

From I to We: Impact Management is the Management of Life towards Holistic Well-being and Flourishing

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ABSTRACT

The Era of Well-being is here, and it falls upon us all to awaken to and align ourselves with the flow of history and time. Impact management is the management of life towards flourishing and well-being. It refers to our ability to direct our intention and attention towards evolving in the direction of our challenges, towards well-being and happiness. Recognizing that we are an inseparable part of a collective system, we must come to embrace and celebrate our life purpose which is to add value and impact, so that all systems are well. Such recognition then brings us on a journey from the “I” into the “We”. When “I am We”, that is when I am truly well. In Volume Two of this Special Issue, I am humbled by the opportunity to co-create this future together with the six excellent contributions to this volume, which detail how well-being and happiness can lead to a life-centered organization and to business flourishing.

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Introduction: Why spirituality matters in the era of well-being

Humanity has a long history of turning to belief and faith systems as a means of coping with the trauma, agony, and anxiety associated with the constant state of precariousness in the human condition (Bourdieu 1998). All humans are interdependent on one another, and we are hence mutually susceptible and vulnerable to one another’s arbitrary whims and desires in some ways – therefore precariousness (Butler 2004). Such vulnerabilities are only part of the process towards a new order. Many of us perceive our lives to be transient, unpredictable, and shaped by forces beyond our control, and this mental state drawn us to religions and belief systems, that help us make sense and meaning of the external world. It provides new doorways to completely new horizons and worldviews, from which each new era is birthed.

In the pre-modern era, humanity came to develop seemingly distinct, often competing religious institutions, from which uncommon, uneven, and fundamentally unrepresentative solutions emerged. The fixation over ‘isms’, ideologies, frameworks, ideals, visions that have been dividing and separating us all. Different religions have sought to answer the questions that humanity has wrestled with for eons – why do we exist? Why are we here? What really

is the purpose of life? For institutions, the purpose of their existence has since come under growing scrutiny and questioning.

The world today has entered the Era of Well-being. This is an era where there is a fundamental reorientation of our lives, our businesses, our societies and economies around purpose, away from today's narrowly defined profits, financial dividends, and material extravagance. In face of the seemingly insurmountable suffering and pain that have come to define our contemporary era, there is an awakening at many levels that happiness is wholeness, and that whatever is whole, integrated, and in oneness, can and will endure the chaos at each point in time. In face of the polycrisis (cf. Tooze in Whiting and Park 2023) threatening to uproot our humanity, we must respond to our inner calling, harness our co-creative potential, and seek to evolve ourselves towards well-being and flourishing.

In *One Choice, One World* (Tsao 2023), I advocate for people across the world to embrace a common language for a common culture for humanity to develop a common worldview to resolve common challenges. Undergirding this is the common, integral factor of holism. Holism, the recognition that our reality is whole, that all systems are integrated, and interconnected, is the answer to our sustainability challenges today.

As pointed out by László & Tsao (2021), we must draw upon the wisdom of ancient practices and integrate them with the modern sciences, to harvest their wisdom over time and the development across space, in order to devise co-created solutions for this era. Traditional Chinese practices and ethics as set out in the ancient doctrines provide a framework, where the Dao sets and paves the way, the Confucian practices provide us with the relational ethical practices, and the Buddhist teachings fundamentally informs our minds and bodies in our actions. Combined, these practices are hence complete and a prerequisite for mind, body, spirit coherence.

Modern science has opened up new dimensions in the interpretation to the phenomena such as consciousness through the prisms of quantum physics and informational theory. Western science is an externally oriented, material form of wisdom. Ancient Chinese wisdom, on the other hand, has a long history of practices that helps us make sense of how we think and perceive the fluidity and dynamism of our inner world that informs us as to how to live life to the fullest. Without the internal 'engine', a robust comprehension of the external world alone cannot bring us closer to well-being, whereas only with inner contemplation, we are able to make full sense and meaning out of our spiritual dimension. As complementary counterparts, ancient and modern, East and West must be integrated in order to be whole.

This is a view heralded by many of the excellent articles in this issue, who have sought to enrich our understanding of both the internal and external worlds through drawing heavily upon practices both ancient and modern. Modern sciences are focused on 'knowing the truth'; when they are integrated with ancient wisdom, the result would provide us with the profundity and depth, the agility and flexibility, required for our flourishing.

This article does not intend to be a comprehensive survey or outline of all my views concerning spirituality in management. Instead, I hope to outline a framework that neatly encapsulates the value of, as well as the story underpinning, the six excellent contributions in this volume. The commonality underpinning all of these authors' arguments today, is the

force of spirituality – “practices of connectedness” that quiet our mind, expand our consciousness, and that improve our comprehension of the deeper questions about life (Tsao 2021).

Yet how can we draw upon spirituality and embody it in our lives? I believe that the answer lies with self-cultivation or practice, the Chinese term *xiuxing* 修行 (Deroche 2021). Life is constantly an evolution in the direction of our challenges, and self-cultivation undergirds our awareness to see and align in the direction of the challenge, as well as adding value to life through collaboration and co-creation. When we look into our inner world in stillness, we will discover that our purpose is to add value to life such that not only do we flourish, but the next system will also thrive. This is the state of coherence – one where we are truly enlightened and in oneness, liberated from our pain.

Self-cultivation is self-learning and self-healing. It is central to our evolution and requires us to reflect carefully upon ourselves and the world we live in, which is characterized by a surface dualism of materialism overdrive and a nascent consciousness shift. This is well-being – the coherence and harmony in the system of life. This is the response to our inner calling, accessing our collective wisdom and shifting our consciousness such that we can achieve true oneness.

To achieve oneness, we must think systemically and act collaboratively. This requires us to do inner work, to quiet our mind, be present, and for coherency of our inner world, so we can observe and see the external environment from a different lens. This inner work is the pathway to shift consciousness of life, and evolve our life along the upward spiral towards oneness.

We can only understand well-being and flourishing when we think in terms of systems, as opposed to siloed fragments. As Waddock aptly notes in her contribution to this issue, change comes only through leaders undertaking fundamental shifts in their mental modes and patterns, in embracing the consciousness and ethos associated with leadership – thereby contributing towards a systemic transformation of the different systems in which these pioneers are situated. This transformation journey towards systemic integration is the management of life towards flourishing, and hence well-being.

Over years of searching and experimenting, I have designed a framework for this transformation, which I refer to as the *I-We* theory of change. Change is an evolutionary energy that moves in cycles constantly towards oneness. Our challenges today arise from the incoherence of the holistic system, the fact that we see one another as separate from the collective system. In this state of *I and You*, humanity seemingly exists as free-floating individuals, unencumbered and completely devoid of a sense of underlying identity that can unite us.

However, human beings are relational creatures. As such, no man is an island. We live in a society with a plurality of others, and when we awake and accept this reality, we will naturally be working to build healthy relationships and constantly focusing on adding value to the next larger system. This is the *I to We* journey towards the ultimate state of oneness of *I am We*, a state of well-being and happiness where truly we are well and everything around us is well. And in the next moment, the next cycle of change begins. Across the six articles in

this issue, this theory of change finds its resonance, and it is such resonance that gives me hope.

Surface dualism: From “I and You” to “I and We”

Modernity, as we know it, seems to be filled with discontent and existential angst. Socioeconomic inequalities have become all the more entrenched, with the ‘Haves’ and ‘Have Nots’ developing radically distinctive mindsets, preferences, and often opposed viewpoints. Countries in the Global North have benefited at the expense of those in the Global South, through resource extraction, neo-colonialist exploitation masquerading as trade, and global governance institutions captured by vested interests unresponsive to the needs of the majority on this planet (Nair 2010). This is the state of “I and You” – one where the “You” is seen as an opponent or even potential threat to “My” interests, and where we fundamentally do not seek to comprehend, let alone empathize with or care for, the other’s interests.

Social media platforms and the rise of online technologies, have rendered more overt the wealth gap between the developed and developing nations, as well as the resultant tensions and conflicts between social system. The unhealthy state of our planet today needs to be viewed through the lens of *materialism overdrive* – an excessive emphasis upon *taking from the planet*, without *giving back to the planet*. The vanity, pride, and greed underpinning materialism have propelled us to ignore the stark injustice and unfairness plaguing our planet today (Piketty 2014). This is a direct result of leadership decisions, the choices we make, with a focus on profit, and the interest of shareholders as a priority.

In this issue, Ehrenfeld aptly draws upon McGilchrist’s (2012) *left/right-brain theory* in arguing that our planet today has deviated from flourishing, in virtue of the imbalance that has placed the *left hemisphere* of our brain firmly in control. Whilst the right hemisphere “pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves” (p. 93), the “left hemisphere pays attention to the virtual world [...] which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other”. The dominance of the left half of the brain, in turn, has spurred the destructive tendencies of consumers, corporations, and even political leaders to strive towards the dominance and maintenance of a winner-take-all economy, a dog-eat-dog world where we become increasingly un-human and inauthentic, and move further and further away from the light of well-being.

Yet the materialism overdrive has triggered a steady awakening and an invisible yet irreversible movement towards systemic coherence. The pain and pressure have pushed humanity to the tipping point, beyond which we have come to realize the fundamental truth, that *everything is whole*. The ensuing *consciousness shift* is anchored in the organic, empowering drive that we have towards *flourishing*. People all over the world are recognizing that they must change, and that change must come from a reset to their mindsets, guided by this truth. Only when the internal reality of individuals is reoriented to ensure equivalence and alignment with the external reality they inhabit, could they be on a path towards flourishing.

We are conditioned to think linearly and in fragmented parts, a tendency that is the core barrier to flourishing. As Ehrenfeld emphatically enunciates, the “brain must be re-balanced to restore the right hemisphere to its proper role as master” (p. 4). From another perspective,

the two halves of the brain are fundamentally one integrated whole, and accessing the wisdom of our creative and holistic mind is needed to complete the whole. Correspondingly, I would suggest that the solution to the hegemony of the left-brain rests not with balancing – which maintains the divide between the two hemispheres, but with integrating to bring together the two seemingly disparate parts as one.

This in turn brings me to a fundamental truth about any “future flourishing-based system” (p. 6), the so-called antagonism between the materialism overdrive and consciousness shift is illusory. There is no fundamental conflict between the pain and the awakening it spurs in us, which in turn allows us to better pinpoint and focus our attention on addressing the pain – one gives rise to another, which in turn feeds into the other.

The dualism here is only ‘surface-level’ and nominal, substantively obscuring the underlying proposition that materialism overdrive and consciousness shift are both components of the *Yin-Yang* (陰陽), which moves like a sine wave that constantly oscillates back and forth between the two elements. Energy moves between these two as coordinated vibrations (Fang 2014) in responding to excess materialism with a consciousness shift.

From I and We to I in We

The above constitutes the first – and critical – step in this *I to We* journey. Yet *I and We* remain divided, where both I and We are moving separately, and not as one inter-connected system. In order for the individual to truly come to see themselves as a part of the collective, it is imperative that they see themselves as part of the collective system, and consequently will *add value* to it. This energy to contribute and add value is love. When we recognize this inter-connection, we will naturally care for others and relate to them differently. Adding value is a process that inculcates in one an engrained ethos of respect for and celebration of the life that inheres and coheres in the collective. This is the first step in our consciousness evolution towards holistic flourishing.

We are constantly seeking an answer to a basic existential question, “*What is the Purpose of Life?*”. On this *I to We* journey, we will discover this when we find our inner calling. I have myself discovered that this calling is for me to participate in the evolutionary process and add value to the holistic system towards oneness. We can find our calling when we are still, a state where we quiet our thoughts and connect with our inner world. In stillness, we will hear the calling of cosmos and see the beacon of light that guides our choices for action.

Intention refers to our ability to respond to our calling – the meta-awareness of our true purpose. Attention, in turn, is the laser-sharp focus on intention, spurring us to direct our energy, action, and resources towards our intention. When we focus our intention and hold attention in relation to the systems in which we are situated, we will naturally be guided to right decisions of action that will add value to the systems. In so doing, we will positively *impact* the bigger system, and towards the well-being of others. Impact, in short, is what follows from a natural alignment of intention and attention in the direction of flourishing.

The ancient Chinese aphorism in the classic 《禮記·大學》 (*Liji, Daxue*), *Conduct yourself with morals, mediate your family, govern your country, and lead the world*, 修身齊家治國平天下, aptly encapsulates a set of practices that guides relational ethics, a core ethos towards healthy relationships needed for systemic coherence. Individuals must be prepared

to make changes to and adjust their behaviors and worldviews in order to become better versions of themselves and build healthy ethical relationships. The doctrine commonly known as *The Great Learning* is a Chinese learning journey that takes one from a smaller system to larger systems. The journey starts with practices for building healthy relationship as an individual, to a harmonious family, that forms part of a thriving community, through to the world at large, as one evolves and learn to become more holistic, truthful, and authentic versions of themselves.

At the core of the Great Learning journey lies the *relational matrix* – an approach to the individual ethic that emphasises our relationship with one another. On the individual level, we must embrace the focus and orientation around the individual. We must anchor our relationships on a strong sense of judiciousness and openness, and that we develop and adhere to practices that give rise to a healthy and complete sense of self. As whole selves, we will connect, bond, and relate with those around us with love and care. These healthy relationships shall in turn contribute towards a collective sense of purpose across each of the spheres – the individual, the family, the country, and the world at large. This is why the individual must always be the focal and initial point of learning, in triggering a virtuous spiral that is flourishing.

The relational matrix then takes us to the family setting. We must hold our families together, in order to serve the bigger system. The family itself is a site of service – where we first receive and learn love, with the purpose of serving the society at large. A stable family environment amounts to fertile soil for the cultivation of a healthy adult that can express love. As the child matures and grows into a full-fledged citizen, they also begin to connect and foster healthy relationships with one another. A peaceful and harmonious family is hence both the environment for nurturing love, as well as the source of coherence for a support system for all to fall back upon at times of need.

Self-cultivation is needed for the family to be harmonious, and a family in harmony is needed in order for the community at large to thrive. Everything is about coherence. The *Great Learning* provides us with precisely the path ahead to cultivate a truly stable and enduring nation-society.

Governing our country, at face value, appears to be strictly within the remit of politicians and statesmen. From the perspective of the *Great Learning*, there are many ‘countries’ that we can govern, once we expand the term in a more liberal manner, to include all institutions, such as businesses, academic establishments, and other organizations beyond the sphere of the family. Across all these contexts, individuals add value by fostering more egalitarian, productive, and transformative organic relations as members of these communities, with attention on the individual action while holding the intention on the communities’ collective purpose.

Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that suggests that some companies in our world are already involved in this very process. Lehmann offers an empirically robust and rigorous contribution – one that is methodologically unique and valuable given the interdisciplinary nature and aspiration of our field – that looks at how holistic management can motivate individuals to think and see beyond narrowly defined corporate objectives. Businesses are shifting from being purely profit-driven, to redirect attention towards becoming purpose-

led. Where employees find meaning in their work, feel fulfilled, their companies will naturally flourish.

In advocating this, I do not intend to suggest that the need to make profit is thereby compromised and diminished. On the contrary, profit-making still plays an important role for the sustainability of any institution. Yet what I do believe is that profit naturally follows from a purpose-led institution constantly serving their market needs. This is an integrated form of business institution that I call *Purpose-led for Profit Institution*, which is an integration of today's *For-Profit and Not-for-Profit* institutions.

For this vision to materialize, we need CEOs who awaken to the principle of holism to lead with love, from which care for the well-being of the markets they serve naturally follows. Select business leaders across the world today are already evolving towards becoming true CEOs of Love. With love we can find creativity and unity. This applies especially in the context of business, which has long suffered from the captive narrative of cutthroat, zero-sum competition. Through love, they come to direct their attention and intention to rendering their corporations to constantly work, innovate and add value to their markets. This is the direction today that *Impact Investment* and *Environmental, Safety and Governance*, are evolving towards.

The awakening to Love is rewriting the social contract between businesses and the market they serve. We must come to learn and appreciate the value of love for our communities, for our societies, for these metaphorically 'big families'. Indeed, humanity is the biggest family amongst them all! In adding value to our many different 'families' – across all levels and sizes – we are creating impact, which is the legacy we leave for our next generation. This is the ancient ethical practice of harmony creation and oneness for the system.

Today, modern science is also discovering rules of energy that describe how we can constantly evolve towards wholeness. When something falls apart, it is merely part of the evolution process that will reassemble towards coherence. Everything is nothing except vibrations. There is no real matter except clusters of vibrating energy in our world, thus giving rise and shape to the illusion of form. Holistic flourishing is when we vibrate in coherence and harmony – not only within ourselves, but also with one another, with everyone, with the universe and nature. When we are at one with the multiple spheres of impact that we occupy – including ourselves, our families, our societies, and the universe – that is when we become truly well.

In our journey towards coherence and flourishing, we must first undergo the process of Bifurcation (László 1991), that is kickstarted upon our arriving at a tipping point: the point where one crosses a threshold, which compels us to either fork upwards towards integration and flourishing, or downwards towards extinction and annihilation. Tipping points can be reached through gradual yet important accumulation. Time and time again, humanity has proven that when pushed to a tipping point, they will choose to fork upwards towards integration and flourishing.

In this volume, Simola's article provides us with a detailed theoretical account of how we can strive for oneness and wholeness amidst a world of seeming fragmentation. In invoking storytelling, Simola presents a persuasive argument for the acts of speaking and listening as

coming together as one integrated whole, in fostering an ethos of pluralist and sustained dialogues throughout communities and societies.

I have long maintained that storytelling is an integral part of the ‘inner work’ we conduct, in uncovering and discovering the underlying beliefs and values we harbor, and in granting coherence to our past, such that we can become whole for the present and future. Simola explores thoroughly how stories serve as plausible pathways to wholeness, activating in us different mindsets and ways of understanding life and reality at large. Indeed, future research directions should aim to apply the insights of this article to a wider range of contexts – including the family, the academic institution, the polity and country, and, even, transnational initiatives aimed at remedying and tackling international challenges, such as climate change and pandemics.

Similarly, Yang’s contribution offers us insights into an alternative pedagogical tool for self-cultivation: arts and culture. Arts is a pivotal tool in strengthening and bolstering our ability to engineer, manage, and unpack the fullest implications and values of concepts. Where concepts are abstract, artistic rendering can transform them into objects that we can interact with (e.g. sculptures, murals, interior design), visuals that we can absorb (e.g. paintings, sketches), and even experiences that envelop and change us for the better (e.g. experimental theatre). Art is not only an expression of creativity; it is also a core part of the Chinese culture that promotes the study of music, GO, reading and art, as part of the basic education for the nobles. The individual must take the lead in guiding and spearheading the way they learn, but the co-creation of arts could prove to be a vital pathway towards finding resonance with and within others. Delivered by Ingenta

Through storytelling and the arts – two seemingly innocuous, yet fundamentally revolutionary methods of self-exploration and self-cultivation – we shall come to develop the requisite consciousness and knowledge to make that one choice, that one choice that unlocks the one world, a world that is at once so old and new to us all. This is a world that we awaken to – and this is a world that follows from our very awakening. This awakening hence puts the I in We, and hence “I in We”.

From *I in We* to *I am We*

Yet *I in We* is by no means the end of this theory of self-cultivation-engendered change. Indeed, to truly reach the highest potential level of consciousness, we must make the final leap – from *I in We*, we progress to *I am We*. I am integral to and inherent in We, yet We cannot exist without the I. I and We must become inseparable at this stage of oneness -- the ultimate state of well-being, before the system moves to the next spiral of seeking coherence with a larger system.

There are two contexts to which I hope to apply this very insight. The first is the notion of philanthropy – what is known in Buddhist texts as *bushi* (布施). *Bushi* refers to the practice and virtue of giving, charity, and offering of alms. In cultivating generosity, individuals also come to cultivate their standing, relations, and positionalities within their collective. Indeed, the highest form of giving is one where the individual subjectively feels, and objectively is indeed, enriched and nourished by their *giving* as a form of care and sharing. This is the ideal

aspirational form of philanthropy, one that should underpin and fuel corporations' commitment to their ESG policies and decisions.

Philanthropy is not an institution. It is an ethos. It is a culture, a lifestyle. It is a fundamental recognition that needs to be embodied, reflected, and harnessed in our thinking and action, thereby producing our mindset. When thinking about philanthropy, I often view it through the lenses of interest alignment: when I give to others, I am in service and contribute to their well-being. When others are well, I become well. I am not well unless and until everyone in the world is well. Well-being is intertwined. Interests are intertwined. This is how and why “We” and “I” must be fully aligned in order for all of us, and each and every individual within us, to be fundamentally well.

The process above is by no means easy. We must and should constantly strive to manage our differences, which render integration difficult; to manage our temptations, to divide and differentiate against the facts of the matter; to manage our greed and avarice, which have caused our world to deteriorate to the state that it currently finds itself in – we must manage. This is why management for impact, is indeed the management of all life – not just my or your life – towards flourishing.

In Culham's insightful interpretation of oneness – as a way to restoring goodness to our society and the environment – I am reminded of the virtues and merits of Daoist and Buddhist as schools of thought, and ways of life, shedding insight on how we can relieve ourselves of alienation from others, from our communities, and our nature.

We must move beyond the days and the times of hyper-individualism; one where socially accepted norm codify and enshrine self-interestedness and selfishness. We must embrace instead Oneness through holistic education – education that orients us towards a “broader view of the self [...]. It is vital that students participate in exercises that provide them embodied personal experiences that shift their sense of self.” (p. 29) Indeed, as Hanh argues, spirituality drawing the “evidence and the insight of interbeing” – inheriting the virtuous thoughts and intellectual rigor of Daoism and Buddhism – is key in guiding us towards uncovering what our lived experiences truly means (Plum Village 2014).

Shifting from the ultimately restrictive range of experiences that “I” have access to, to the unlimited, boundless experiences that “We” have collectively endured over time and history, opens up our horizons indefinitely. It is precisely this shift of what makes us *us*, what makes the self *self* that encapsulates the “I in We” to “I am We” transition. The former still strains to acknowledge the fact that the individual is ontologically conjoined to the collective; it referentially assumes that there can be some untethered, disjointed “I” that can be analytically, even if not relationally, detached from the “We”. The latter, on the other hand, is far more accurate and authentic, in enabling us to recognize that we are defined by our deep and meaningful connections with not just some others, but with all others, with the environment, and with our world. This is the highest and greatest form of impact.

Impact is what gives rise to our holistic flourishing. I have longed for a day when thinkers and scholars would conduct a more systemic study into what economics driven by well-being and happiness would look like. With the resounding success and rich insights contained within this volume, I am confident that the prospects for this endeavor have never shone brighter. May we flourish in the light of impactful management!

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