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Inner Transformation and Well-being: A Transformations Community Dialogue

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Abstract

Trends towards unsustainability are worsening, driving interest in inner transformation to support progress towards a more viable and just future. Many approaches to these transformations include interventions intended to shift ways of seeing, being, and relating in the world from a narrative of separation towards one of interconnectedness. Transforming dominant systems that perpetuate inequities and imperil both social and ecological systems is a necessary yet profoundly challenging task. This paper synthesizes the dialogue between four individuals with diverse backgrounds in inner transformation, sustainability, and systemic change hosted by the Transformations Community at the annual 2023 conference. Diverse approaches to and cautions for shifting mindsets towards more sustainable worldviews were discussed. Emergent insights from the discussion inform a growing body of scholarship and practice at the nexus of inner and outer sustainability.

Introduction

The Transformations Community (TC) represents a constellation of researchers and practitioners concerned with improving conditions for social and ecological flourishing. As a global network of changemakers, the TC holds space for innovative, inclusive, and diverse approaches to systemic change in service to collective and long-term well-being. This paper is a reflection of insights gathered during the annual 2023 conference during the session: Inner Transformation & Well-being. While it draws on sustainability transformations research gesturing toward the urgent need for profound societal transformations in response to current unsustainable trajectories (e.g., Abson et al., 2017; O'Brien, 2018; Feola, 2015; Linnér and Wibeck, 2020), the paper further develops ideas on personal sustainability transformations - the subjective beliefs, values, worldviews and paradigms that influence how people experience, perceive, and define themselves, systems and structures, as well as their behaviors and practices (O'Brien, 2018). Central to the session were inner dimensions of personal sustainability transformations – a too often neglected aspect of societal transformation scholarship and practice (Ives et al., 2020) yet considered a deep leverage point with great potential for system change (Woiwode et al., 2021).

The session discussion circulated around the synergies between inner and outer change, with specific focus on contemplative traditions, collective efficacy, and the need for precaution when scaling interventions.

Background: Exploring the Nexus Between Inner and Outer Sustainability

Organized by the Transformations Community as part of their annual 2023 conference, this session highlighted the need for shifts in inner dimensions – including worldviews, values, and belief systems – to support sustainability progress. Panelists and participants expressed curiosity around how different skills and capacities could accelerate the changes needed to support both individual and collective well-being. Practices linked to wisdom traditions, including meditation and mindfulness, as well as play, were explored as potential pathways to catalyze new ways of seeing, being, and relating.

Panelists included:

1. Pål Dobrin: CEO Empaticus and CARE Meditation
2. Therese Asplund: Associate Professor, Centre for Climate Science and Policy Research, Department of Thematic Studies, Environmental Change, Linköping University
3. Kira Jade Cooper: Postdoctoral Researcher, WISIR (Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience), University of Waterloo
4. Anne Taufen: Professor of Urban Studies at the University of Washington
Facilitator: Nick Graham

Insights

Key Insight 1: Wisdom traditions and shifting awareness from separation to connection

The first key inquiry to emerge was linked to wisdom traditions, specifically, how these ancient practices may support transformations in dominant ways of thinking and being. Wisdom traditions include religious and spiritual philosophies, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, that are oriented towards investigating and exploring the nature of reality through various forms of insight practices. Such practices often include the cultivation of various skills and capacities to more accurately perceive the nature of reality, to recognize causes of suffering, and, in some cases, to reduce suffering (Dhammananda, 1964). Through their rich lenses, wisdom traditions offer a plurality of descriptions and approaches for understanding the interconnectedness and inseparability of all phenomena.

Within the context of the session, wisdom traditions were described as potential pathways to support a profound shift in consciousness – from separation towards connection or interbeing (Rauschmayer 2019). This transformative process was described as a way to shift how an individual perceives the Self in relationship to other beings and the cosmos more broadly. Many wisdom traditions are practiced in order to attain enlightenment, self-realization, or a profound sense of unity with all life, and in so doing, are pathways believed to expand consciousness and support a more harmonious relationship with the natural world (Smith, 1986).

The session explored how worldviews predicated on separation are detrimental to both social and ecological well-being. For example, separation is positively correlated with increased loneliness, anxiety, and despair (Barjaková, Garnero, and d’Hombres, 2023). Similarly, the narrative of separation lends itself to anthropocentrism, thus legitimizing ecological degradation and human exceptionalism (de Witt 2016; Eisenstein 2013). One of the profound benefits of wisdom traditions, as discussed in the session, is the encouragement of deep introspection to help individuals honestly and openly examine their inner dimensions. The impetus for these introspective practices is to guide individuals towards a state of meta-awareness through which they become aware that they are aware and, in so doing, can make conscious their worldviews, values, and belief systems that are to different extents in service or detrimental to transformations towards collective well-being (Donald et al. 2019; Dorjee 2016; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). For example, interventions such as CARE (compassion, awareness, resilience, and emotion), which draw from core elements from many wisdom traditions, have demonstrated benefits for increasing measures of well-being (Safaeian, Tavakolifard, and Roohi, 2022).

Key Insight 2: Outer transformations require inner reflection, play, and embodiment.

Another key insight discussed was linked to transformative wellness and healing within the context of sustainability (Kastner and Matthies, 2023). Collective efficacy – shared beliefs around a group’s capacity to achieve goals – is influenced by inherited paradigms and dominant sensemaking regimes (Hipp 2016; Hoogsteen 2020). As such, transformations towards long-term and collective well-being necessitate more intersectional and contextual awareness, especially around relationality with self, others, and the more-than-human world (Abram 2020; Böhme, Walsh, and Wamsler 2022).

Since humans are both social and ecological beings, it is essential that transformative healing and well-being is approached not as an individual process but rather as a shared, conscious, and community endeavor. Through disciplined patterns of play – including sports, performing arts, and spiritual and religious traditions – individuals can cultivate novel capacities for healing (Nowakowski-Sims et al., 2023; Rhodes, 2015). Some of these core healing capacities include trust nurturing, both self and other individuals. Embodied practices, especially when linked to play, are mutually supportive of individual and communal transformative healing, especially when trauma is present (Wang and You)

Key Insight 3: Precaution is needed to ensure inner transformations align with requirements for outer sustainability

The need for precaution when navigating shifts in consciousness was another key topic, specifically, the need to ensure that interventions for inner transformation do not become extractive, exploitative, or antagonistic to well-being. In the discussion, there were concerns raised surrounding the need to consider that not all change interventions would be universally beneficial in all contexts and that the potential negative effects of different change processes ought to be considered. Even popular practices such as post-Buddhist mindfulness have been associated with undesirable effects, such as reducing pro-social reparations and deepening social inequities when used in specific contexts (Davis & BehmCross, 2020; Hafenbrack et al., 2021;

Rose Black & Switzer, 2022). Against a backdrop of declining global mental health, deepening inequities, and ecological decline, for inner transformations to contribute to transitions towards a more just and viable future, it is essential that interventions for inner transformation do not undermine the resilience and well-being of social and ecological systems (Ebi and Hess 2020; IPBES 2022; WHO 2022).

Despite the profound range of offerings for inner transformation, there are few evaluative processes to examine to what extent and how interventions for inner transformation align with outer sustainability (Cooper and Gibson, 2023). Linking interventions for inner transformation with considerations for broader sustainability requirements is likely essential for coupling these change processes with long-term and collective well-being. The integration of insights from various traditions, community-based and embodied practices, and attention to healing social and ecological rifts will need to occur in tandem to support sustainability transformations at scale.

Conclusion

This panel discussion hosted by the Transformations Community provided timely insights into the relationship between inner transformation and well-being. Among the many topics discussed, the need to cultivate more diverse and inclusive ways of seeing, being, and relating resonated most strongly throughout the session. Similarly, cultivating capacities for compassion, healing, and joy were also particularly salient.

The next steps and takeaway points that were identified in the discussion included:

- Recognizing the value of wisdom and contemplative traditions to support sustainability progress, particularly through the cultivation of compassion, empathy, and attentional regulation;
- Addressing the need for more physical spaces for community-led, emergent, and collaborative projects that can nurture inner transformations at the local level;
- Encouraging activities that promote embodied experiences in the form of play to nourish joy, lightheartedness, and fun along the transformative journey;
- Approaching interventions for inner transformation with precaution and not assuming universal benefit to all is important in these challenging times. Such efforts would help to mitigate adverse effects that could undermine conditions for sustainability and
- Supporting inner work to help individuals cultivate the resilience to sensemaking in a time of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA).

This dialogue contributes to an emerging body of scholarship exploring the nexus of inner and outer sustainability. Hopefully, this panel will be one of many conversations examining the relationship between inner transformation and well-being.

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