

# **Mindful reflexivity: Unpacking the process of transformative learning in Mindfulness and Discernment**

## **Abstract**

Can spiritual practice encourage transformative learning? In this article, we unpack how spiritual practices from the Buddhist tradition – mindfulness – and the Quaker tradition – discernment – encourage the attainment of moral reflexivity and the capacity to transform self, in individual and relational organizational contexts respectively. We also show how moral reflexivity and self-transformation are mutually-reinforcing and promote a transformational cycle of management learning. We propose that ‘mindful reflexivity’ – a foundational model of spiritually-informed moral reflexivity – can contribute to new ways of management learning through its context-sensitivity and ethical orientation to foster the kinds of reflexivity needed for responsible management. Our paper concludes with implications for management learning theory and practice and we offer pathways for future research.

## **Introduction**

There are various forms and approaches to reflexivity scholarship, which are constituted by different assumptions about epistemology and ontology (Johnson & Duberley, 2003). For instance, reflexivity based on a realist ontology and objectivist epistemology enables researchers to nurture and sustain objective inquiry (Mulkay, 1992). Epistemic reflexivity, based on a realist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, includes ideas such as self-reflection (Habermas, 1974), infra-reflexivity (Latour, 1988), radical reflexivity (Pollner, 1991), and reflexive realism (Beck, 1996), to mention a few. In contrast, one strand of reflexivity scholarship that we believe has much promise is the idea of moral reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2009, 2016; Driver, 2017), which may encourage a transition to responsible business (Hibbert

& Cunliffe, 2015), authentic leadership (Tomkins & Nichols, 2017), and facilitate ethical decision-making (Gunia et al, 2012).

Moral reflexivity emphasizes the ability to question who we are in the world, that our interactions are contextually-embedded, and how we can act responsibly and ethically (Cunliffe, 2009; Gunia et al, 2012; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Segal, 2011). Moral reflexivity involves both (1) self-reflexivity – the ability to question our own ways of being and relating – and, (2) critical reflexivity – the ability to examine assumptions underlying social and organizational policy and practice to guide responsible and ethical action (Cunliffe, 2009, 2016; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hibbert, et al., 2014). We agree with Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) that moral reflexivity is crucial for management learning and responsible management because morality enhances ethical judgment, which “is about self and being able to reflect upon and evaluate whether we are living a good life” and it constitutes a process in which an “ethical selfhood unfolds in a reflexive process of recognizing we are accountable for our self, our actions and our relationships” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 97). Moral reflexivity is particularly timely in contemporary management practice. For instance, the recent Volkswagen emissions scandal in 2015 reflects an unreflective management practice (Pless et al, 2012, 2017; Rhodes, 2016). This case has highlighted the need for an enhanced moral reflexivity so that “powerful corporations cannot define their own morality as they unabashedly pursue their own economic interests at the expense of others” (Rhodes, 2016, p. 1512)

Despite continued interest in reflexivity scholarship, and moral reflexivity in particular, few studies have examined the potential role of spiritual practice in encouraging reflexivity, although studies by Allen (2017), Hosking (2012), Jordan, Messner and Becker (2009), Vu, Wolfgramm and Spiller (2018), and Xing & Sims (2012) are some notable exceptions. This is rather puzzling given that moral and ethical considerations are deeply-embedded in many spiritual practices (Corner, 2009; Sheep, 2006). In addition, reflexivity is built upon beliefs, knowledge and experiences (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005)

attained through an inner dialogue, and through communication with core belief systems - practices which are part of most spiritual traditions (Xing & Sims, 2012). Furthermore, spiritual practice can trigger an ethical orientation and self-transformative process (Lynch et al, 1997), reflected in traditions such as mindfulness (Qiu & Rooney, 2017; Vu & Gill, 2018, Vu et al, 2018), Quakerism (Allen, 2017; Fennell, 2012), as well as others such as Daoism (Xing & Sims, 2012). Nevertheless, charting the theoretical linkages between moral reflexivity, spiritual practice and self-transformation remains underdeveloped and ripe for elaboration (Archer, 2007; Maclean et al, 2012).

We draw upon a social constructionist view of moral reflexivity to explicate the foundations for our ideas of ‘mindful reflexivity’ - a foundational model of spiritually-informed moral reflexivity. We answer the call of Baden and Higgs (2015) in reflexively revising perceived wisdom in management and leadership learning for a pro-social mindset, which involves sustainability, spirituality and the practice of being mindful. To build the foundations for our model, we draw upon the principles and practices of Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment to elaborate how spiritual practice encourages mindful reflexivity to facilitate a process of self-transformation by encouraging a learning cycle that attends to the complex situational ethics needed for responsible management. Given Cunliffe (2009) emphasized that moral reflexive processes should encompass both the self and relationships with others, to illustrate the potential of mindful reflexivity we chose Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment given that mindfulness is an individual practice, and Quaker discernment constitutes a group and relational practice. However, while the two traditions have different relational foci they are both deeply rooted in a morality and ethics.

For instance, Buddhism is about practicing, learning and transforming the self with logical guides to understand the universe rather than depending on religious rituals (Daniels, 2005). Mindfulness is part of the Buddhist path of deep transformation of mind and behavior “to transform the human mind by

lessening, and ultimately eliminating, toxic mental states rooted in greed, ill will and delusion” (Purser & Milillo, 2015, p. 7). We argue that moral reflexivity is also an important part of Buddhist mindfulness practice since mindfulness requires an intellectual awareness (Qiu & Rooney, 2017, Vu & Gill, 2018) and a rejection of prior assumptions to foster context-sensitive management (Vu et al, 2018). Mindfulness is a facilitator of personal and social transformation through an ethical framework that considers the well-being of all living beings (Purser & Millilo, 2015; Purser & Loy, 2013). By emphasizing how Buddhist mindfulness may attend to the ‘mindful’ aspects of reflexivity may enable individual leaders and managers to critically question their own assumptions, past experiences, and moment-awareness in different contexts to attend to ethical dilemmas and problems.

Quaker discernment has many similarities, but also important differences. Quaker discernment, practiced as part of what Quakers’ describe as a ‘meeting for business’ (eg, see Anderson, 2006; Burton, 2017), affords primacy to collectivized knowledge and learning (Muers & Burton, 2018). The Quaker practice of discernment – collectively sitting in silence and listening deeply to the contributions of others in order to encourage unity around a way forward - aims to generate a shared understanding of an issue or problem and encourages and embeds a mindful reflexivity that shapes and transforms the individual in relation to others. Attaining mindful reflexivity through discernment may cultivate collaborative efforts to attend to organizational grand challenges such as sustainability that is sometimes beyond an individuals’ potential (Allen, Marshall, and Easterby-Smith, 2015; Phillips, 2013). We hesitate to suggest that Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment can be integrated together into a single practice, as the different traditions emphasize different relational foci and different philosophical and theological roots. Nonetheless, the respective practices each share deeply-embedded moral and ethical considerations that leaders and managers and groups and teams may draw upon to encourage greater reflexivity in leadership, governance and decision-making.

In this paper, we argue that our ideas of mindful reflexivity further extend the notion of moral reflexivity. We contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, while moral reflexivity is a well-developed concept within the literature associated with self and relationship with others (Cunliffe, 2009), an operationalization of the concept at individual and group/team level remains underdeveloped. Second, examining how spiritual practice can foster moral reflexivity is also under-explored, despite many spiritual practices being embedded with ethical and moral traditions (Marques, 2012; Scully, 2009; Vu, 2019). Thus, we propose a foundational mindful reflexivity model that incorporates both critical and self-reflexivity based upon Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment, and show how mindful reflexivity fosters a transformative learning process.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by briefly reviewing the literature on reflexivity, moral reflexivity and self-transformation. Second, we show how the spiritual practices of Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment can encourage the attainment of moral reflexivity and promote self-transformation in different relational contexts. In our discussion, we then introduce our mindful reflexivity model and elaborate how moral reflexivity and self-transformation can be mutually-reinforcing in the presence of spiritual practices which leads to a transformative learning cycle. In our conclusion, we outline the implications for management learning and management education and offer new pathways for future research.

### **Reflexivity and moral reflexivity**

The notion of reflexivity has been explored widely in social sciences (Ashmore, 1989; Woolgar, 1988), management and organization studies (Allen, 2017; Cunliffe, 2002; 2009; Rigg, 2018; Segal, 2010; Xing & Sims, 2011), organizational learning (Schippers et al, 2008; Smith & Kempster, 2019) and management research (Johnson & Duberley, 2003; Lynch, 2000; McDonald, 2013; 2016). Reflexivity has become an important topic, since it embraces “the realization that we shape our lives with others; therefore, in shaping

our lives, we need to be attuned to, and critically examine the circumstances of such relationships” (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015, p. 180). In other words, reflexivity encourages the consideration of multiple perspectives, promoting “an explicit concern for otherness and difference” (Bleakley, 1999, p. 328).

In management learning, reflexivity is a crucial practice needed by managers for ‘practical coping’ in challenging situations. According to Segal (2010), some management experiences can be based on a felt-sense of judgment, and there is a need to foster those felt senses into “critical thought, framing and reframing”. In other words, “managers become attuned to the way of being-in-the-world implied in their coping”, and, therefore, it is important that reflexivity is brought into practice to work “with the nagging existential-emotional doubts of managers and turning these nagging doubts into opportunities for questioning by working in the space of resolve” (Segal, 2010, p. 388). In particular, managers today are increasingly facing complex issues such as ethical dilemmas that challenge managerial abilities and ethical frames (Vu et al, 2018).

Moral reflexivity highlights an ethical awareness that can encourage responsible management (Cunliffe, 2009; Driver, 2017; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hibbert et al, 2017; McDonald, 2013, 2015). For instance, moral reflexivity fosters the questioning of prior assumptions, actions, and organizational practices, altering the way we think about knowledge in such a way that it generates a new understanding (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). Moral reflexivity is enacted through both self-reflexivity and critical-reflexivity because ethical and moral actions are embedded in a relational understanding (Cunliffe, 2009). Self-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002; 2003; Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Hibbert et al, 2014, Hibbert et al, 2015; Smith & Kempster, 2019), the first component of moral reflexivity, reflects the ability to question one’s values and assumptions to make sense of everyday experience by placing individuals in the “construction of social reality and the creation of meaning” (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005, p. 229). In order to be able to challenge one’s own assumptions, it is crucial to have the ability to relate and engage with the world and with others

(Garrety, 2008; Segal, 2011) so that one is able to become more responsive (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005) and have the willingness to change (Greig et al, 2013; Moore, 2013). Therefore, self-reflexivity demonstrates a willingness to break down one's status quo (Antonacopoulou, 2010), to challenge assumptions and habitual practices (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005) and enact change through personal praxis (Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 2005). Self-reflexivity is particularly important for responsible management as it provides individuals with the ability to question "means and ends of action" (Lash, 1993, p.202).

The second element of moral reflexivity - critical reflexivity - emphasizes social and organizational practices and the willingness to critique structures and systems (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Hibbert et al, 2014; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Manz, 2014). For instance, critical reflexivity helps individuals to engage in revealing multiple perspectives and alternative ways of thinking about issues and practices such as organizational manipulation or control, and challenging systems of power within organizational contexts (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). Therefore, critical reflexivity offers the ability to critique ideologies and normalized practices to reformulate and expand the bounds of social and organizational policy and practice by rethinking individuals' metanarratives that legitimize existing ways of thinking (Lyotard, 1992). In order to activate self- and critical- reflexivity that underpins moral reflexivity suggests a process of transforming the self through interactions with others and the external environment (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). However, how moral reflexivity encourages a process of self-transformation is underdeveloped in the literature (Archer, 2007; Maclean et al, 2012).

In the next section, we discuss the notion of self-transformation, its relevance to moral reflexivity, and particularly highlight how spiritual practices and moral reflexivity enable a process of self-transformation.

### **Self-transformation, moral reflexivity and spiritual practice**

Self-transformation reflects a movement involving both knowledge and action, expressed both internally and externally (Steiner, 2005). From a psychological perspective, self-transformation encourages the

“rumination in addressing psychological disturbances and in creating space for the expression, acceptance, and integration of all experiences as integral to one’s life and meaning” (Albert, 2017, p.69). In fact, self-transformation is an essential feature of human life, a part of the evolutionary design of life (Ouspensky, 1949; Satprem, 1968). The experience associated with self-transformation can also be very different to individuals since some may feel excitement, while others may experience fear, unfamiliarity with the unknown and change because self-transformation may involve mental and cognitive changes, new ways of thinking, transformation of emotions, or development of heightened sensory awareness (Metzner, 1980).

Self-transformation is associated with reflexivity, since reflexivity facilitates a transition from individual to integrated knowledge in order to understand underlying assumptions, paradigms and different worldviews (Söderlund, 2010). Particularly for generating moral reflexivity, a process of transforming the self is involved (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005). For instance, to be morally self-reflexive, there is a need for continuous dialogue with the self about assumptions, values, belief systems embedded in a radical process of questioning ideologies and transforming selves to recognize the need for changes within relationships or in organizational cultures and practices (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Hibbert et al, 2015; Jun, 1997). Likewise, critical reflexivity involves the process of questioning familiar assumptions by having a more critical lens on organizational policies and disciplines to recognize emerging issues and concerns with a critical eye (Cunliffe & Jun, 2005; Jun, 1994). This process reflects a learning process of self-transformation not just by questioning and having doubts over actions, but it also involves a process of learning from one’s own failures.

While moral reflexivity is embedded and involved in the process of self-transformation, it is unclear how they are interlinked or how they can reinforce and enhance one another. Limited scholarship has suggested that spiritual practice may play a role in self-transformation processes through a self that is beyond ego



(Lancaster & Palframan, 2009, p.257), coping with stressful life experiences (Wong & Wong, 2006) or through psychological adjustment to stress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Spiritual practice is an essence that refers to “the core nature which provides the motivating energy toward meeting the potential for self-development and self-transformation” (Carroll, 1998, p.11). Similarly, spiritual practice is closely-linked to reflexivity (Allen, 2017; Xing & Sims, 2012; Vu et al, 2018), ethical principles (Marques, 2012; Scully, 2009; Vu, 2019) and self-transformation (Fennell, 2012; Qiu & Rooney, 2017; Vu et al, 2018). Spirituality can also facilitate transformative learning, since spiritually grounded approaches cultivate and construct knowledge narratives and develop spiritual awareness as part of a transformative learning experience (Taylor, 2017).

A few studies consider reflexive practice in relation to Eastern and Western spiritual and religious traditions, such as Chinese Daoism (Xing & Sims, 2012), Quakerism (Allen, 2017), and Buddhism (Hosking, 2012; Vu et al, 2018). For instance, Daoism facilitates reflexivity to capture complex interactional learning from social experiences and leadership through ways of believing in Wu Wei by following a reflexive process of performing rather than forcing the situation (flow), being aware of risks (self-protection), and coping with things that are not going well (Xing & Sims, 2012). In Quakerism, reflexivity is attained through “embracing individual unknowing in support of collectively findings ways forward in a diversity of settings” (Allen, 2017, p. 137). Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasizes reflexivity through mindful learning from past and moment awareness (Vu, et al, 2018).

We argue that both self-reflexivity and critical reflexivity are embedded in Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment. For instance, Buddhist mindfulness, based on the principles of impermanence<sup>1</sup> and dependent arising<sup>2</sup>, suggests that phenomena occur independently of human desire, and, at the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> (Pāli: anicca; Sanskrit: anitya) – the universe is in constant change, independent of human desires

<sup>2</sup> (Sanskrit: Pratītyasamutpāda; Pali: Paṭiccasamuppāda) - nothing stands alone but subject to the interdependent nature of the universe

are interrelated to everything around them. Thus, there is a fundamental requirement for the self to relate to others (Garrety, 2008; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015) and engage with the world (Segal, 2011). Furthermore, since mindfulness is a wisdom-enacted practice (Vu et al, 2018), it encourages critical reflexivity based on the combination of wisdom and compassion to stimulate and advocate necessary changes to overcome excessive and harmful desires (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006). Buddhist mindfulness also emphasizes context-sensitivity (Vu et al, 2018) since it is impossible to detach from the context in which we act (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006, p.90).

In Quakerism, discernment aims to find unity around a way forward on a particular issue or problem within diverse groups. As contributions are made to the discernment process, a sense of unity emerges, interpreted by Quakers as the ‘sense of the meeting’ (Burton, 2017). In other words, Quaker discernment requires a self-reflexivity that is willing to be open to a wide range of different perspectives and has resonance with Hibbert, et al (2010) definition of reflexivity as “exposing or questioning our ways of doing” (p.48). In Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015), the authors cite the work of Gunia et al (2012) who acknowledge that allowing time for contemplation and moral conversations in decision-making can improve the ethical framing of decision outcomes. By opening up individual knowledge to a process of ‘testing’ by others embeds a high degree of self-reflexivity by acknowledging that no one individual has the ‘right answer’. Furthermore, as a radical faith that gives primacy to experience and action in the social world, Quaker discernment serves as not only a basis of collective ways of knowing, but that collective knowing must serve as the basis of social action to build a better world (Burton, et al., 2018), embedding a distinctive and spiritually-informed moral reflexivity. Next, we unpack the linkages between moral reflexivity and self-transformation in Buddhist mindfulness, followed by Quaker discernment.

### **Unpacking the link between moral reflexivity and self-transformation in Buddhist mindfulness**

Buddhist mindfulness practices originate from the fundamental teachings in Buddhism known as the Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: *catvāri āryasatyāni*; Pali: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*)<sup>3</sup> and the Noble Eightfold Path (Pali: *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*; Sanskrit: *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*)<sup>4</sup> to guide practitioners to overcome ignorance that cause various forms of suffering. According to the Four Noble Truths, the noble truth of the origin of suffering is due to cravings, “which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there” (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1844). However, often in Western interpretations, mindfulness is understood in a less comprehensive way, and often scholarship and practice emphasizes how mindfulness can serve organizational ends (Purser & Milillo, 2015; Vu & Gill, 2018), such as symbolizing a caring environment or offering spiritual support for oppressive and unequal working environments (Hyland, 2017). Described as ‘McMindfulness’ (Hyland, 2017; Purser & Loy, 2013), rather than encouraging personal development through wisdom and experience, the co-optation of mindfulness by many organizations has resulted in an obscuration of its moral and ethical foundations.

Buddhism refers to the practice of right mindfulness (*samma sati*), one of the eight principles of the Noble Eightfold Path – “the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering” (Bodhi, 2000), through a meditative and contemplative inquiry to correct defects affecting the mental states of individuals. The notion of ‘right’ here does not imply a moral judgment but an ethical discernment between what is skillful and unskillful to differentiate what leads to suffering or genuine happiness (Brito, 2014). Right mindfulness is cultivated through the four foundations of mindfulness (*cattaro satipatthana*) – the mindful contemplation of four objective spheres representing both material and mental sides of existence: body, feelings, states of mind and phenomena (Bodhi, 1994, p. 83): contemplation of the body

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<sup>3</sup> *Dhammacakkappavattan Sutta*, Samyutta Nikāya, 56: 11; *Saccasamyutta*, Samyutta Nikāya, 56

<sup>4</sup> *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* MN 117

(*kayanupassana*)<sup>5</sup>, contemplation of feeling (*vedananupassana*)<sup>6</sup>, contemplation of the state of mind (*cittanupassana*)<sup>7</sup>, and contemplation of phenomena (*dhammanupassana*)<sup>8</sup>.

In other words, right mindfulness “is based on wisdom, the intellectual understanding of surroundings to moderate desires, transforming the self, and reducing the state of suffering resulting from attachment to desires” (Vu & Gill, 2018, p. 160).

### *The process of self-transformation in Buddhist mindfulness practice*

The Noble Eightfold path demonstrates a path to eradicate suffering as a process of three stages (Bodhi, 1994) in which ‘right mindfulness’ is part of that process. This process includes training of higher moral disciplines (*silakkhandha*) through right speech<sup>9</sup>, right action<sup>10</sup> and right livelihood; training for higher consciousness (*samadhikkhandha*) through right effort<sup>11</sup>, right mindfulness<sup>12</sup>, and right concentration<sup>13</sup>; and training in higher wisdom (*pannakhandha*) through right view<sup>14</sup> and right intention<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, mindfulness itself is processual<sup>16</sup> and facilitates self-transformation, self-deconstruction and spiritual awakening (Watts, 1971). It is not a practice or technique embracing the sense of self as promoted in Western interpretations, but reflects a path of self-transformation that cultivates wisdom and compassion (Brito, 2014).

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<sup>5</sup> – to sunder egoistic clinging to existence with a contemplation and acknowledgment that everything that is formed is impermanent.

<sup>6</sup> – no greed for pleasant feelings, no aversion for painful feelings, no delusion over neutral feelings, representing fleeting and substanceless states

<sup>7</sup> – the sequence of momentary mental acts, distinct and discrete with causal connections to one another rather than substantial

<sup>8</sup> – a contemplative process, arousing investigation, probing the quality of intelligence through the stages of cultivating energy, rapture, tranquility and equanimity.

<sup>9</sup> Being truthful and positive in speech

<sup>10</sup> Being fair, honest and respectful in ethical conduct

<sup>11</sup> Motivation towards right livelihood and ethical living

<sup>12</sup> Ability to see the true nature of phenomena

<sup>13</sup> On-going practice

<sup>14</sup> Understand the impermanent and imperfect nature of life

<sup>15</sup> Commitment to do good and be ethical

<sup>16</sup> Ongoing process of understanding the nature of the universe as a process of attaining wisdom

In the next section, we deconstruct how mindfulness from a Buddhist perspective generates self-transformation through enhanced sensory, emotional and cognitive processing, continuous self-correction, and heightened ethical orientations.

### *Sensory, emotional and cognitive processing*

Kuan (2008) highlighted four aspects of mindfulness that indicate how practitioners can make sense of surroundings. 'Bare awareness' (p. 41) facilitates the continuous and immediate awareness of moment experiences. 'Protective awareness' (p. 42) is the state where mindfulness adds discernment to bare awareness to support moral judgments. 'Introspective awareness' (p. 51) reflects how mindfulness becomes an introspective vigilance to guide individuals, monitor and identify unwholesome states, and redirect their attention and energy to an antidotal state. Lastly, 'forming inspiring conceptions' (p. 52) is where attention is paid to wholesome thoughts, images, and emotional states to cultivate and redirect mental and emotional energy to skillful behavior. In other words, mindfulness fosters a skillful awareness that enhances sensory, emotional and cognitive processing.

These various aspects and forms of awareness are the foundation of 'right mindfulness'. "The mind is regarded, not as a lasting subject of thought, feeling, or volition, but as a sequence of momentary mental acts' (Bodhi, 1994, p.97) reflecting the notion of impermanence in Buddhism, in which various states of awareness are important contributors of experiencing the impermanent state of the mind. Along the process of self-transformation, there will be changes in habit across systems of sensory, emotional and cognitive processing (Vago, 2014), and therefore the state of 'right mindfulness' can provide sensory clarity, equanimity, free from attention bias through a continued awareness that is alert and informed (Vago, 2014). This process involves continuous self-correction and awareness facilitating a resilience in developing and adapting to changes and stress (Thompson et al, 2011).

### *Continuous self-correction*

Based on heightened and skillful awareness through cognitive processing, mindfulness also emphasizes the ongoing sense of ‘self’ that can learn to be more adaptive and efficient in reacting to the environment in a constructive rather than destructive way (Vago, 2014). In attending to the unpredictable and constant change of phenomena, the state of mindfulness involves a process of continuous self-correction through self-reflexivity in questioning the validity of knowledge in the impermanent state of the universe. The state of correcting the self through self-reflexivity is evident in the contemplation practice of the body (*kayanupassana*) – the practice of detachment from the body in acknowledging that the body is not the self or belonging, but a configuration of living matter that needs to be released from an ego-based existence - and the contemplation practice of feeling (*vedananupassana*) – the practice of detachment from greed or particular feelings, since feeling is a stream of events, arising and dissolving moment by moment (Bodhi, 1994; p. 86, 91). The theory of emptiness in Buddhism (Pāli: *suññatā*, Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) also encourages practitioners to realize that the self is empty of intrinsic existence (Van Gordon et al, 2016) because the self exists in relation to its surroundings, emphasizing the interdependent nature of all phenomena in the universe. Correcting the self thus encourages a continuous self-reflexivity to adapt to constant changes, learning from both successes and failures of the self and from others. For instance, in a multi-cultural and diverse business context, management practice in one culture may not be transferable to another culture, requiring managers to act and respond differently, involving different techniques and skills. Therefore, self-reflexivity and self-correction needs to be repeated as an ongoing process in different cultural or relational contexts.

Mindfulness is a method for awakening, realization and psychological transformation (Bodhi, 2011). According to ontological addiction theory (Shonin et al, 2013; Van Gordon et al, 2018), “the unwillingness to relinquish an erroneous and deep-rooted belief in an inherently existing self or I as well as the impaired functionality that arises from such a belief” (Shonin et al, 2013, p. 64) can lead to “the over-allocation of

cognitive and emotional resources towards a particular object, construct, or idea to the extent that the object is assigned an attractive quality that is unrealistic and that exceeds its intrinsic worth” (Shonin, et al, 2014, p. 124). In other words, when an overemphasis is paid to preserve the selfhood in various forms of pursuits, this can lead to barriers for self-reflexivity and selfish intentions and suffering from ontological addiction<sup>17</sup> (Van Gordon et al, 2018). Therefore, the practice of mindfulness can facilitate self-correction from different forms of ‘addiction’ in a transformation process that encourages self-decentralization<sup>18</sup> and self-reflexivity. Recent corporate scandals such as Enron, Volkswagen, Lehman Brothers, and BP are related, at least in part, to an emphasis on profit maximization. In Buddhism, such pursuits are considered a form of ‘addiction’ or extreme attachment, which Buddhism refers to as a type of suffering, clinging onto an expectation of an outcome that is dependent on unforeseeable, uncontrollable and impermanent contextual variables. Therefore, it is important to be mindful of such addictions and self-serving pursuits and learning to let go of such states.

### *Ethical enhancement*

Mindfulness as a transformational and learning process cannot be divorced from its ethical foundations as a deep and rich learning process. Mindfulness is embedded with moral principles of compassion and loving-kindness (Hyland, 2017) and “encompasses and is embedded in a range of not only cognitive, but also emotional, social, and ethical dimensions” (Grossman, 2011, p. 88). Ethics, mental training, and wisdom are also three important pillars of the Buddhist path (Kapleau, 1989), which are reflected in the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path but often neglected in Western interpretations of mindfulness. Therefore, even though mindfulness entails transformative, ethical and spiritual outcomes, in its Western

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<sup>17</sup> Based on the metaphysical model of psychopathology, individuals can form and shape beliefs the way they think they exist, which can become addictive leading to functional impairments (Van Gordon et al, 2018)

<sup>18</sup> The ability to let go self-serving pursuits

interpretation and practice it is often decontextualized, disembodied and isolated as a type of meditation practice (Brito, 2014).

The notion of ethics can be trained in the contemplation practice of phenomena (*dhammanupassana*) – the development of wisdom for critical reflexivity, in which ethics is crucial to identify hindrances, understand their arising, and identify ways to remove or avoid such hindrances in the future (Bodhi, 1994, p. 92). For instance, being mindful about the perpetual change of all phenomena based on the notion of impermanence can guide practitioners to critically identify and cope with attachment to material pursuits that may prevent unethical intentions. Since all phenomena are impermanent, the pursuit of profit-maximization cannot be static, as it fails to account for the changing expectations and awareness of consumers on issues of social responsibility and sustainability. Therefore, being mindful of perpetual change offers managers a more realistic and context-sensitive approach that can prevent unethical intentions drawn from rigid attachment to organizational ends. In critically evaluating the underlying assumptions of social and organizational practices, individuals engage in the process of identifying and evaluating the harmful values associated with such practices (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006) to develop understanding of moral considerations for responsible management (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). In other words, ethics is a crucial aspect of reflexivity to facilitate the four foundations of mindfulness and to foster a breakthrough along the path of wisdom and enlightenment<sup>19</sup> (Bodhi, 1994).

In summary (see figure 1), the process of self-transformation activated by mindfulness is a reflexive process. Through awareness of sensory, clarity, equanimity and emotional, cognitive processing, self-reflexivity is enhanced by decentering the self for a learning process of self-correction and critical reflexivity is encouraged with awareness of ethics to reinforce moral reflexivity.

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<sup>19</sup> Knowledge, wisdom, awakened intellect and mastery of Buddhist practice is term Enlightenment



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## **Unpacking the link between moral reflexivity and self-transformation in Quaker practice**

Quakers have a history of about 370 years in the UK. Quaker practice, especially its discernment processes that share structural similarities to worship, has recently attracted growing interest from management scholars who attest to its growing interest and use in non-Quaker and non-religious organizations (Burton 2017; Burton, Koning & Muers, 2018; Muers & Burton, 2018).

Quaker theology is rich and varied (Dandelion, 2014). However, at its heart is the idea of ‘That of God in everyone’<sup>20</sup> and the Light Within<sup>21</sup> (Rediehs, 2016). Quaker discernment is framed in silence, and each person is a constituent of the ‘Quaker meeting’<sup>22</sup> and may feel led to speak (or minister<sup>23</sup>) to the group. While early Quakerism had a Christo-centric tradition, many Quakers now emphasize its ‘spirituality’ rather than adherence to a set of shared religious beliefs (Muers & Burton, 2018). For Quakers, the sacred/secular binary is widely rejected, understanding the divine to be present in both ‘religious’ and ‘worldly’ activity. Quaker belief is thus highly pluralized (Dandelion, 2004; 2008). For example, Quaker scholars have written of Quagans<sup>24</sup> (Vincett 2009), and Muslim and Buddhist Quakers (Dandelion 2004). Thus, in our discussion to follow we set aside the common assumption that a religious group will share belief content.

### *Discernment - the facilitator of moral reflexivity*

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<sup>20</sup> Quakers try to recognise, and respond to, ‘that of God’ in others. That is, it is a recognition that each person possesses an essence of God (or Spirit) within them

<sup>21</sup> The Light Within is recognition that God within is a Light that shines

<sup>22</sup> Quaker worship practices are termed ‘meetings’ rather than ‘services’

<sup>23</sup> Quaker meetings have no priest or clergy, and each person is part of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ (Cranmer, 2003). Thus, each person present may feel led to ‘minister’ to the meeting. An absence of vocal ministry – eg a silent meeting – is termed ‘silent ministry’.

<sup>24</sup> Quagans is a term used by the author to describe persons who are both Quakers and Pagans

The initial entering into silence – what Quakers call ‘centering down’ – encourages each person to connect with self, the Light within, and with others in the Quaker meeting, triggering a self-reflexive and transformative process. During the silence, anyone may then experience ‘inward leadings’ (Anderson, 2006) and feel led to offer spoken ministry, “revealing their attempts at understanding and forming their belief” (Kline, 2012, p.286). As meeting proceeds, periods of silence and spoken ministry are interwoven, as those present offer contributions to the discernment process, and the group aims to achieve unity around an issue of concern to the group – Quakers call this finding the ‘sense of the meeting’.

The discernment process of the group aims to provide a much richer and deeper self-reflexive experience than any one individual can experience alone. By opening up individual knowledge to others in the group, Quaker discernment enables those present to self-reflexively examine their own judgement in light of the contribution of others. Given leadership is enacted by God/Spirit, and human authority is relegated, each person present is a constituent of, but subordinate to, the collectivized unity that is reached by the group. Thus, through this process Quakers expose individual knowledge to ‘testing’ (Burton, 2017). In his paper on UK Quakers, Allen (2017) adopted a relational ontology to note that reflexivity in Quaker practice involves a process of interaction with others that “...decentr[es] the individual knower, and so is engaged with unknowability” (Allen, 2017, p. 129). So, in Allen’s terms, testing requires Quakers to be open to a practice of individual ‘unknowing’, which then opens up the possibility of fostering a wider group-wisdom. Muers and Burton (2018) also argued that Quaker discernment encourages new knowledge not through sole reference to creed or scripture, but by together seeking the will of God/Spirit, with guidance provided by the Quaker testimonies to peace, truth, integrity, simplicity, and equality (Quakers in Britain, 1995) that have the character of “storied and shared traditions of practice, individual and collective - that relate particularly to interactions with the non-Quaker world” (Burton, et al., 2018, p.,360). Scully (2009) contends that the Quakers testimonies are akin to the cultivation of virtues, albeit, for most Quakers, with

a "deontological tether" of 'That of God in everyone' (p.118). For Quakers, once unity has been discerned on an issue, problem, or decision, the way forward is minuted contemporaneously, but it is never final and the way forward never certain. For Quakers, doubt is a prescription, and discernment has the character of an epistemology of the 'absolute perhaps' (Dandelion, 2004), where individual and collective knowledge is treated as partial and provisional (Muers, 2015). Thus, Quaker discernment practice respects the "validity of diverging views" (Pluss, 1995, p.129), but recognizes that knowledge is about possibility of seeking, never finding.

Quakerism is a radical and critical faith, and discernment is directed towards action in the social world (Muers 2015). For Quakers, knowing T/truth collectively, and living T/truth are inseparable (Muers & Burton, 2018). Muers describes the primacy afforded to experience in the social world as 'experimental knowing' – discernment serves as a basis of collective knowing, and collective knowing stimulates action in the social world. To complete the learning cycle, experience with social action then serves as the basis for further discernment and further 'experiments' (p.15). For Quakers, social action is often directed towards building a better world (Burton, et al., 2018). For example, in recent years, Quaker discernment has been directed towards peace-building, humanitarian work, economic reform and good governance (Muers, 2015).

#### *Discernment, moral reflexivity and self-transformation*

What unites Quakers, then, is not shared religious belief, but rather a spiritual process of discernment and experimenting in the social world (Burton, 2017). The Quaker meeting is the location where these dimensions coalesce (Anderson, 2006). For many Quakers, discernment constitutes a deeply moral reflexive process that underpins a self-transformation that has the character of Mead's (1934) ideas that such types of spiritual encounter fuse parts of the self together, and Hosking's (2011) ideas of "relational constructionism" that deconstructs self/other. As Marshall and Simpson (2014) noted, "the self is socially-

constructed in interactions with others, and has no independent existence. It is in dialogue that we come to see ourselves for the interdependent, mutable, and context-specific manifestations that we really are”. The authors conclude that “In doing so, they become more fully a social being by seeing themselves in and through the group” (p.424).

The transformative ‘spiritual journey’ that Quaker discernment encourages is never complete. Rather, Quakers acknowledge that self-transformation is a morally reflexive process of experimenting and seeking. For Quakers, self-transformation is *self-transforming*. Self-transformation may begin with the silence of the Quaker meeting that enables communication “with God...and the ‘self’” (Fennell, 2012, p.555), and encourages a reconstructed ‘personhood’ (Smolenski, 1999), but is a continuous journey.

<<<Insert Figure 2 here>>>

## **Discussion**

We have argued that Buddhist mindfulness and Quaker discernment can facilitate a process of moral reflexivity and self-transformation. We now introduce our model of mindful reflexivity – a spiritually-informed moral reflexivity - that encourages self-transformation and transformative learning. Mindful reflexivity highlights the process of self-transformation associated with moral reflexivity as a continuous self-reinforcing learning process. Mindful reflexivity extends the concept of moral reflexivity for responsible management by facilitating transformative learning for managers, and our exploration of mindfulness and discernment offers an example of how this can be enacted at the individual and group levels respectively. Buddhist mindfulness is an individual spiritual practice that emphasizes the primacy of learning from moment and past experiences, whereas Quaker discernment is a collective spiritual practice emphasizing collective ways of learning and knowing. In both examples, the practices embed context-sensitivity and facilitate transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1995, 1996; Cranton, 1994; 1996), changing the way people see themselves and the world (Baumgartner, 2001; Smith & Kempster,

2019). To continue our discussion, we turn to examine the role of mindfulness in encouraging transformative learning at the individual and then turn to Quaker discernment as a facilitator of transformative learning in groups and teams.

*Mindfulness - transformative learning at individual level*

Mindfulness facilitates self-correction and self-decentralization for self-reflexivity by enabling detachment from personal pursuits (detachment from greed) and personal ego (emptiness) (see figure 1), which helps to revise and question meaning schemes (belief, values, feelings reflecting the interpretation of experience) and meaning perspectives (perspectives and experiences acquired uncritically) (Mezirow, 1996). In addition, mindfulness is a lifelong self-transformation process, learning from the accumulation of experiences including failures (Purser & Millilo, 2015; Vu & Gill, 2018), which encourages transformative learning across one's lifespan, representing continuous, incremental and progressive growth (Taylor, 2017). This process of self-transformation which generates transformative learning is particularly important for enhancing awareness (Smith & Kempster, 2019) since it emphasizes the context in which the transformation is taking place and encourages the construction of new and revised interpretations of experiences in the world (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), which can be useful for managers in dealing with complex ethical concerns. For example, managers may have to face disorienting dilemmas when they move to a new cultural context, where there are different interpretations of what is considered ethical (e.g., developing vs developed contexts). This particular situation may require them to reflect back on the appropriateness of their understanding of how they see things (self-reflexivity) and how they critically evaluate the context (critical-reflexivity) and question ego to acquire new skills and knowledge and cultural intelligence to develop a more inclusive and critical worldview (Taylor, 2017).

On the other hand, along the process of transformation, mindful reflexivity reinforces moral reflexivity. Buddhist mindfulness provides principles and practices to attain self- and critical-reflexivity for the

development of moral reflexivity. For instance, Buddhist mindfulness activates the process of self-reflexivity and transformation through self-decentralization – the ability to let go of ego and prior assumptions, which are important values for the required ongoing adjustment in ethical decision making (Pless et al, 2017). Based on ethical considerations (the Noble Eightfold Path), past experiences and heightened moment awareness (wisdom), the willingness to change and be flexible (emptiness), and by understanding the contemplation practice of phenomena (impermanence/depending arising), ethical decision-making is enhanced through critical reflexivity as it evaluates ethical values that determine our actions towards a diverse range of stakeholders rather than an ethical framework defined by the corporation (Rhodes, 2016).

Scholars often mistakenly argue that mindfulness can be practiced at the group or organizational level without context-sensitive framing (Vu et al, 2018). In our arguments, we have reinforced that mindfulness originates as a practice at an individual level (Purser & Milillo, 2015), a facilitator of self-transformation and moral reflexivity, and that it requires context-sensitive adaptation to transfer mindfulness from individual to group/organizational level, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, Quaker discernment may offer groups or teams in organizational contexts a way forward as a means to generate moral reflexivity and transformational learning.

#### *Quaker discernment - transformative learning at group level*

Quaker discernment aims to find unity around a way forward in diverse groups, and in so doing encourages a moral reflexivity and promotes self-transformation (figure 2). While there is some evidence that diverse groups pose problems of communication and trust, they can, in contrast, be more creative and are less liable to accept conformity (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2008). Although Quaker discernment can create an environment of anxiety, and be uncomfortable and unsettling for those inexperienced in its use, especially when individual knowledge is openly tested by others, learning that transforms the self, is a “collective,

embodied and embedded process that is practice-based” and “constitutes individual and collective identities” (Collien, 2018, p.132).

Smith and Kempster (2019) have argued that scholars who advocate transformative learning emphasize dialogue and the relational aspects of learning, which encourage “the learner not simply to think differently but to act differently” (p.305). Thinking and acting, in Quaker discernment, is not a dualism, but rather a self-reinforcing cycle that embeds learning. Through sharing contributions with an open heart and mind, and being open to individual knowledge being tested by others, members of the group learn together sharing, testing, and sensing the right way forward. Echoing the ideas of Meacham (1990, p. 187) that primacy should be afforded to how knowledge is put to use, Quaker discernment is a process in which each person self-reflexively adjusts his or her position in relation to others towards an issue or problem through cycles of learning that create a new understanding that everyone can unite with. Experimenting with this collective knowledge in the social world then generates further learning and further discernment. Transformative learning occurs then as an active and continuous negotiation between individual knowledge and the ‘sense of the meeting’, as individual knowledge, belief and opinions are adjusted in contextually-embedded ways. These learning loops are characterized by Quakers as part of the spiritual journey, which is never final or complete. The primary aim of the journey is to be a better person, live a better life, and as many Quakers would express it, to build God’s Kingdom on Earth. Likewise, for Buddhist mindfulness, it is a journey of self-correction towards enlightenment, where accomplishment and happiness do not lie in the destination, but along the learning journey and the process of transformation.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of theoretical contribution, our foundational model of mindful reflexivity extends existing studies on spiritual practice and reflexivity in management learning (Allen, 2017; Rigg, 2018; Vu et al, 2018) as

we bring into conversation the notions of moral-reflexivity, self-transformation and spiritual practice, and demonstrate how it cultivates transformative learning for responsible management. Our mindful reflexivity model also contributes to the often-overlooked role of spirituality in the theory of transformation (Laros et al, 2017; Mezirow, 1991), bringing together the ‘self’ and its relationship with others in practicing moral reflexivity at an individual (eg, leaders or managers) or group and team level in a mindful, context-sensitive manner.

In management learning, mindful reflexivity can facilitate a more mindful reflexive awareness and context-sensitivity in response to ethical and moral dilemmas by taming excessive self-interest and respond to the call for an interdependence between emotions, cognition, contextual factors, and personality structure in ethical decision-making (Pless et al, 2017). When faced with situations that require ethical decision-making, attaining mindful reflexivity using Buddhist mindfulness may help managers and leaders to learn from past experiences, detach from self-interest and forego ego in order to adjust beliefs and values. The types of ethical practices associated with Buddhist mindfulness could potentially support managers and leaders to avoid taking extreme positions such as being overly rational or utilitarian, or even too compassionate, without being sensitive to the context of the ethical dilemma. For example, in the study by Vu and Tran (2019) compassion alone can be counterproductive, especially in dealing with organizational issues such as intentional sabotage at the workplace. Managers need to renegotiate their approaches from time to time to accommodate complex organizational changes, which requires mindful reflexivity to attend to individual differences to foster an ethical and inclusive culture.

Quaker discernment may offer opportunities for groups and teams to make responsible decisions that attend to the ethics guiding the group. The practice of discernment encourages a diverse group/team to contribute to a decision in a respectful, non-hierarchical, and ego-constrained manner, aiming to achieve unity around the way forward. Despite some similarities to consensus forms of decision-making (Muers



& Burton, 2018), finding unity in a group is fundamentally different to consensus. Rather than horse-trading or effecting a quantitative change in the beliefs of the group, reaching unity requires a qualitative change in individual beliefs and knowledge, and a willingness to sense the emerging unity as the will of the group. Discernment thus gives primacy to collectivized knowledge in a process of continuous moral reflexivity and learning. This relational route to attaining mindful reflexivity may thus offer groups/teams an approach to ethical decision-making that encourages a greater degree of responsibility towards an organization's diverse range of stakeholders, such as decisions relating to employee welfare, sustainability in supply chains, and the organizational impact on the environment or communities.

Beyond the organizational context, our ideas of mindful reflexivity may offer implications in business schools. Scholarship that examines spiritual practice in management education has expressed the need for business schools to return to a mission that is existential (Petriglieri, & Petriglieri, 2015), to build skills such as being present and deep listening (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2004), develop heart and soul (Waddock & Lozano, 2013), humility and empathy (Hay & Samra-Frederick, in press), embed soulful leadership (Benefiel, 2005), and to encourage a process which displaces certainty in favour of inquiry (Yanow, 2009). Critics of management education, such as Ghoshal (2005) and Mitroff (2004), lament management education for its absence of ethical reasoning which leaves “ethics and social responsibility *subordinate* [emphasis in original]” (p.274) to shareholder maximization. Practicing Buddhist or Quaker mindful reflexivity in the classroom context may enable teachers and students to give primacy to ethics and social responsibility through learning to be in tune with self and with others, and respecting the validity of divergent views. For example, in Quaker discernment knowledge remains partial and uncertain, and a willingness to be non-expert, not-knowing. Thus, as opposed to relativistic arguments that everyone can be right, the ‘Quaker view’ is that no individual can be fully right (Dandelion, 1996, 308) which fosters group learning and wisdom.

Having discussed these implications for practice, we acknowledge and do not under-estimate the challenges of introducing spiritual practice in management boardrooms or classrooms. For example, our ideas of mindful reflexivity are more likely be applied effectively in organizations that are knowledge-intensive and innovation-driven (eg, Becke, 2013; Bigley & Roberts, 2001) rather than in contexts where organizational members are more used to routine work that can easily lead to inflexibility (Gersick & Hackman, 1990) or stagnation (Hummel, 1987).

We encourage empirical studies exploring our ideas, especially in longitudinal studies exploring the transformative learning and self-transformation process for mindful reflexivity as well as how the notion of mindful reflexivity may foster critical reflection and critical thinking (Rigg, 2018) for business students. For instance, we recommend action-research that explores mindful reflexivity in organizations. On the other hand, further exploration of how transferring from individual to group levels take place and what forms of tensions individuals face in their process of moral reflexivity and transformation would also be worthwhile to expand on.

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