

THE FLOURISHING PRISON INITIATIVE

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of Philosophy

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas

May 8, 2023

THE FLOURISHING PRISON INITIATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of this project is flourishing in prison, with a focus on how mindfulness practice can help make that accessible to this particularly vulnerable population of people. I am very concerned about the harsh and unjust treatment of people in prison that not only works against a human being's innate capacity for transformation, but also compromises the well-being of both the incarcerated and those who work in prisons. More generally, the treatment of people in prison compromises our communities since most people in prison eventually transition back into civil society. Those individuals who experience positive and healthy transformation while incarcerated are much more likely to be supportive members of healthy communities. As part of this project, I explore the notions of flourishing, self, and interdependence as well as the transformational capacity of mindfulness practice in promoting well-being and flourishing. I integrate valuable perspectives of those who have worked with the incarcerated or have some experience with them and experiential practices.

## 1. Introduction

People in prison suffer. This is undeniable. It is clear that the conditions this group faces on a daily basis inhibits their ability to grow, develop healthy lifestyle choices, and live well. With conditions that often exacerbate mental health conditions, it is unfortunate to note that a recent study reports that 69% of those confined to federal prison did not receive mental or behavioral health treatment.<sup>1</sup> A lack of a sense of belonging and community, punitive sentences, and limited access to mental and physical health care, on top of other conditions, dramatically decrease the possibility for people in prisons to take the opportunity to transform themselves onto a more sustainable and healthy path that can promote flourishing. Indeed, the current attitude in the American population towards incarceration in the U.S. penal system seems to preclude even having discussions of systems that would promote transformation and flourishing.

When discussing prison reform, people tend to lean towards legislative, financial, and immediate solution-oriented changes. While these are necessary reform initiatives, they tend to overlook the self or "inner" work that can be done to transform unhealthy ways of living into ones that promote sustainable lifestyles of living well individually but also offer a supportive dimension of healthy community.

I maintain that we need to rethink the approach to prison reform in an innovative way that supports the self-growth and self-development of people in prison to promote their flourishing rather than perpetuating suffering. I begin by describing the current challenges people in prison face. Prior to discussing a model of prison flourishing, I consider the notion of flourishing itself, and in a later section defend a conception of flourishing that is grounded in a conception of self. My strategy avoids the need for defining flourishing, and thereby allows for cultural variations in how flourishing is understood and experienced in daily life. One might think of this as a meta-level conception of flourishing that allows for local variations in practice. For example, flourishing for someone living in Manhattan is likely going to have a different texture from flourishing among the Kaxinawa in the Amazon rainforest.

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<sup>1</sup> Families Against Mandatory Minimums, "The Answer is Less Punishment, Not More Crime" (Washington, D.C.: FAMM, May 31, 2017), 4, [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/famm/Prison-Report\\_May-31\\_Final.pdf](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/famm/Prison-Report_May-31_Final.pdf).

One question that regularly does not get asked among those working in the academic disciplines of philosophy or psychology is what assumptions about the self lie behind how we think of flourishing and happiness. This is unfortunate since an unclear conception of self would seem to skew any attempt to account for flourishing. My argument is that no attempt to account for flourishing is defensible unless one moves from a definable account of self. Many raised in the West tend to assume that there is a hard distinction between mind and body, as well as self, other people, and nature. We also tend to think that we are the same person over time. For example, consider how we treat people in prison. Someone who commits a horrific crime at 16 and is tried as an adult could face life in prison. Is it reasonable to think that this person at 65 is the same person as the young man who committed the murder at 16?

My project appeals to a position that views the self as a dynamic pattern of various psychological, interpersonal, and ecological dimensions, among others, rather than anything like a property, a substance, or some personal essence. The self is real, but as philosopher Evan Thompson argues, it is a real construction. One might think of the self as an ongoing project rather than as some thing or some set of properties. Here, I draw from the Enactivist model of mind and self that is grounded in a combination of dynamic systems theory, cognitive science, phenomenology, and Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. I argue that because the self is an activity, flourishing should be construed as an activity of a certain sort, with the goal to be *selfing* well. A key dimension of self in this model of prison flourishing is interdependence. Each person is a project embedded in the world, suggesting that fundamental dimensions of each of us are our interpersonal and ecological "relatings." I argue that dedicated mindfulness and embodiment practices along with education about worldviews, mindsets, values, and cognitive and behavioral patterns can promote inner transformation to support both sustainable living and sustainable conditions for growth in non-punitive-based opportunities for the incarcerated.

Next, I turn to a low cost, evidence-based transformational approach that could be implemented as a step forward toward this sort of reform: the integration of mindfulness-based programs that promote flourishing. Such transformational programs that promote flourishing would not only benefit those in prison but also carry over into helping incarcerated people successfully transition back into their communities and live well.

Finally, one way to implement reform and ameliorate the suffering of people in prison is to shift to what I call, based on current research, a "sustainable regeneration model," which I explain by analogy with a regenerative eco-village model.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Lived Experience

There are a vast number of challenges people in prison face, including being ostracized from the public, limited contact with the outside world, exposure to prison-related violence, threats of solitary confinement, and low pay for difficult work. Even seemingly less severe examples, such as low-quality sleep accommodations and food, still contribute to a heightened vulnerability to depression, feelings of hopelessness, and an overall, general dissatisfaction with life.

Ross Robinson, the Director of Training at the Holistic Life Foundation, an organization which provides mindful assistance to underserved communities, has worked with incarcerated youth and adults to advocate for their well-being and to share his experience with the transformative potential of meditation and mindfulness practice. In an interview, Robinson described certain challenges that arise when attempting to bring mindfulness into such facilities, focusing on correctional officers. For example, he explained that there have been times where these officers will purposefully shake their keys while walking around the meditation group. Robinson went on to say that while he did "kindly" ask the officer to stop, despite the annoyance, "you still have to be compassionate."<sup>3</sup> He pointed out that "every facility I've been in has been short staffed... you're dealing with people that are coming to a job that are probably not happy to be there; they're overworked, sleep deprived, tired, constantly there, and then you have to emotionally show up to people that are already experiencing trauma."<sup>4</sup> In this way, the suffering in prison becomes a "full circle."<sup>5</sup>

The conditions faced by prison employees leads to a disorganized, and often chaotic, facility. Inmates have complained to Robinson that "we don't even get to go to

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<sup>2</sup> Christoph Wiowode, "Inner transformation to sustainability as a deep leverage point: fostering new avenues for change through dialogue and reflection," *College Composition and Communication* 16 (2021).

<sup>3</sup> Ross Robinson (Director of Training at Holistic Life Foundation) in discussion with the author, March 2023. <https://holisticlifefoundation.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson.

our programs.”<sup>6</sup> He recalled an experience where he was brought into the prison and sat in his room, and because of how short staffed the facility was, the incarcerated participants were never escorted to him. Robinson described that it even felt like he was incarcerated in that moment.<sup>7</sup> He recalled another, almost opposite experience, where he was left for about an hour with his incarcerated participants when several individuals were left completely unaccounted for. When the guards finally arrived, they blamed the program for “messing up our numbers.”<sup>8</sup>

Robinson observed that “people just fall through the cracks.” To elaborate, he said that the guards “can’t monitor everyone.”<sup>9</sup> This lack of proper attention, when combined with medical situations, such as psychological ailments, has led to the incarcerated participants of his programs showing up in “zombie mode.”<sup>10</sup>

Simply having meditation programs is not enough to fix the massive problem that is the American prison system. It is widely recognized that our system is deeply flawed and in need of major reform. However, the way we do this is up for debate. Inner transformation is key to making flourishing accessible to those in prison.

### 3. Introduction to Flourishing

In this section, I turn to a discussion of self and selfhood, a topic which is woefully overlooked and at best underappreciated in discussions of the penal system and traditional prison reform initiatives. Such discussions tend to focus exclusively on structural change and treating mental disorders – both necessary projects, but ones that could be significantly bolstered and transformed by considerations of what it means to be a self and what it means to flourish.

Flourishing, even in prison, is possible and desirable. Conversation on prison reform is oriented towards legislative, financial, and immediate solution-oriented changes. I am arguing that we should rethink this approach to support the self-growth and development of people in prison. Rather than supporting a system which

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson.

<sup>7</sup> Robinson.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson.

perpetuates suffering, we should reframe the concept of prison reform to one that promotes flourishing through inner transformation.

What exactly is flourishing, though? The popular Positive Psychology Movement identifies specific, universal elements of flourishing, largely focused on happiness, pleasure, and simply feeling great.<sup>11</sup> The Positive Psychology website cites Dr. Martin Seligman's PERMA model that defines five factors of flourishing which, if tended, create a flourishing state. The model includes Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments.<sup>12</sup> Flourishing, according to this movement, is "to find fulfillment in our lives, accomplishing meaningful and worthwhile tasks, and connecting with others at a deeper level – in essence, living the 'good' life."<sup>13</sup>

I offer two criticisms of this view. First, despite the PERMA model's acknowledgment of multiple factors, there remains a centering around positive emotions and feeling great. The movement neglects the inevitability and importance of life's challenges.<sup>14</sup> Moments of suffering are associated with certain heavier emotions which have a substantial role in our growth and development.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh often expressed this relationship by saying, "no mud, no lotus."<sup>15</sup> This saying explains that the mud of the pond is a necessary element for the growth and bloom of the beautiful lotus flower. Without the essential nutrients held in the darkness and muck of the mud, the lotus could not thrive. When applied to human life, this means that "the secret to happiness is to acknowledge and transform

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<sup>11</sup> "Positive Psychology Basics," *Positive Psychology*, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/positive-psychology>.

<sup>12</sup> Courtney E. Ackerman, "What is Flourishing in Positive Psychology," *Positive Psychology*, published May 9, 2018, <https://positivepsychology.com/flourishing/>.

<sup>13</sup> Ackerman, "Flourishing in Positive Psychology."

<sup>14</sup> Van Zyl, E. Llewellyn, et al. "The Critiques and Criticisms of Positive Psychology: A Systematic Review," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (2023): 9. A recent literature review of Positive Psychology lists nine categories of critiques on the movement: Poor metatheory, poorly conceptualized values, no clear definition of 'positive', the positive versus negative divide, differences and inconsistencies in concepts/theories, the jingle and jangle fallacy, level of abstraction, lack of theoretical grounding of interventions, and positive institutions. Each of the nine critiques provide a significant and challenging objection to Positive Psychology. However, none seem to address the suggestion of a persistent and static self, a view of the movement which complicates our supposed relationship to flourishing, which we see as dynamic and active. The second criticism I offer takes issue with Positive Psychology not acknowledging suffering as a transformative force that plays a role in our flourishing.

<sup>15</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, "No Mud, No Lotus," Plum Village, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://plumvillage.org/books/no-mud-no-lotus/>.



suffering.”<sup>16</sup> Unless we reach some transcendent state where challenges have been completely eliminated – a highly unlikely prospect – we are fastened to a life of discomfort and deeper forms of suffering. While this may initially appear as a hopeless sentence, Thich Nhat Hanh explains, “If you know how to suffer, you suffer less.”<sup>17</sup> By embracing suffering and intentionally deciding to learn from experiences, utilizing challenges as lessons from which to grow and transform ourselves, we can flourish.

My second criticism is that the Positive Psychology theorists recognize that flourishing involves engagement, yet the movement is still working (unwittingly) from a typically Western emphasis on the individuality of self and thus deemphasizes connection, which Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing.”<sup>18</sup> The conception of flourishing I defend in this project highlights such connections by understanding engagement in the world as interdependent activity.

#### 4. The Embodied, Interdependent Self: Enactivism Explained

An underappreciated strategy for understanding flourishing is to focus on the self since whatever conception we have of a self will inevitably inform how we understand flourishing, and so a problematic conception of self will diminish our understanding of flourishing. In this section I turn to a discussion of a theory of self that supports a more inclusive conception of flourishing. I focus specifically on the work of philosopher Evan Thompson who is a widely-respected proponent of “autopoietic,” or “self-making,” philosophy. This view is articulated by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch in *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1991). Dave Ward, David Silverman, and Mario Villalobos write that “autopoiesis” is a synthesis of ideas from phenomenology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, Buddhist philosophy and psychology. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch argue for an enactive cognitive science, that bridges the gap between the empirical study of the mind and the

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<sup>16</sup> Hanh, “No Mud, No Lotus.”

<sup>17</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “If You Know How to Suffer, You Suffer Less” (lecture, Plum Village, France, July 29, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> See related concerns in Van Zyl, et al. (2023), 10.

disciplined reflection on our lived experience that characterizes phenomenological and Buddhist practices.<sup>19</sup>

'Autopoeisis' is how Thompson understands the phenomenon of autonomy, which is something we associate with being an organism in the world. Ward, Silverman, and Villalobos, explain as follows:

Instead, the closely related notion of autonomy is emphasized—the way in which the self-sustaining biodynamics of autopoietic systems create both a distinction between an organism and its environment, and a domain of interactions that bear on the organism's prospects for survival. The 'autopoietic' strand of enactivist theorizing emphasizes and develops this attempt to ground cognition in the biodynamics of living systems. In holding that cognition is grounded in the dynamics of biological life itself, autopoietic enactivists incur a commitment to the strong continuity of life and mind—the view that the organizational structures and principles distinctive of mind are simply enriched versions of the structures and principles grounding life itself.<sup>20</sup>

When discussing mind and self, the Enactivists emphasize what is sometimes called the 4-E's: embodiment, embeddedness in the world (i.e. socio-ecological interdependence), emergence<sup>21</sup>, and enaction.

First, cognition and, relatedly, the self are embodied. Our cognition is embodied as it is constituted by certain characteristics of our physical bodies. The body is not some separate entity which *causes* our cognition, rather, many aspects of cognition are constituted by those features of our physical bodies. In this same sense, water does not cause rain, rather, water constitutes rain.

Second, we are embedded, in the sense that we are interdependent with the surrounding environment. Existence in the world is what enables our mental processes; we would have no cognition in a vacuum. We need contextual and environmental factors to be present for our cognition to function.

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<sup>19</sup> Ward, Silverman, Villalobos, "Introduction: The Varieties of Enactivism," *Topoi* 36 (2017), 365–375.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, Silverman, and Villalobos, "Varieties of Enactivism," 369-370.

<sup>21</sup> Contrary to, for example, Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," who argue for a view that is grounded in a version of computationalism. The autopoietic enactivists argue against such computational ways of understanding the human mind.

Third, we are emergent. Thompson, in *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, cites Stephen Batchelor in his explanation of the Enactivist self as emergent, stating, "To have become a person means to have emerged contingently from a matrix of genetic, psychological, social and cultural conditions."<sup>22</sup> We require the context of the world around us for our own being to occur; each of our mental states has to develop based on the contexts of the world that we experience. Batchelor continues, "You are unique not because you possess an essential metaphysical quality that differs from the essential metaphysical quality of everyone else, but because you have emerged from a unique and unrepeatably set of conditions."<sup>23</sup> In our dynamic interaction with those conditions, we form not just our mind, but our self, as well.

Finally, we are enacted. Cognition is a kind of sense making insofar as cognitive activity involves *enacting* or *bringing forth* a world of meaning and significance, rather than mentally representing information that exists separately in the world. Thompson's view of the self is a natural extension of this view. The self is not a thing or substance, but rather a dynamic complex network or pattern of processes that include bodily, psychological, conceptual, interpersonal, and ecological factors. Take the concept of dance for example. What is it? Is it the moving of the hips, the swaying of the hands, the dancers themselves, the accompanying song, the supportive ground, or even the audience? None of these factors can define dancing independently of the others. Every feature that goes into dance is an active, dynamic, overlapping process. We cannot legitimately justify a thing-based definition here because the dance cannot be separated from its characterizing processes. We must accept the dance as being defined in the *dancing*—that is, in the activity. In other words, dance ought to be considered as an overlay of dynamic, interconnected processes existing in a construction of several contextual and environmental factors. The dancing enacts the dance, the activity enacts the construct. In the same sense, our continuous act of "selfing" enacts the self. Cognition brings forth significance through its existence in and interaction with the world.

Like his mentor and eventual collaborator Francisco Varela, Thompson appeals to cellular biology to illustrate the concept of "I-making," or the continual process of becoming and thereby making what we refer to as "I."

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<sup>22</sup> Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 511.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 512.

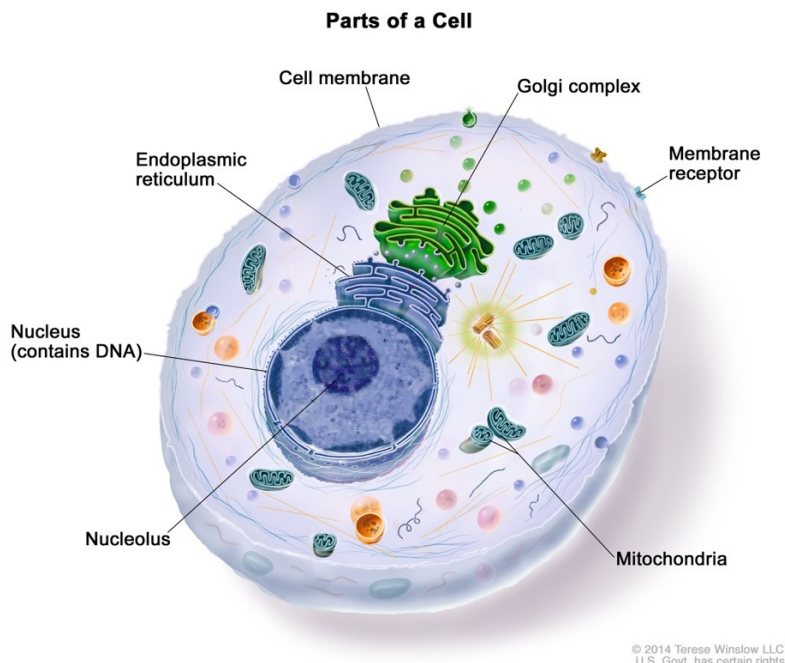


Figure 1. shows a diagram of a cell. Source: National Cancer Institute, accessed March 2023. <https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms/def/cell>.

Figure 1. depicts a labeled cell. For this to be a cell, it relies on both its inner-processes, such as the ribosomes reading mRNA and translating it into amino acids, as well as its outer-processes, such as other cells coming together with the communal goal of performing their functions. Thompson writes that the cell is a “collection of chemical processes that mutually produce each other so that they constitute the cell as a self-perpetuating whole in relation to its environment.”<sup>24</sup> The cell is enacted by these chemical processes and thereby actively creates a distinct identity in the context of its environment. The chemical processes, by being mutually necessary and enabling the functioning of one another, create a self-organized and self-perpetuated network.<sup>25</sup>

A selection of these processes that produce the cell membrane create a physical boundary which encases the inner processes. However, the boundary, by being selectively permeable, still interacts with its environment.<sup>26</sup> In allowing certain molecules in and out, the membrane is relating to its surroundings. An essential feature of the

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 325.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 326.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 326.

living cell—also true of living humans—is this purposeful interconnection with the cell's context.

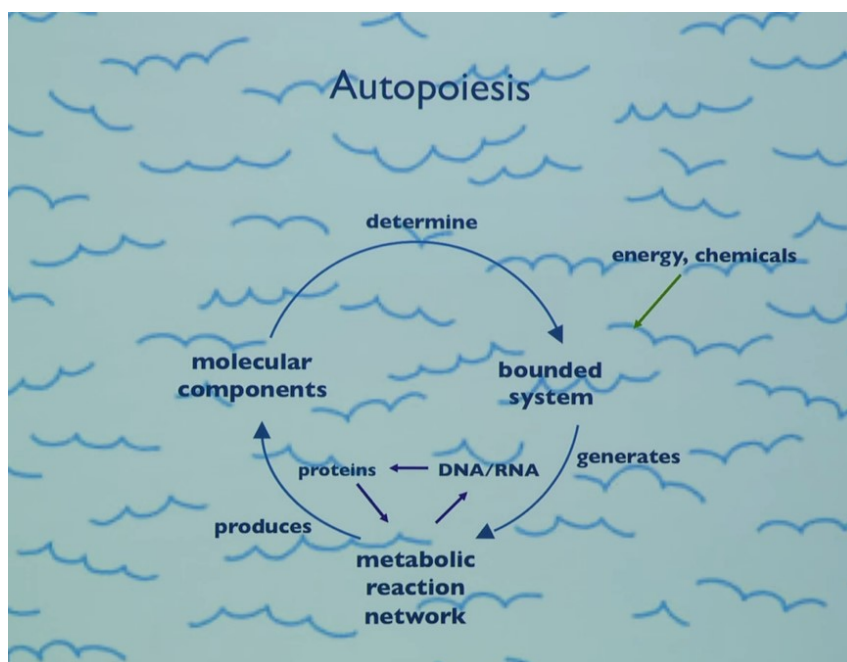


Figure 2. represents the cell's autopoietic cycle. Source: Evan Thompson, Keynote, Dartmouth College, 2014

The term "autopoiesis," meaning "self-making or self-producing," describes what is seen in the cell.<sup>27</sup> Figure 2. displays how cells are an autopoietic, biochemical system that not only self-produce their own molecular elements, but also draw a line between the self and other. This helps illuminate the way in which the living cell "provides the minimal and fundamental case of a self-specifying system."<sup>28</sup> The cell emerges by way of the constant, seamless flow of the overlapping chemical processes of its internal and bounding systems.

Being self-organizing does not necessarily mean something is self-specifying, with the latter being a special component of the living self. Thompson provides the example of a tornado, which emerges as a result of an accumulation of air and water into a "global pattern of a vortex."<sup>29</sup> He elaborates that, "this pattern influences how the

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 326.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 326.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 327.

individual molecules locally behave."<sup>30</sup> There exists no "internal chemical reaction network" to create and sustain its molecules.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the tornado does not have a boundary comparable to that of a cell, and thereby it lacks the cell's careful and intentional control over how it relates to the environment. Thompson writes that because the tornado does not self-specify, it is a system that is not a "full-fledged [individual] but simply [a macrostate] of underlying microprocesses."<sup>32</sup>

Thompson writes that "living is a process of sense-making."<sup>33</sup> As living beings existing in the world, we are continuously "making sense" of the environment we are in. We use the information we perceive to determine our actions; our behavior is simply an embodiment of sense-making.<sup>34</sup> Although self-organizing, tornados are not living beings *because* they are not closely related, non-linear systems and do not rely on mutually interdependent functioning systems from their inner worlds, their outer worlds, and the boundaries between them.

A human is autonomous like a living cell, yet because we have a complex overlay of systems, including a powerful sensory-motor system grounded in our neural overlay, we have a unique way of making sense of our world. Our skeletal, muscular, endocrine, circulatory, respiratory, and nervous systems are arranged to allow us not only to make sense of our worlds, but also bring forward self-awareness, moods, and intellectual dimensions.

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<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 327.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 327.

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 328.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 329.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 329.

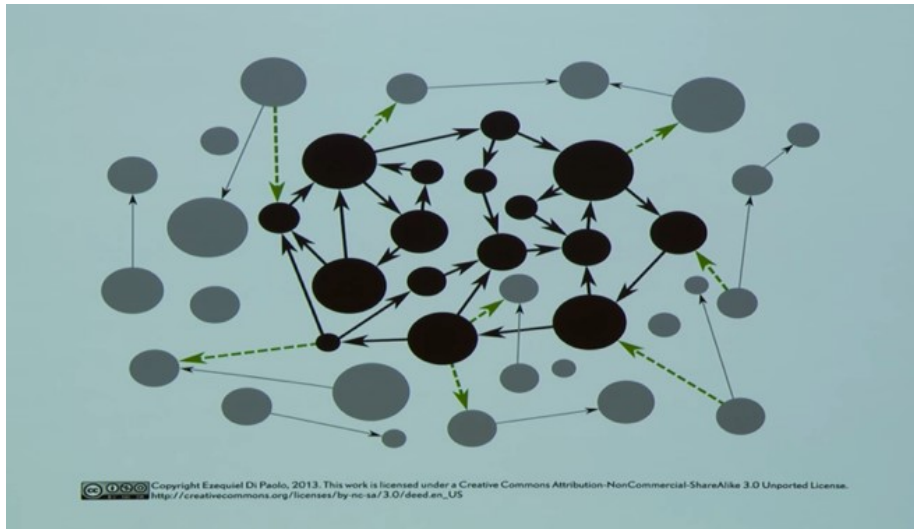


Figure 3. represents the interdependence of processes in an operationally closed system. The black circles form a tightly bound system with closure (though not a closed linear system), scaffolded by the gray circles. Source: Di Paolo, E., & Thompson, E. (2014). "The Enactive Approach." In L. Shapiro (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of embodied cognition* (pp. 68–78). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. Copyright Ezequiel Di Paolo, 2013.

Figure 3. is an image that helps visualize the interdependent nature of these living systems. Suppose the black circles represent the systems of a human individual. Processes ebb and flow, as demonstrated by the arrows, each influencing and being influenced by another process's functions. A boundary is visible between the black and gray circles, representing a living framework. The bounding black circles impact the contextualizing gray circles, and likewise, the gray circles impact the bounding circles. From the human perspective, these gray circles represent social and ecological systems. Take the social systems, for example: Those we love or loathe, but also those we feel neutral about or have yet to meet, all constantly add meaning to one's life. When a gray circle stranger walks down the street and smiles at you, your black circle inner processes light up. When this random act of kindness directly causes you to smile back, you have become the happy victim of interdependence.

The concept of our interdependence is key in the discussion of mind and self, particularly under the Enactivist conception. Thompson claims in *Mind in Life* that the mind should be understood neither as a Cartesian "container" of our thoughts, emotions, and consciousness, nor as reducible in any sense to some type of functional organization of neural activity. Instead, he argues that the human mind "emerges from self-organizing processes that tightly interconnect the brain, body, and environment at

multiple levels."<sup>35</sup> Central to his view are the autonomous, self-making systems, where mental states are understood as emergent processes rather than emergent properties.<sup>36</sup>

At the most basic level, functioning human cellular biological processes are what allow the possibility of a mind and self to emerge. The Enactivist conception of mind considers the brain as a facilitator of the mind and the environment as a necessary element that the brain must relate to in order to produce said mind. The brain must have some sort of awareness of its surroundings to contextualize itself and thus to function. A brain in a vacuum would not be able to facilitate a mind; the mind requires a framework of reality that it can play and interact with, and thus it can learn from.

The continuous interaction between a human and the environment opens up the possibility of the self to exist. Organisms living in the world partake in sense-making to establish some sort of significance derived from their shared experiences with the environment.<sup>37</sup> This allows for self-reflection and awareness, which are critical to building a sense of identity and of self.

#### 4.1 The Buddhist "Selflessness" View

Thompson derives much of his philosophy from the Buddhist traditions which discuss various views of the self. The independent self-view views the self to have some sort of essence that can stand alone. This is addressed by early Buddhism through the five aggregates, a set of psychophysical dimensions that supposedly exhaust every feature of our perceived self. The five aggregates, otherwise known as the five *skandhas*, are:

- 1) Form: physical form including matter;
- 2) Feeling: pain, pleasure, and indifference;
- 3) Perception/apperception: particular mental events that we grasp, in the sense of basic comprehension or awareness of something as such;
- 4) Volition: hunger, anger, habits, and forces that motivate (emotions); and

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<sup>35</sup> Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Evan Thompson, "What Is Mind?" The Mind & Life Institute, August 29, 2022, <https://www.mindandlife.org/insight/what-is-mind/>.



### 5) Consciousness: awareness.

If one accepts these aggregates, there are two options for understanding the self. Either the self is one of, or some collection of, these elements, or it is separate from them.

Form, or one's physical body, as well as one's mental states, are constantly changing; every *skandha* is impermanent and thus in constant flux. Every single passing moment brings about something different in one's body, and while it may be subtle at times, all aspects of our physical form are impermanent and thus changing. This is also true for each of the other aggregates, and by implication any combination of them. Philosopher Mark Siderits constructs this version of the argument in the following way:

1. Form, anything that is part of our material form, is impermanent.
2. Feelings, any of the sensations of pleasure, pain, and indifference, are impermanent.
3. Perceptions, any of those mental events whereby one grasps the sensible characteristics of a perceptible object, are impermanent.
4. Volitions, any mental forces like habit, will, and emotion, are impermanent.
5. Consciousness, the awareness of physical and mental states, is impermanent.
6. If there were a self, it would be permanent.
7. Exhaustiveness claim (implicit): there is no more to a person than the five *skandhas*.
8. So, there is no self.<sup>38</sup>

By acknowledging this ever-changing nature of the self, one cannot accept the understanding of the self as any of these aggregates. Given the view that if the self existed, it would persist over time, at least one *skandha* would have to persist as well. Since none of them do according to this view, we cannot locate the self anywhere, suggesting the second option: that is, the self does not exist, or at least it does not exist in the *skandhas*.

Nâgârjuna, a Mahâyâna Indian Buddhist philosopher, argues this way, "If the self were the aggregates, It would have arising and ceasing (as properties). If it were

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

different from the aggregates, it would not have the characteristics of the aggregates."<sup>39</sup> If one were to remove all of the defining characteristics from oneself, how would one even recognize or be a self in the first place? Neither of these options prove to withstand their objections.

One might argue, though, that the Buddhists have missed one seemingly permanent feature of self which is the "felt continuity of awareness."<sup>40</sup> Many claim the existence of some sort of cohesive progression of oneself and one's awareness over time. Moments seem to blend seamlessly together. Vasubandhu, a well-known Buddhist monk and scholar proposes the image of a moving forest fire to better explain what one experiences here and so promotes the selflessness view. When a fire goes from one location to another, it is not one single flame continuously moving locations. Rather, there is a "causal series of flames," with the individual flames being "confined to the location of the fuel on which it depends."<sup>41</sup> So, as our awareness moves from one moment to the next, it is not the individual instance of awareness that is persisting through that movement. Instead, each instance of awareness is engaging in a causal relationship with the adjacent instance.

## 4.2 Thompson's Enactivism Revisited

Thompson's approach to the self is through the concept of I-making, "the sense of being an 'I' who endures through time and who is a thinker of thoughts and a doer of deeds."<sup>42</sup> He proposes, "The self is a process of I-ing – an ongoing process that enacts an 'I' and in which the 'I' is no different from this process itself."<sup>43</sup> With this concept, Thompson elaborates on the selflessness view. The self is not a *thing*, as per the independent self view that Buddhism rejects. Rather, it is an *activity*. It is a continuous set of processes that create what we refer to as "I." Again, as Thompson puts it, just as the flight of a bird is in the flying, and the dance of a dancer is in the dancing, the friend

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<sup>39</sup> J. Garfield, trans. and comm., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyama-kakārika* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 245.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Siderits, *How Things Are: An Introduction to Buddhist Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>41</sup> Siderits, *How Things Are*.

<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 325.

<sup>43</sup> Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 325.

is in the friending, the parent is in the parenting, the teaching is in the teaching, and the self is in the "selfing."

Daniel C. Russell, in *Happiness for Humans*, speaks about how bereavement can demonstrate how the embodied and embedded conception of self allows others within the boundaries of oneself through interdependence. He cites one grieving parent, who said, "it's like losing my right arm. I can't grow a new arm, but I'm learning to live as a one armed man."<sup>44</sup> Russell explains that while this may be a metaphor, research indicates that amputees and grieverers really do share similar experiences. As for the amputee, he may be described as "incomplete', he is no longer a whole man." Those grieving often share like sentiments. Russell attributes this to the feeling of "internal loss of self."<sup>45</sup> This relates to the key insight of the Enactivist theory: an inherent part of our self-definition includes the relationships we carry with the people, and similarly, the land and non-human animals around us.

### 4.3 Worldviews and Enactivism

Worldviews help us understand these relationships and the potential for transformation. The worldviews one maintains structure one's mindset and approach to the environment. In Richard DeWitt's book, *Worldviews: An Introduction to the History and Philosophy of Science*, he describes worldviews being like a jigsaw puzzle. In this sense, a worldview is an "intertwined, interrelated, interconnected, *system* of beliefs," rather than "merely a collection of separate, independent, unrelated beliefs."<sup>46</sup> Beliefs work together to form an individual's worldview. Worldviews can also be grouped when certain similar beliefs are held by a majority of people in a certain collective, such as in a particular region or among those who abide by a certain religious teaching.

In the Western traditions, the commonly-accepted view is anthropocentrism, a philosophy centered around one's own existence. Under this view, everything ought to be interpreted from the perspective of one's personal human experience. This view clings to individualism; there is something particular about each of us that seems to suggest we exist independently of each other. The self is individualized in the Western

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<sup>44</sup> Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 203.

<sup>45</sup> Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, 203.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Dewitt, *Worldviews: An Introduction to the History and Philosophy of Science* (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 7.

traditions, with an emphasis on our personal, internal perspective set apart from an external world of people, places, and things. This can be described as a separation model, and without awareness of it, we are more inclined to prioritize our own wants and needs, and privilege ourselves over nature. This can be contrasted with an ecocentric worldview, which appreciates the deep roots of our existence in our communities and the dynamic interactions we constantly have with the world. The understanding of the self in relation to the larger whole, that self is one of many inter-related activities that make up the world, can help us place the good of the whole ahead of any self-centered desires.

The Enactivist view, in providing a more powerfully explanatory account of our natural interdependence, offers a rejection to the Western worldview toward something more holistic and cosmopolitan – more ecocentric in scope. Moreover, since the Enactivists emphasize the self as a complex activity, or a pattern of various psychological, biological, interpersonal, and ecological dimensions, flourishing itself becomes an activity. Without such a view of the self, the Positive Psychologists struggle to explain this same dynamic conception of flourishing.

## 5. The Art and Science of Flourishing

I now turn to a conception of flourishing that I take to be compatible and indeed supportive of the understanding flourishing I have articulated above. If the self is an activity, it follows that flourishing requires that we do it well. Yet, what does it mean to go about being a self well? In what follows, I discuss the ingredients model of flourishing that the Center for Healthy Minds has developed in collaboration with the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia and the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Penn State University. The course that accompanies this, *The Art and Science of Flourishing*, is now offered by Professors Mark Dennis and Blake Hestir at TCU and for which I am now serving as the student assistant.<sup>47</sup>

The ingredients model mentioned above suggests that flourishing itself will look different for each individual. However, there are certain pillars that are universal components of flourishing. According to an article, “The Plasticity of Well-Being, A Training Based Framework for the Cultivation of Human Flourishing,” by Cortland J.

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew J. Hirshberg, “Can the Academic and Experiential Study of Flourishing Improve Flourishing in College Students? A Multi-university Study,” *Springer* 13 (2022).

Dahl, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhall, and Richard J. Davidson, there are four core dimensions of flourishing: awareness, connection, insight, and purpose.<sup>48</sup> Each of these may be naturally diminished in a prison environment. However, the article likens these dimensions to skills that can be trained. Even someone in prison has the ability to take self-regulatory actions to improve their sense of well-being.

Awareness relates to attentiveness regarding one's perceptions of the surrounding environment, in addition to one's internal environment, containing cues such as "bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions."<sup>49</sup> Experiencing heightened awareness is associated with being completely aware of one's actions, feelings, and surroundings. Diminished awareness, on the other hand, corresponds with greater distraction and absorption. The article cites one study which concluded the average person spends about "47% of their waking life in a state of distraction."<sup>50</sup> The study further claims that being in such a state is associated with "lower levels of well-being," and has several negative consequences such as "[impaired] executive function, ... stress and anxiety, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms, and depression."<sup>51</sup> While bursts of heightened awareness are common in most people's daily lives, the "occurrence and duration" of this awareness can be expanded by developing one's meta-awareness and through purposeful "self-regulation of attention."<sup>52</sup> This can be done, for example, through breath awareness meditation. In this form of mindfulness practice, one simply draws attention toward their breath, aiming to maintain focus on the breath simply going in and out.

Connection, the second dimension, is marked by a "sense of care and kinship" towards others, promoting "supportive relationships and caring actions."<sup>53</sup> This may come about as a result of interactions that display impressions like "gratitude and appreciation."<sup>54</sup> Through empathy, unconditional respect, and seeking to understand

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<sup>48</sup> Cortland J. Dahl, Christine D. Wilson-Mendenhall, and Richard J. Davidson, "The Plasticity of Well-Being: A Training-Based Framework for the Cultivation of Human Flourishing," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 51 (2020): 1.

<sup>49</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 2.

<sup>50</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 2.

<sup>51</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 2.

<sup>52</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 2.

<sup>53</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 3.

<sup>54</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 3.

others despite any apparent differences, connection is possible. Maintaining positive social relationships is crucial to one's well-being as it can defend against disorders like anxiety and depression and promote one's sense of being socially supported. On the other hand, negative relationships may be even worse for one's health than "excessive drinking and smoking."<sup>55</sup> Choosing to consider people through a lens of gratitude, rather than perceiving others as "social threats," can help one avoid feelings of loneliness, a "major risk factor for poor mental and physical health."<sup>56</sup> Being intentionally positive and working towards constructive social relationships can increase overall connectivity, which promotes well-being. When considering our interdependence, it is clear how building community and fostering a sense of belonging is critical to flourishing. Intentional positivity and gratitude practices, such as a *metta*, or loving-kindness meditation, and a *mudita*, or sympathetic joy, meditation can grow this skill. In these practices, one wishes happiness, well-being, and joy to oneself and others.

The third pillar, insight, is defined as "self-knowledge concerning the manner in which our emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and other factors are shaping one's subjective experience, and especially one's sense of self."<sup>57</sup> The article references anxiety as an example of how insight can play a role in well-being. When anxious thoughts occur, utilizing one's insight can help one understand how "memories and self-critical thoughts" are playing a disproportionate role in creating "fearful expectations" and making one "overly focused on negative outcomes."<sup>58</sup> Someone with diminished insight might treat their anxiety as fact, neglecting to consider circumstances that may be influencing their thoughts. Similar to awareness, there is a spontaneous element to experiencing insight. Likewise, one can practice self-inquiry like any skill to "sustain and integrate moments of insight" in daily activity.<sup>59</sup> There is a wide range of benefits from having a positive self-conception; feeling "compassionate, accepting, and growth-oriented" about oneself correlates with diminished symptoms of anxiety and depression, and increased levels of well-being.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, having "rigid and negative" self-conceptions is associated with numerous psychological disorders, including eating

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<sup>55</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 3.

<sup>56</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 3.

<sup>57</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 4.

<sup>58</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 4.

<sup>59</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 4.

<sup>60</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 4.

disorders, psychosis, and depression.<sup>61</sup> Self-reflection presents an accessible and low cost means to promoting well-being by opening the door to insight. Mindfulness practices that promote self-awareness, such as an exercise where one observes and labels thoughts, can enhance one's insight.

Purpose, the final dimension of well-being, refers to the "sense of clarity concerning personally meaningful aims and values" that motivate one's daily actions. Purpose brings about "meaning and significance" to one's lived experience; it drives the stories one tells about oneself and helps one understand one's life.<sup>62</sup> By directing oneself towards what one finds meaningful and significant, one is better prepared to "persevere in the face of challenges."<sup>63</sup> A strong sense of purpose is associated with embodying one's core values. There are several benefits to this, including "increased physical activity, decreased incidence of stroke, fewer cardiovascular events, reduced risk of death, lower health care utilization, and even better financial health."<sup>64</sup> Purpose further benefits one's psychological functioning, by improving the health of one's "memory, executive function, and overall cognitive ability, and also psychological resilience."<sup>65</sup> Diminished levels of purpose are correlated to certain psychological disorders that can hinder one's well-being. Mindfulness practices where one affirms personal values, for example, by repeating certain mantras, may increase one's sense of purpose.

These four dimensions do not constitute a definition of flourishing; rather, they offer insights into how we might understand well-being. A positive aspect of this model is that these dimensions are equated to skills that can be practiced, trained, and improved. This research concludes that flourishing can be cultivated through intentional self-regulating efforts, something accessible even to people in prison.

## 6. Inner Transformation as Part of Sustainability Flourishing

The concept of a "transformational" model is based on intellectual engagement and experiential practice. Literature on the model distinguishes "inner transformational"

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<sup>61</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 4.

<sup>62</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 5.

<sup>63</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 5.

<sup>64</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 5.

<sup>65</sup> Dahl, Wilson-Mendenhall, and Davidson, "Plasticity of Well-Being," 5.

approaches from “outer transformational” approaches. While outer approaches orient towards structural and institutional change, inner approaches concentrate on values, worldviews, and cognitive and behavioral patterns. However, because of our natural interdependence, the distinction between “inner” and “outer” is reduced to a conceptual and pragmatic distinction, rather than an ontological distinction.

Whether we feel comfortable with change or tend to resist it, we are always transforming in some way. From the Western scientific perspective, self or “inner” transformation, is made possible by the fact of neuroplasticity, which refers to the “capacity of neurons and neural networks in the brain to change in form or function in response to experiences throughout a person’s life.”<sup>66</sup> In an article written for the The Art and Science of Human Flourishing course, “Transformation,” by Abra Vigna and John Dunne, research is cited stating that “the brain changes almost continuously in response to our physical and social experiences in the world.”<sup>67</sup> We cannot help but experience, and in turn, react to those experiences. We are always learning and adapting to new information. While it is not uncommon to fear change, humans have an inherent capacity for transformation. By embracing this capacity to change ourselves in a world in which we are an interconnected part, we can thereby change the world and help create the conditions in which other beings can also flourish.

There is, of course, an important distinction between intentional and unintentional changes as they relate to the concept of inner transformation, which is cited by Wamsler. She argues that inner transformation ought to come with a willfully engaged and deliberate effort to transform.

Wamsler acknowledges that there exist varying definitions, but “a common denominator is that inner transformation relates to exploring and addressing people’s inner dimensions and their relation to sustainability to support individual, collective and systems change.”<sup>68</sup> Through exploring and questioning these inner dimensions, which include “consciousness, values, worldviews, beliefs, spirituality and human-nature connectedness,”<sup>69</sup> along with interrogating our cognitive and behavioral patterns, one can move onto the path of inner transformation. This is essential to advocating with people in prison to better their lives since when we transform ourselves, we can also

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<sup>66</sup> Abra Vigna, “Transformation,” ed. John Dunne (2020), 2.

<sup>67</sup> Vigna, “Transformation,” 2.

<sup>68</sup> Woiwode, et al., “Inner transformation,” 844.

<sup>69</sup> Woiwode, et al., “Inner transformation,” 844.



transform our relationship with ourselves; we can, consequently, transform our relationship with others and the environment around us.

A problem with the standard approach to prison reform is that it disregards the potential for personal, inner transformation. Previous well-intentioned efforts to fix the prison system have focused on petitions, electing open-minded politicians and district attorneys, prison evaluations, and other actions to improve the quality of life for people in prison.

While these examples undoubtedly have the power to help, there is an impersonal aspect that can only be escaped through inner transformation. Wamsler cites scholars who are concerned over how the current “external focus has tended to blind us to the shaping power of interior factors.”<sup>70</sup> No matter how effective outer transformation initiatives may appear, without being paired with inner transformation, they will never get us far enough to properly address the lived experiences of those in prison.

I focus on the following three areas that we can leverage for inner transformation:

1. Opportunities for becoming aware of and expanding our worldviews;
2. Implementing the four basic areas of contemplative education:
  - Awareness:** Focus, Emotions, Mindfulness
  - Connection:** Interdependence, Compassion, Diversity
  - Insight:** Identity, Values, Gratitude
  - Integration:** Courage, Community, Belonging;
3. Engaging in evidence-based mindfulness and embodiment practices.

In exploring the nature of our interdependence with one another and the environment, we can see how inner transformation initiatives may be just as important as outer ones. There is an argument to be made that outer transformation initiatives, while important to prison reform, must be done hand-in-hand with their inner counterparts.

## 6.1 Inner Transformation as a Deep Leverage Point

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<sup>70</sup> Woiwode, et al., “Inner transformation,” 842.

Wamsler discusses the usefulness of inner transformation in an article describing how to develop sustainable cities. By using the innovative approach of incorporating inner transformation initiatives, Wamsler's concept of using "leverage points" to mark where we can "intervene in a system" can be directly applied to these prison reform initiatives.<sup>71</sup>

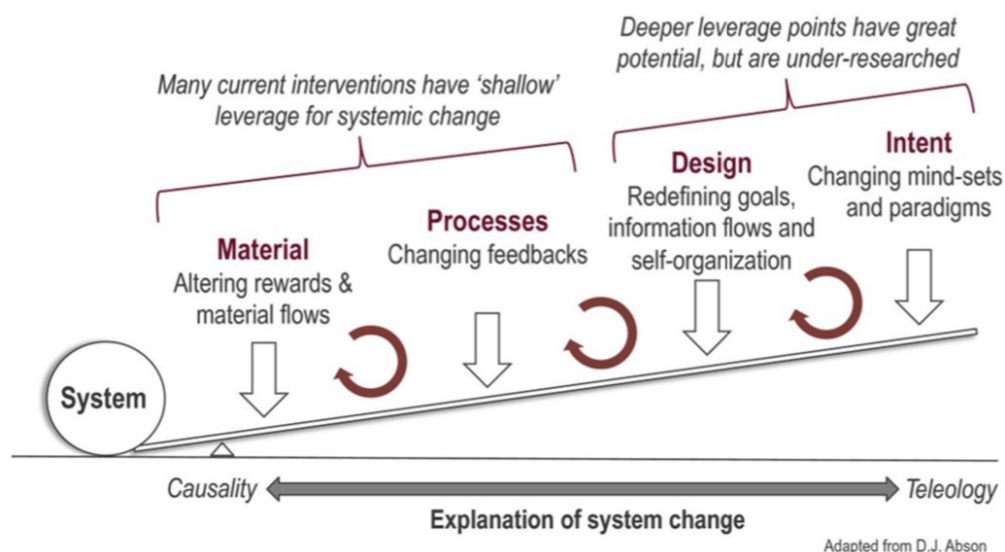


Figure 4. Illustration of leverage points, ranging from shallow to deep, organized into four realms. Original source: Fischer and Riechers 2019, based on Abson et al. 2017, adapted from an earlier version of D.j. Abson. Taken from Christoph Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation to sustainability as a deep leverage point: fostering new avenues for change through dialogue and reflection," *Sustainability Science* (2021): 842.

Figure 4. illustrates the range of leverage points, going from shallow to deep. It demonstrates how a deeper leverage point will be more effective at getting the metaphorical ball of systemic change rolling. Wamsler cites one's inner dimensions, including "consciousness, values, worldviews, beliefs, spirituality and human-nature-connectedness" as crucial, deep leverage points for sustainability transformation.<sup>72</sup> Shallow leverage points, on the other hand, may be interventions that are financially or

<sup>71</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 841.

<sup>72</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 842.

legislatively driven. Simply changing laws or donating to charitable organizations, on their own, will not resolve our society's challenges.

## 7. The Flourishing Prison Initiative

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is well-known for teaching a secular form of mindfulness and for creating the scientifically-tested Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), states, "there are very few people that I know on the planet that couldn't benefit... from a greater dose of awareness."<sup>73</sup> The benefits of mindfulness were, at one point, just a hypothesis. As of 2023, several studies of mindfulness-based interventions have been conducted on various groups that consistently show an enhanced sense of well-being. This data showing such benefits has become part of popular American discourse; this trend is evident in a 2012-2017 study showing that the number of adults who had participated in mindfulness, spiritual, or mantra-based meditations tripled.<sup>74</sup> MBSR interventions have been used to treat depression, drug addiction, disordered eating, and dysfunctional relationships.<sup>75</sup> It has been shown to effectively reduce symptoms of chronic pain and relieve dependency on pain medication.<sup>76</sup> These are just a few of the benefits that have been found in the general population.

Benefits of mindfulness interventions have been studied in a prison setting as well. One study found that mindfulness-based programs, including Transcendental

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<sup>73</sup> Bill Moyers, "Healing and the Mind," *Healing from Within*, 1:25:55, February 23, 1993, <https://billmoyers.com/content/healing-from-within/>.

<sup>74</sup> Adam Burke, "Prevalence and patterns of use of mantra, mindfulness and spiritual meditation among adults in the United States," *BMC complementary and alternative medicine* 17, no. 1 (2017): 316.

<sup>75</sup> J. David Creswell, "Mindfulness Interventions," *Annual Review of Psychology* 68 (2017); JD Teasdale et al., "Prevention of Relapse/Recurrence in Major Depression by Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68, no. 4 (2000); Sarah Bowen et al., "Relative efficacy of mindfulness-based relapse prevention, standard relapse prevention, and treatment as usual for substance use disorders: a randomized clinical trial," *JAMA psychiatry* 71, no. 5 (2014); Ashley E. Mason et al., "Effects of a mindfulness-based intervention on mindful eating, sweets consumption, and fasting glucose levels in obese adults: data from the SHINE randomized controlled trial," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 39, no. 2 (2016); James W. Carson et al., "Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement," *Behavior Therapy* 35, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>76</sup> D K Reibel et al., "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Health-Related Quality of Life in a Heterogeneous Patient Population," *General Hospital Psychiatry* 23, no. 4 (2001).

Meditation, MBSR, and 10-day Vipassana retreats, provide an “enhancement of psychological well-being, a decrease in substance use, and a decrease in recidivism.”<sup>77</sup>

One MBSR study included testimonials from the incarcerated participants. Regarding the mindfulness exercises themselves, Participant D9 stated, “We received a raisin, I held it in my hands... I don’t know if that was really an exercise. I had to capture the taste and smell, and then I had to observe what exactly was going on, I thought that was a really good exercise.”<sup>78</sup> This participant is referring to a mindful eating exercise, which has been shown to lead to “greater psychological wellbeing, increased pleasure when eating, and body satisfaction.”<sup>79</sup>

Participant D4 reported, “I liked the exercise when I should lie down and the exercise where I just had to sit quietly and watch my breathing. Those two are the best.”<sup>80</sup> Participant D8 shared, “The best is just meditation... then you are very busy with just emptying your head, and just sit. And then all the thoughts come into my mind, and then I notice that, and I become distracted, and then I return to focusing my breathing. That is why the breathing is so important and helpful, and that’s why I always come back to where I am at that moment.”<sup>81</sup> Both of these participants are discussing forms of breath awareness meditation, which is an accessible and well-studied method for reducing stress.<sup>82</sup>

In the “general evaluation” section of the intervention, the study shared other testimonials. For instance, Participant D4 shared, “I just internalized it. It is not really that I am working on it every day, but I do have it in my mind, I can deal with things differently, and don’t act in the same way I did before the training. It is better to observe

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<sup>77</sup> Samuel Himmelstein, “Meditation Research: The State of the Art in Correctional Settings,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 55, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>78</sup> N. Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison: Experience of Inmates, Instructors, and Prison Staff,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 63 (2019).

<sup>79</sup> “Mindful Eating,” The Nutrition Source, Harvard T. H. Chan, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/mindful-eating/#:~:text=Research%20has%20shown%20that%20mindful,when%20eating%2C%20and%20body%20satisfaction.>

<sup>80</sup> Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison.”

<sup>81</sup> Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison.”

<sup>82</sup> “Breath meditation: A great way to relieve stress,” Mind & Mood, Harvard Health Publishing, published April 15, 2014, [https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/breath-meditation-a-great-way-to-relieve-stress.](https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/breath-meditation-a-great-way-to-relieve-stress)

things.”<sup>83</sup> Participant D16 stated that “You also notice that every time you become aware of yourself, you have a different face. Sometimes you are happy, the next you are angry, then you are afraid. So that’s really something important, because I want to get to know myself very well.”<sup>84</sup> Participant D21 shared that he gained “a bit more self-control and control over myself,” and Participant D23 recalled, “Rest and self-awareness... And do not judge myself so hard anymore.”<sup>85</sup> Coming from the testimonials of incarcerated persons, the benefits of mindfulness appear, at least anecdotally, to be powerfully transformative.

Participant D5 reflected on his willingness to participate in the program: “It is mainly that I just have a moment to just relax. And then, when I walk away again after the training, I come back on the block, and there it is just as always, chaos. But you’ve been relaxed for a while.”<sup>86</sup> An important and inseparable element of individual flourishing is collective flourishing. How well can anyone really be when people around them are suffering? When chaos is all that surrounds you, it is understandable that flourishing may be naturally inhibited. As the comments from incarcerated persons above suggest, mindfulness and meditation practice offer release from such chaos.

Another mindfulness study of flourishing in prisons suggests that an equally important part of the conversation is making flourishing available for all those who interact with incarcerated persons.<sup>87</sup> This movement needs to be comprehensive, not limited to promoting inner transformation for those confined to prison; it should, rather, be expanded to include correctional officers, prison administrators, and even the general community. Furthermore, these efforts must be in addition to the outer transformative, structural changes mainly addressed in prison reform initiatives: minimizing sentences of non-violent crimes like drug possession, inhibiting the growth of the private prison industry, and offering other legislative, financially-oriented, systemic changes.

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<sup>83</sup> Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison.”

<sup>84</sup> Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison.”

<sup>85</sup> Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison.”

<sup>86</sup> Bouw, et al., “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Prison.”

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements and Mass Incarceration,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 60, no. 12 (2015).

The study highlights establishing a “radical oneness between helper and helped.”<sup>88</sup> In an interview with Tamera Hutcherson, a Texas-based community organizer, they made the case for adjusting the phrase “advocating *for*” to “advocating *with*.”<sup>89</sup> Even this minor modification of wording gestures toward this sense of oneness. Instead of partaking in a “savior complex,” where we actively put ourselves above those in prison, we should position ourselves at the same level of those we wish to advocate alongside. This simultaneously promotes a sense of ecocentrism where we are all a part of one another. The goal is collective flourishing: everyone’s well-being matters equally.

One study cites four concrete recommendations for developing mindfulness programs in prison facilities. First, “Facilitators should be meditators themselves and have a mindfulness practice of their own.”<sup>90</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, in his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, suggests that “the fundamental prerequisite for teaching mindfulness is to have a mindfulness practice oneself.”<sup>91</sup> For the intervention to be truly meaningful, the teaching would have to come from a place of genuine understanding and personal involvement.

Second, “they should elicit experiences rather than tell inmates how to meditate.”<sup>92</sup> As exemplified by the selection of quotes, having a personally meaningful experience naturally promotes inner transformation. Teachers should be directly invested in cultivating a significant, relevant, lasting practice for participants.

Third, “they should empower them to facilitate their own meditation groups.”<sup>93</sup> This would not only provide a sense of autonomy to a group that seldom sees any independence, but it would provide purpose, community, and even a degree of freedom to establish and run their own practices.

Fourth, and “most importantly, the programs should link individuals inside prison to outside meditation groups.”<sup>94</sup> In a return to the notion of collective flourishing and interdependence, this last step is crucial. Creating a sense of unconditional, radically

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<sup>88</sup> Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements.”

<sup>89</sup> Tamera Hutcherson (community organizer) in discussion with the author, March 2023.

<sup>90</sup> Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements.”

<sup>91</sup> Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements.”

<sup>92</sup> Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements.”

<sup>93</sup> Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements.”

<sup>94</sup> Lyons, “Prison Meditation Movements.”

accepting community is imperative to helping foster inner transformation on an individual and communal level.

Various initiatives have already begun to bring these sorts of sustainability and mindfulness practices into prisons. Prison Mindfulness is an organization whose mission is to “provide prisoners, prison staff, and prison volunteers, with the most effective, evidence-based tools for rehabilitation, self-transformation, and personal and professional development.”<sup>95</sup> This organization is utilizing mindfulness-based interventions not only to transform individual lives, but also to transform the entire corrections system.

One of their programs, Path of Freedom, focuses on “increasing participants’ resources, capacities, and skills for self-awareness by developing mindfulness, presence, focus, and attention stabilization,” by offering tools for developing “emotion regulation, resilience, deep listening, empathic communication, problem-solving, forgiveness, and conflict management.”<sup>96</sup> By shifting away from fear-based and punitive rehabilitative programs, they embrace a forward-looking and hopeful model that can promote inner transformation in prisons.

Another initiative is the Sustainability in Prisons Project, whose vision is to “reduce recidivism while improving human well-being and ecosystem health,” with an overall goal to “reduce the environmental, economic, and human costs of prison.”<sup>97</sup> They host several programs based in prisons in the Pacific Northwest, some even provide people in prison the opportunity to earn college credit. Some programs include a peer-led gardening course, beekeeping, rearing and releasing native butterflies, and waste diversion.

One particularly notable program, the Corrections Hope Gardens, was responsible for growing and donating over 246,000 pounds of food in 2018. This food was distributed to facility kitchens, foodbanks, nonprofit organizations, elementary schools, and even childcare centers. This program not only directly serves the community, but it also gives the “opportunity to individuals eager to make a

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<sup>95</sup> “Prison Mindfulness,” Prison Mindfulness, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://www.prisonmindfulness.org/>.

<sup>96</sup> “Prison Mindfulness.”

<sup>97</sup> “SPP,” Sustainability in Prisons Project, accessed April 24, 2023, <http://sustainabilityinprisons.org/>.

difference.”<sup>98</sup> People in prison, just like anyone else, are *eager* to feel a sense of belonging and help positively transform themselves and their communities.

## 8. The Ecovillage Analogy

One way that can help us visualize the possibilities of inner transformation is the ecovillage analogy discussed in Christine Wamsler’s article, which offers solutions to climate challenges that can be applied to other systemic issues, such as those within the prison system.



Figure 5. Illustration of inner versus outer dimensions in the context of ecovillages. Original source: S. Veciana for the conference Leverage Points 2019, Lüneburg. Taken from Christoph Woiwode, et al., “Inner transformation to sustainability as a deep leverage point: fostering new avenues for change through dialogue and reflection,” *Sustainability Science* (2021): 852.

Figure 5. helps us see how inner and outer dimensions offer various paths towards sustainability. Wamsler uses the example of ecovillages, and more importantly, the ecovillagers, to demonstrate how certain inner dimensions, such as their “perspectives, values, beliefs, emotional and habitual patterns, and bodily experiences,” encourage

<sup>98</sup> “SPP.”



sustainability through daily practices which construct a 'greener' lifestyle.<sup>99</sup> The ecovillagers live in a community-oriented society; there is a noted "willingness to focus on achieving the 'best solution for the whole.'"<sup>100</sup> The whole, in this case, does not solely refer to the eco-villagers, but also includes the village itself and the world around it. They utilize diverse inner and outer practices, as noted in Figure 5., to experiment with sustainable lifestyles that are ultimately best for the whole.

Several of their practices involve deep leverage points, including "fostering being open 'to not knowing' and to continuously question one's own worldviews with a self-reflexive attitude."<sup>101</sup> The range of contemplative practices "address elements of the inner-transformation-sustainability nexus at an intra-personal, inter-personal and community level."<sup>102</sup>

Naturally, in practices that question an established worldview, inner barriers are brought to the forefront of our awareness. The ecovillage approach encourages people to overcome these barriers with the same community-oriented mindset, rather than an individualistic, frequently isolationist, one. Any "social, ecological, economical or cultural matter" is to be addressed in "group processes."<sup>103</sup> The methods embraced for inner transformation by the ecovillage expand one's worldviews to being much more appreciative of our deep interdependence on one another and the environment. Interrogating our inner dimensions can help us understand our cognitive and behavioral patterns, and thus bring into our awareness how those patterns affect interdependence, and can thereby aid in transforming each of us into more considerate and sustainability-driven beings.

Broadening our attention to a more inclusive worldview, such as an ecocentric one, is key to fomenting a "strong impulse for overall systems change."<sup>104</sup> An ecocentric worldview centers our awareness on our environment, increasing our understanding of our interdependence, and thereby, encourages us to act in ways that promote collective, community well-being.

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<sup>99</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 851.

<sup>100</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 852.

<sup>101</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 851.

<sup>102</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 851.

<sup>103</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 852.

<sup>104</sup> Woiwode, et al., "Inner transformation," 853.

While I am not suggesting we literally transform prisons into ecovillages, this analogy can help explain how the self can be fully realized in a healthy way in this and other challenging contexts. By encouraging people in prison to foster inner transformation through similarly diverse practices as exercised in the ecovillages, we open a conversation that can lead to flourishing.

The Western worldviews disconnects us in an alarming way from one another, from the environment, and even from ourselves. In this worldview, these three qualities are all separate from each other, with a fine line drawn between them. With this “thing-based” mentality, it becomes easy to misconstrue how we ought to address prison reform. We struggle to understand our relationship to ourselves and others. When others are viewed as things, and when we also are a thing, we get stuck in a static form of existence that is fundamentally at odds with dynamic systems views noted above that constitute ourselves and our contexts. If our goal is to help people in prison flourish, we need to shift to such a dynamic worldview that sees potential for positive transformation. By placing a physical and mental division between ourselves, others, and the environment, we only push ourselves further away from accessing our interconnection since fixed barriers prevent us from seeing our dependent relationship with one another.

People in prison can, and should, flourish. In a country where “roughly 1.9 million people are incarcerated,” it is especially necessary to promote well-being among those behind bars.<sup>105</sup> By engaging in the inner transformational practices as described in this paper, we can set out on a path toward realizing a hopeful vision of the future where the corrections system makes people’s lives better, both inside and outside of prison. Rather than perpetuate the suffering of nearly two million people, we ought to expand our view to realize how their flourishing is interdependent with everyone’s flourishing and do everything we can to help facilitate mindfulness-based programs that encourage the cultivation of a sense of well-being.

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<sup>105</sup> “New Report Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023 Shows That as the Pandemic Subsides, Criminal Legal System Returning to ‘Business as Usual,’” Prison Policy Initiative, March 14, 2023, [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/03/14/whole\\_pie\\_2023/#:~:text=In%20total%2C%20roughly%201.9%20million,million%20people%20are%20on%20probation.](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2023/03/14/whole_pie_2023/#:~:text=In%20total%2C%20roughly%201.9%20million,million%20people%20are%20on%20probation.)



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