* Practitioners report how mindfulness has influenced their consumption patterns as well as their connection to nature. Long-term practitioners speak of a profound experiential awareness of their interdependence with all beings.
- *People.* Practitioners report how their relationships have improved at home and at work. They develop more skillful ways of dealing with difficulties, and are more likely to respond compassionately to people in need. Many leaders are involved in collaborative projects, which facilitate co-creative solutions from the bottom-up.
- *Prosperity.* Mindfulness helps draw attention to sub-conscious impulses and reactions, including fears, aversions, greed, and craving that fuel destructive economic behaviours (e.g. the hedonistic treadmill). The cultivation of courage, equanimity and wisdom can provide powerful antidotes to these impulses, paving the way for new economic objectives and narratives to emerge (e.g. wellbeing economics).
- *Power.* Waking up from 'automatic pilot' helps reveal the dominant mindsets and cultural stories, often supported by powerful vested interests, shaping current unsustainable systems.

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<sup>64</sup> Scharmer, O. and Kaufer, K. (2013): *Leading from the Emerging Future. From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies. Applying Theory U to Transforming Business, Society and Self.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*

Some practitioners report that mindfulness leads them to challenge the status quo with alternative worldviews, within their organizations.

- *Personal*: Ultimately mindfulness is a *radical* act. Mindfulness turns inwards, not outwards to solve problems. It harnesses the *root* sources of inner power to overcome destructive emotions and thoughts and to develop equanimity, wisdom and happiness – important to healing and psychological wellbeing.

However, given the scale and urgency of the global sustainability challenges, it is legitimate to ask whether we have time to 'change the world, one person at a time, from the inside out'. We argue that personal transformation is a missing dimension of sustainability theory and practice, and that outer changes need to arise from inner ones for lasting transformation. However, mindfulness on its own is not enough. Change must happen simultaneously from the inside-out, and the outside-in. The two need to mutually reinforce each other.

Finally, our research suggests that transformations at the level of **Self – Organization – System** are interconnected, co-creative, co-emergent, and co-evolutionary. Transformation of these domains can be encapsulated in the acronym 'SOS' - an urgent 'cry for help'. We promote trialing SOS as a holistic approach to leading with integrity, for a sustainable future.

**January 2017**

## Annex 1

### Ten Interviews with Mindful Meditation Practitioners 2016

INT	Role	Country	Gender	Years of Practice
1.	Sustainability academic working in a University *	Australia	F	10+
2.	Programme Director of a government Institute *	Bhutan	M	40+
3.	Psychologist working in a University	Ireland	F	6+
4.	Founder and Co-Director of Mindfulness Training Centre *	Spain	M	30+
5.	Foreign Service Mental Health Practitioner	USA (in Iraq)	M	5+
6.	Business Consultant and Leadership Coach	Ireland	F	10+
7.	Business Consultant in Leadership Development	UK	M	Eighteen months
8.	Company Director of Sustainability Business	UK	F	30+
9.	Senior Advisor for a global NGO	Switzerland	M	30+
10	Communications Director of government institution	Puerto Rico	F	2
*	Buddhist Mindfulness practitioner			

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