

# THREE INTERTWINED PATHS TO LEADING FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable peace anchors itself in mindfulness of the present, the people, and the microcosms in which we exist. Rather than existing as a static state, the peace is organic and dynamic, flowing itself around the vagaries of “unpeacefulness.” Thus, being a mindful leader begins with the practice of Noble Eightfold Path and finding peace within oneself and continues by manifesting that peace every day. Doing so is the seed from which systems and circumstances can, themselves, perpetuate peace.

Thinking about how mindful leadership can sustain peace, we must consider how mindfulness can be cultivated within the individual and how he or she can sustain mindfulness everyday despite external challenges. Integrating the practice of mindfulness with an understanding of “systems thinking” opens paths for sustaining peace within and across organizations, governments, and political structures. Yet, leaders, teachers and others must also embrace “the continual flow” and know that a seeming “end” is only a new “beginning.” Peace can sustain us in our circular journeys through systems and time.

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Thus, there are “Three Intertwined Paths to Leading for Sustainable Peace.”

### *Learning and Sustaining Peace Based Mindfulness Practice*

Leaders who would sustain peace without must find and cultivate it within themselves. Not a matter of will or of a platitude, being mindful begins and continues through daily practice. Mindfulness transforms lives, rewires the brain, provides relief from physical and emotional pain, and enhances learning. Mindful practices in an organization bring about a more respectful, tolerant, and peaceful climate and culture. Teaching others how to live a mindful life and how to practice meditation gives them a lifelong skill for coping with the pressures of modern life in a turbulent world and for harvesting sustainable peace.

Peace, universal harmony, and shared responsibilities start from the within, and the inner peace starts with mindfulness and meditation. Mindfulness and mediation-based practices prior to the start of group sessions or daily work relaxes people, and studies show it helps them improve focus while diminishing anxiety. Mindful organizations can become joyful and stabilized as people learn to relax, to feel appreciated, and to relinquish anxiety.

### *Systems Thinking as a Path for Sustaining Peace*

In times of rapid change and uncertainty, leaders are faced with complexities that will and do challenge peace. Seeing and reacting only to particular parts of a system leads to fragmented responses that solve immediate problems. By seeing and being with the system as an organic whole, the leader can co-create sustainable peace. Understanding that a living system will re-create itself opens the possibility for peace being central to the relationships, processes, and contexts of the system.

Having this broader, richer systems view cannot be left to chance or to a vague commitment. Like mindfulness, systems thinking must be learned and practiced daily. Within the works of Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer (Theory U) are concepts and methods for leaders to become practitioners of systems thinking. Doing so enables them to deliberately cultivate organic change and to create the ethos of peace across and among systems, including Buddhism.

### *Embracing Continual Flow*

Some leaders believe that, when something is sustained, it has reached a static state and continues in that state over time. Leaders and those in a system may try to embrace and hold peace, only to find it slipping away. Peace, in this view, is not sustained. Peace, though, can be perpetuated, if we accept that it has no beginning or end. Rather, it is a dynamic and organic phenomenon, one that continually flows from past to present to future.

Embracing the continual flow brings the phenomenon of peace into a leader's mindful practice of it on a daily basis. "The O Theory" (Dr. Bach and Bureau) lights the way for leaders to mindfully live the flow of peace. Recursive in nature, "The O" flows circularly through elements of: recognizing, accepting, embracing, learning, practicing, transforming, sharing, completing. Were a leader to be aware of and live these, he or she would live peace, would be peace. "Being peace" sustains peace. It is another proposal to a *Buddhist Approach to Global Leadership and Shared Responsibilities for Sustainable Societies*.

### LEARNING AND SUSTAINING PEACE-BASED MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

*"We can choose how to live our lives now. We can seize any moment and begin anew" and "You need to wake up from your autopilot mode. You have to live deeply and with more awareness so that you can be attentive to each moment." - Thich Nhat Hanh*

As a Buddhist practitioner and educator, the primary author has been practicing and teaching Mindful Leadership as a model of peace-based mindfulness practice in his way of life and livelihood (see Appendix A, *Leading From Compassion*). Or as Malala Yousafzai (the Nobel Prize Winner in 2014) put it, "Let us bring equality, justice, and peace for all. Not just the politicians and the world leaders, we all need to contribute. Me. You. It is our duty." It is our responsibility for us to bring this kind of spiritual leadership, peace, and mindfulness to ourselves and to others.

Being mindful, is being *aware of something that may be important*. (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*) or as the *Oxford Dictionary* defines it, *Conscious or aware of something; Inclined or willing to do something*.

That willingness to do something is the practice of mindfulness in everyday life. Mindfulness hones focus, concentration, and awareness; it is the foundation of success and is a skill that requires practice to allow us to feel emotions without reacting, to respond rather than be reactive when it comes to stimulations. In education alone, according to Parker, et al. (2014), mindfulness enhances children's self-regulatory abilities, showing significant improvements in executive functioning skills significant, and substantial reductions were found in aggression and social problems. Black, D. S., & Fernando, R. (2014) also informed that teachers reported improved classroom behavior of their students (i.e., paying attention, self-control, participation in activities, and caring/respect for others). Furthermore, there are more than hundreds of thousands of studies on mindfulness and its effectiveness. Researchers have reported empirically-supported benefits of mindfulness including: reduced rumination, stress reduction, increase in working memory, more focus, less emotional reactivity, more cognitive flexibility, an increase in relationship satisfaction, increase in emotional intelligence and social connectedness, increased morality, increased fear modulation, increased immune function, improvement in overall well-being, increased information-processing speed, decreased mind wandering, decreased blood pressure, increase in empathy/compassion, decreased anxiety, enhanced self-insight, improved relationships, regulated attention, behavior, and emotion, health and well-being as well as enhanced academic and other intellectual outcomes.

Mindfulness, as in the Right Mindfulness, in the Noble Eightfold Path, is the art of living, a notion of a peaceful, harmonious, and righteous way of life that enhances the safety and happiness of family, community, and society. Thus, the daily practices of mindfulness and meditation are the way of life. In succinctly, as Bach (2014) pointed out, mindfulness is the energy of 'paying attention', self-observation, and awareness of the present moment, without judgment, and with an attitude of kindness and compassion, of what is going on around you and within you. Mindfulness brings you back to the present moment. The present moment is the only thing we truly have because of as an old saying goes, "*Yesterday is history and Tomorrow is mystery. Today is the gift--the here and now. (That's why it's called the PRESENT)*". Thus, the authors use the

Four Noble Truth and the Noble Eightfold Path as a way of to live, teach and lead.

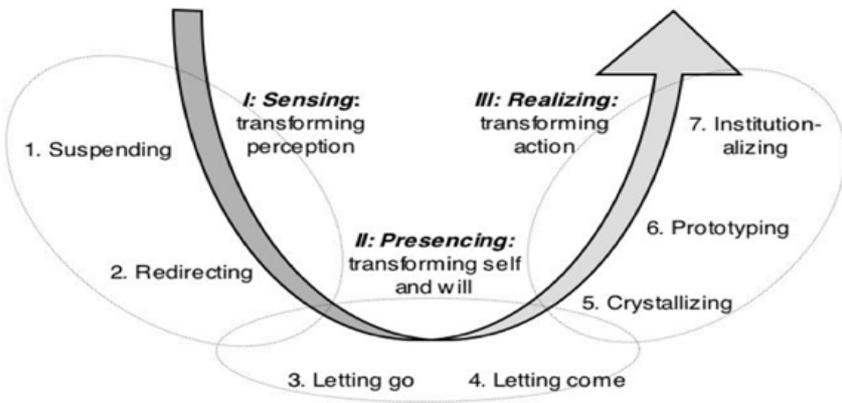
Boorum (2009) suggested that leadership has roots in religion, as there is a direct correlation between leadership and spirituality qualities. Marques (2010) urges that “it is perfectly possible to be spiritual yet not religious. There are many spiritual people who are atheists, agnostics, or that embrace multiple religions at the same time” (p.13). For her, “a spiritual worker is a person who simply maintains good human values, such as respect, tolerance, goodwill, support, and an effort to establish more meaning in his or her workplace” (p. 13). DeVost (2010) emphasized that current research in organizations has found a relationship between the spirituality of the leaders and the workplace spirituality. In this study, Devost (2010) found that the practice of ‘encouraging the heart’ – one of the five exemplified leadership values - was significantly positive. According to Kouzes & Posner (1995), the five practices of good leadership are: “Challenge the process, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, model the way, and encourage the heart” (p. 9).

Meanwhile, leaders often practice their spiritual life as well as their moral belief and ethical values. As Northouse (2004) has argued ethics and leadership are “concerned with the kinds of values and morals an individual or society finds desirable or appropriate” (p. 342). Furthermore, he pointed out that an ethical model of leadership consists of five components: a) show respect, b) serve others, c) show justice, d) manifest honesty and e) build community. In another study, Zhu, May, & Avolio (2004) define ethical leadership as “doing what is right, just and good” (p. 16). Zhu et al., (2004) added that leaders exhibit ethical behaviors when they are doing what is morally right, just, and good, and when they help to elevate followers’ moral awareness and moral self-actualization. Bass and Steidlmeier (1998) suggest that a truly transformational and effective leadership must be based upon: a) the moral character of the leader and their concern for oneself and others, b) the ethical values embedded in the leader’s vision, and c) the morality of the processes and social ethical choices and actions in which the leaders and followers engage.

Rather than a suggestion or an idea for leaders and organizations,

mindfulness can be woven into the fabric of the organization. Doing so must be deliberate and not capricious, but organizations and leaders may need a framework for doing so. One such approach is offered by the Presencing Institute and the works of Otto Scharmer, as seen in his books *Theory U* and *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (Scharmer, 2017 and 2013). The Institute continues to bring people from across the globe together to learn how to “move through the U” toward sustainable change and peace. Understood from a balcony view, engaging in such deliberate change can transform systems and the people in them, rather than merely hoping for change. Given much of the “un-peacefulness” in systems across the globe, we two authors believe that, through the practice of the processes of the U, people can transform systems.

The notion and practice of mindfulness translates into early phases of the U. We develop the abilities to “suspend” our preconceived notions and judgments. In the language of the U, we become aware of “downloading” notions that prevent us from seeing with fresh eyes, and we learn to observe (mindfully) how such preconceptions shape our views of people, systems, and the human condition. Individually and collectively, we learn to “let go” in order to “let come” what we could not see before, what may be our future selves. As we do, we are “presencing” - the state of being both present in the moment and sensing what could be in the future. Presencing, then, is “the experience of the coming in of the new and the transformation of the old” (Scharmer, 2013).



**Figure 1** The U Movement: Three Spaces, Seven Capacities

Source: Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers

In the language of Theory U, there are individual and collective “blind spots” that block our abilities to create socially-conscious change and systemic transformation. It is these blind spots that trap us into current ways of thinking and models of behavior, both individual and systemic. These, in turn, prevent us from creating sustainable global peace. If we can be mindful of our blind spots, we can begin to see with an open mind, open heart, and open will. Each of those three are dimensions of being human. How can we be mindful enough to live in the “open states” of them? The processes of Theory U, through mindfulness, offer us deliberate paths to embracing them and finding sustainable peace in systems.

*Phe’s journey of practice!*

*“Mindfulness practice means that we commit fully in each moment to be present; inviting ourselves to interface with this moment in full awareness, with the intention to embody as best we can an orientation of calmness, mindfulness, and equanimity right here and right now.” – Jon Kabat-Zinn*

In today’s world, there are trends in moral decline within the leadership ranks. Personal interests, benefits, and greed appear to be outweighing public and/or community values and well-being. Leaders often lack an in-depth understanding of the spiritual leadership practices of the self, so these the authors started looking inward to find a solution to this issue. It starts with living life mindfully, and in this case living according to the Noble Eightfold Path. These qualities of leadership enhance spiritual practices such as, compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, or understanding that may lead to moral and ethical consequences.

For Phe’s journey, it starts with the Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association at GĐPT Linh Quang in 1991 and begins with a position in leadership in 1994 as a freshman in college at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. He was trained as a GĐPT leader in 1996 at Trại Huấn Luyện A Dục Lộ Uyển in Houston, TX. Since then, he embraced and implemented Lead-by-example (Thân giáo), He wrote an extensive research paper on the leaderships, titled *Leadership at Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association (VBYA) Also known as GĐPT*. Here is the last portion of the research article

in his book, *An Essence Of Mindful Leadership: Learning Through Mindfulness And Compassion* (Bach, 2015).

...Leaders of *Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association (VBYA)*, also known as *GDPT*, must practice and implement the value of leading-by-example (Thần giáo); it is certainly essential for the success of the organization. According to Bach (2012), “Leading by example is just one invaluable lesson the Buddha taught us. It is based upon our mindful thought, speech, and actions in our daily life. His teachings have reached and transformed innumerable people from all walks of life. The peaceful development of humanity is in large part due to the enlightened teachings of the Buddha. Today, Buddhism can be a possible solution for the human crises” (p. 5). He continues to suggest that Buddhist youth leaders should establish these recommendations: 1) Establishing a Moral and Ethical Mindset; 2) Understanding and articulating the principle of cause and effect (Law of Karma); 3) Think Globally and Act Locally – making a difference around you first; 4) Mutual Respect and Mutual Benefit; 5) Being present to each other - (Presencing as in the Theory U), 6) The Power of Unity or the Collaboration with other Organizations for Sustainable change; and 7) Be a (Buddhist) Practitioner, not only a Learner (p.6).

As a leader, especially for leaders in Buddhist institutions, one must be mindful and have a solid foundation in the Dharma (the teaching of Buddha). As Michael Carroll (2008) in his book, *The Mindful Leader*, suggests, the ten talents of a mindful leader are: simplicity, poise, respect, courage, confidence, enthusiasm, patience, awareness, skillfulness, and humility. He continues that bringing our full being to work: synchronizing, engaging the whole, inspiring health and well-being in organizations and establishing authenticity all combine to define a successful leader.

Furthermore, the leaders should live a spiritual life and lead by setting positive examples. Here is another study by Andre L. Delbecq (2008), a professor of Organizational Analysis and Management at J. Thomas and Kathleen L. McCarthy University; and as the director of the Institute for Spirituality and Organization Leadership at Santa University’s Leavey School of Business. Delbecq (2008) suggests that the managers, who are working with

him, possess positive changes through meditation and spiritual disciplines (p. 495):

- *Improved capacities to listen—less need to dominate*
- *More patience with others—less judgmental and self-asserting*
- *Great adaptability—less desire to control events and others*
- *Great focus—less distraction and anxiety*
- *Greater ability to devote self to service through work—less frustration with burdens and irritants at work*
- *More hopefulness and joyfulness even in times of difficulty—less cynicism and pessimism*
- *Greater overall serenity and trust*
- *More confidence in using personal competencies—deeper knowledge of self-limitations, more trust that things will work out*
- *Persistence and diligence—less withdrawal and self-occupation when under stress*

To him, nourishing the soul of the leader and the inner growth certainly matters. Thus, the spiritual dimension of leadership is particularly crucial and vital for success in any organization. In short, once a Buddhist leader, a lifelong leader, and Phe continues to teach Mindful Leadership to fellow educators in the state of California and around the country. He has been training the over 3000 educators for the last 5 years (see Appendix B).

#### SYSTEMS THINKING AS A PATH FOR SUSTAINING PEACE

*“We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace with ourselves.” Dalai Lama*

*“Hope lives when people remember.” Simon Wiesenthal.*

Creating sustainable peace can grow from our explorations of two notions: ‘Peace is a dynamic and organic phenomenon, one that continually flows from past to present to future *in systems*’ and ‘A living system will re-create itself and open the possibility for peace being central to the relationships, processes, and contexts of the system.’ Both notions can be framed through “systems thinking.” In this paper we begin to explore both, but precede that with noting

how the seed of the peace process is found in the writing and practices of Thich Nhat Hanh and others. This section concludes on a note of how systems thinking for peace is a bridge from the U-theory to the O-theory.

More importantly, take the work of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh is an example. He is a peace activist, a writer, a poet, a scholar, and a Buddhist monk, and is the champion of mindfulness. His work has carried mindfulness practices into mainstream culture. His wisdom and practice of mindfulness have provided guidance and a practical approach, which benefit individuals, families and organizations. Thich Nhat Hanh (1993, 2007) emphasizes: “With mindfulness, we are aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world, and we avoid doing harm to ourselves and others.” He continues: “Mindfulness protects us, our families, and our society, and ensures a safe and happy present and a safe and happy future. Precepts are the most concrete expression of the practice of mindfulness” (p. 2).

Precepts or Sila (in Sankrit and Pali – the ancient language of India) is a “code of conduct that embraces a commitment to harmony and self-restraint with the principle motivation being non-violence, or freedom from causing harm” Bodhi (2005). It can be described in various ways as virtue (Gethin, 1998, p. 170; Harvey, 2007, p. 199), right conduct (Gethin (1998), p. 170), morality (Gombrich, 2002, p. 89; Nyanatiloka, 1988, and Saddhatissa, 1987, pp. 54, 56), moral discipline (Bodhi, 2005, p. 153) and precept.

In his book, “For a future to be possible: Buddhists ethics for everyday life”, he encouraged us to practice the precepts that we have abided to. The five most basic precepts of ancient times (i.e. do not kill, steal, perform sexual misconduct, lie or use alcohol/intoxicant) still apply for all Buddhists today (Bodhi, 2005; Thich, 1993, 2011). Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich 1993, 2007, 2011) skillfully and compassionately translated these precepts for our modern time and called them “The Five Mindfulness Trainings”. According to him, they “represent the Buddhist vision for a global spirituality and ethics. They are a concrete expression of the Buddha’s teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path,

the path of right understanding and true love, leading to healing, transformation, and happiness for ourselves and for the world.”

In addition, Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich 1993, 2007, 2011) points out that “to practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings is to cultivate the insight of interbeing, or Right View, which can remove all discrimination, intolerance, anger, fear, and despair.” The five ancient precepts were adapted to our modern time under Thich Nhat Hanh’s vision as the Five Mindfulness Trainings. They are as follows:

### **The First Mindfulness Training - Reverence For Life**

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world.

### **The Second Mindfulness Training - True Happiness (Generosity)**

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others; and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering; that true happiness is not possible without understanding and compassion; and that running after wealth, fame, power and sensual pleasures can bring much suffering and despair. I am aware that happiness depends on my mental attitude and not on external conditions, and that I can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that I already have more than enough conditions to be happy. I am committed to practicing Right Livelihood so that I can help reduce the suffering of living beings on Earth and reverse the process of global warming.

### **The Third Mindfulness Training - True Love (Sexual Responsibility)**

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. Knowing that sexual desire is not love, and that sexual activity motivated by craving always harms myself as well as others, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without true love and a deep, long-term commitment made known to my family and friends. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. Seeing that body and mind are one, I am committed to learning appropriate ways to take care of my sexual energy and cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness – which are the four basic elements of true love – for my greater happiness and the greater happiness of others. Practicing true love, we know that we will continue beautifully into the future.

### **The Fourth Mindfulness Training - Loving Speech and Deep Listening**

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope. When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak. I will practice mindful breathing and walking in order to recognize and to look deeply into my anger. I know that the roots of anger can be found in my wrong perceptions and lack of understanding of the suffering in myself and in the other person. I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to utter words that can cause division or discord. I will practice Right Diligence to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear that lie deep in my consciousness.

### The Fifth Mindfulness Training - Nourishment and Healing (Diet for a mindful society)

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will practice looking deeply into how I consume the Four Kinds of Nutriment, namely edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. I am determined not to gamble, or to use alcohol, drugs, or any other products which contain toxins, such as certain websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations. I will practice coming back to the present moment to be in touch with the refreshing, healing and nourishing elements in me and around me, not letting regrets and sorrow drag me back into the past nor letting anxieties, fear, or craving pull me out of the present moment. I am determined not to try to cover up loneliness, anxiety, or other suffering by losing myself in consumption. I will contemplate interbeing and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well-being in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society and the Earth.

Another seed of strong leadership is leading by example. Venerable Thích Minh Đạt (2011) believes leadership influences by: 1) Example: teach through your actions or behavior. One must live a moral and ethical life. Benefit yourself and benefit others, and then influence and contribute positively to our community and society. 2) Teaching by loving speech: seek understanding and wisdom. 3) Teaching by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path: The first one is Right Thought: your thinking must be constructive and always be based on the teachings of the Buddha – Compassion and Wisdom.

To emphasize this point, one should live accordingly to the teaching of the Enlightened One, the Buddha. The author takes that into his everyday life practices. He is applying and implementing by teaching many workshops for teachers in the state of California. Some of the workshops covered are Mindful Leadership: A Mindfulness-based Professional Development Workshop for All Educators; The Neuroscience of Mindfulness: The Art to Cultivate

Understanding, Respect, Academic Success, and Social-Emotional Well-Being; Mindfulness in the Classrooms; Mindfulness; Mindful Leadership: Mindfulness Practices for an Equitable, Emotionally Safe Classroom; Mindful Leadership: “Be Prepared” and “Do a Good Turn Daily” in the Spirit of Vietnamese Americans; and Social Emotional Skills for Life.

If we know, then, that peace rises from within individuals’ daily practices of mindfulness, we are left with wondering how the systems humans create can become generators of larger contexts of peace. What constitutes a “system” we define very broadly - any design created by humans to meet multiple purposes, be they spiritual, political, charitable, financial, and so on. How, then, can “peace be a dynamic and organic phenomenon, one that continually flows from past to present to future - *in systems?*”

We must, first, see systems in totality and know that they are organic and living. While there are many metaphors for seeing from broad perspectives, that of the “balcony view” helps us learn to see and know the system in all of its complexities, dynamics of growth, and seeming stagnations. To be a “systems thinker”, though, we must suspend our judgments about the system, and, most particularly, the people in it. We cannot see and engage with an organic, living system, if our “blind spots” fixate us on what has been in the system and on the foibles of humans in it. Such leads to the “collective failures” described so well in Scharmer’s works. To see from the balcony, to see without judgment gives us the view from the balcony and opens up the possibility for moving up the right side of Theory U into co-creating and co-evolving with others in “systems of peace.”

If there is circularity here, it is this: To see from the balcony, to suspend our judgments, to co-create and co-evolve with others, we must sustain our practices of mindfulness. Doing so is that “seed of leading by example” (Thich Nhat Hanh). For leaders who would co-evolve with others in a system to sustainable peace, we are reminded by Dr. Phe Bach that “The mindful leader is the one who leads *inside out* with understanding, compassion, and wisdom.” Systems can be transformed for sustainable peace on by the humans in the systems. Within the people and, thus, in the system, “peace is every step” - to

borrow the phrase from Thich Nhat Hanh. By doing so, we come to understand that “a living system will re-create itself and open the possibility for peace being central to the relationships, processes, and contexts of the system.”

As compassionate leaders with a balcony view of a system, we can co-evolve with others to create systems that embody sustainable peace. That we can do by moving through the “U” to create prototypes of emerging systems grounded in peace and compassion. Creating prototypes for peace and assessing them, as would be done through the U, is not a process that ends. Our balcony view and practice would be continual, circular, and flowing, as engendered in the O-theory.

### EMBRACING CONTINUAL FLOW



Figure 2: The foundation of O Theory

*“Living 24 hours with mindfulness is more worthwhile than living 100 years without it.” - The Buddha*

The “O” theory is the continuation of this BuddhaDharma flow. O has no beginning or ending. It symbolizes for completeness or wholeness and ultimately the emptiness. As Watson (2014) puts it, “a philosophy of emptiness helps us to acknowledge impermanence, contingency and the tragic sense of life and prosper on a middle path between denial and mindless distraction and a nihilistic loss of value.” A beauty of the O theory is centered at the foundation of any Threefold principles in Buddhism such as Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; (Phật Pháp Tăng); Threefold Training / Tam Vô Lậu Học (Giới Định Tuệ): Higher

virtue (*adhisīla-sikkhā*), Higher mind (*adhicitta-sikkhā*), Higher wisdom (*adhipaññā-sikkhā*); Bi-Trí-Dūng (*Compassion-Wisdom-Courage*). The “O” theory has the core values of mindfulness, love, understanding, perseverance, diligence, determination, harmony, trust, trustworthiness, joy, gratitude, integrity, honesty, and responsibility.

According to Buddhist Theravada tradition, pursuing the Threefold Training, as Thanissaro Bhikkhu (*trans.*) (1998b) translated from Buddhist text can lead to the abandonment of lust, hatred, and delusion. Ultimately, anyone who is fully accomplished in this training attains Nibbana (*Nirvana*).

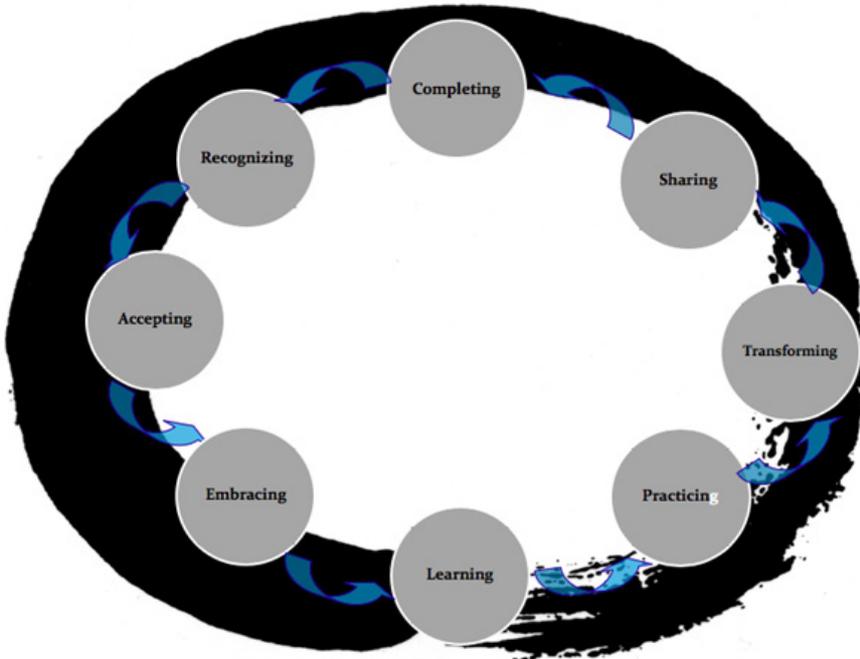
The “O” theory has 8 components, just like the Noble Eightfold Path; these components are: recognizing, accepting, embracing, learning, practicing, transforming, sharing, completing.

**1. Recognizing:** First and foremost, we must perceive clearly or realize everything as-is. We need to acknowledge that peace within creates beauty without, and that inner peace is the foundation for a more harmonious society. One must recognize the fact. For example, human species won’t be able to solve climate change and/or global warming if we are in denial of it. We have to recognize that human activities are the main factors that lead to this crisis. We have to recognize and examine at both micro and macro levels.

As if a chemist recognizes that everything is composed of smaller sub-particles and even quarks and how these basic components are interacting and behaving. Looking at the ocean at the first sight, we can see the water, space, its shorelines, and its immenseness. But that is just a macroscopic view of all matters, at a microscopic view, it is all the connection or the bonding, the intermolecular forces and attraction between molecules. We must have a scientific approach to solve any problem and even that starts with the recognition that we have a problem, and it is necessary to define it. We recognize that we have a problem, an issue, and we must state it clearly so that we can make things better for us.

**2. Accepting:** After the realization period, one must accept the fact in order to be able to move on. Accepting is the art of being at ease. For example, if we don’t accept the fact that there is no global warming, then we won’t be able to seek for the solution.

**3. Embracing:** As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary puts it, embracing is ‘*hold (someone) closely in one’s arms, especially as a sign of affection; accept (a belief, theory, or change) willingly and enthusiastically; include or contain (something) as a constituent part.*’ Whatever it is, one must be willing to embrace others as if they were a child that is crying, one must hold and comfort first.



The O theory - Transform oneself, transform organization and society.

Figure 3: The diagram of O Theory

Some leaders believe that, when something is sustained, it has reached a static state and continues in that state over time. Leaders and those in a system may try to embrace and hold peace, only to find it slipping away. Peace, in this view, is not sustained. Peace, though, can be perpetuated, if we accept that it has no beginning or end. Rather, it is a dynamic and organic phenomenon, one that continually flows from past to present to future. Embracing the continual flow brings the phenomenon of peace into a leader’s mindful practice of it on a daily basis.

**4. Learning:** As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it, it is ‘*the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught.*’

In times of rapid change and uncertainty, leaders are faced with complexities that will and do challenge peace. Seeing and reacting only to particular parts of a system leads to fragmented responses that solve immediate problems. By seeing and being with the system as an organic whole, the leader can co-create sustainable peace. Understanding that a living system will re-create itself opens the possibility for peace being central to the relationships, processes, and contexts of the system.

**5. Practicing:** As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary puts it: *‘Actively pursuing or engaged in a particular profession, occupation, or way of life.’*

Sustainable peace anchors itself in mindfulness of the present, the people, and the microcosms in which we exist. Rather than existing as a static state, the peace is organic and dynamic, flowing itself around the vagaries of “unpeacefulness.” Thus, being a mindful leader begins with the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path and finding the peace within oneself and continues by manifesting that peace every day. Doing so is the seed from which systems and circumstances can, themselves, perpetuate peace.

**6. Transforming:** As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary puts it, *‘make a marked change in the form, nature, or appearance of, after the stages of learning and practicing, one must transform into the betterment, from something negative to something positive. Transformation is the art of progression. Without it, there is simply no development and advancement.*

**7. Sharing:** Next step after transforming is an art of sharing to making sure others are even better than oneself, as in the Golden Rules. The American’s concepts of Paying It Forward is priceless and makes the world a better place to live.

**8. Completing:** Lastly, the notion of completeness or wholeness is so essential in our human life. We are just visitors to this planet; we’ll come and go just like everyone else, what we leave behind is our own legacy. Thus, we must do everything that we can while we are here on Earth to make this world more harmonious, peaceful, and kind so that our children and grandchildren can live and excel. Now the whole circle is completed.

This O theory is a meticulously way to remind us that we need to live in the present moment, not worrying about the future since it is yet to come nor stuck in the past. With mindfulness and meditation, using breathing as the anchor, helps us focus on the present moment and allows us to be present or ‘presencing’ as in the U theory. It takes practice to train our minds to be in the presence. Practices make it better over time, just like nerve cells can be rewired and that ‘neurons that fire together wire together’; in other words, ‘what you practice grows stronger’, including mindfulness, peace and inner values. As Ven. Prof. Dr. Phramaha Hansa Dhammaso, the Director of Office of International Association of Buddhist Universities), in his paper, the Peace Village, recognized that peace brings loving-kindness, happiness, solidarity and harmony to human beings and societies.

Additionally, the primary author wrote a short paper titled, CHANGE: FEAR ME NOT – EMBRACE ME: Five thoughts on fostering change, which is an example of this continual flow. (Appendix C), as though there is no beginning and there is no ending.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusions expected to be drawn from this paper are to understand our lived-experiences, beliefs, practices, and leadership styles and daily practices. Peace, mindfulness and transformation are happening because of choice not chance. Contemplating the U theory, we learn to “let go” in order to “let come” and that we are “presencing” - the state of being both present in the moment and sensing what could be in the future. By doing so, we engage in O theory - a completion of the circle.

The O theory also reveals a strong, yet simple notion: *It is better to be a human being than a human doing.* What is embedded in the Vietnamese Buddhist monks’ leadership style is their daily practice that has transformed the lives of those in their communities. It is the idea of living inside out; it is the idea of peace. The findings show that this leadership style is based upon wisdom, understanding, practice, peace of mind, harmony, and compassion. All these elements are associated with a peaceful existence.

We can live, then, “Three Intertwined Paths to Leading for

Sustainable Peace.” We can learn and sustain peace based on mindfulness practice. Systems thinking can be a path for sustaining peace. We can live and embrace the continual flow of the O Theory. Sustaining peace through these three paths can be the best of who we are as humans.

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