

Systems Thinking



Buddhist and Taoist Systems Thinking

The Natural Path to Sustainable Transformation

Josep M. Coll



“Transformation: what it is, why it matters, how to achieve it, and meaningfully evaluate it. That’s the territory of this book. Systems understandings can propel transformation, but to do so must cut through the cacophonous demands for more rigorous methods to pursue the challenge of engaging in more rigorous thinking. Drawing on ancient and enduring wisdom, this book illuminates the pathway to sustainability where what is at stake is nothing less than the future of humanity on Earth.”

Michael Q. Patton, *founder of Utilization-Focused Evaluation, author of Blue Marble Evaluation and former president of the American Evaluation Association*

“Coll’s groundbreaking book builds a solid bridge for you to connect the inexplicable and impenetrable world of Eastern philosophies with the wicked and vexatious challenges of sustainable management. From Chapter Five, you can ride on his Zen Business Wheel to roam back inside the mysterious domain of Taoism and Buddhism and forward to apply its wisdoms to your triple business bottom lines, principles, and practices. With this new book, you no longer will feel that sustainable management is akin to teenage sex: everyone talks about doing it; everyone thinks everyone else is doing it; but no one is doing it well.”

Yuwei Shi, *Academic Director, Blue Pioneers Program at University of California, Santa Cruz*

“This book argues that emerging economies contribute to global economic growth, bringing a wealth of wisdom that is essential to fix capitalism. From a business and holistic management perspective, Coll’s new book explores a novel interpretation and enlightening application of Eastern systemic philosophies to build a more conscious, harmonious, regenerative and inclusive economy in turbulent times.”

Lourdes Casanova, *Director of Emerging Markets Institute at Cornell University, S.C. Johnson School of Management*



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Buddhist and Taoist Systems Thinking

Buddhist and Taoist Systems Thinking explores a radical new conception of business and management. It is grounded on the reconnection of humans with nature as the new competitive advantage for living organizations and entrepreneurs that aspire to regenerate the economy and drive a positive impact on the planet, in the context of the Anthropocene. Organizations today struggle in finding a balance between maximizing profits and generating value for their stakeholders, the environment and the society at large. This happens in a paradigm shift characterized by unprecedented levels of exponential change and the emergence of disruptive technologies. Adaptability, thus, is becoming the new business imperative. How can, then, entrepreneurs and organizations constantly adapt and, at the same time, design the sustainable futures they'd like?

This book uniquely explores the benefits of applying Buddhist and Taoist Systems Thinking to sustainable management. Grounded in Taoist and Zen Buddhist philosophies, it offers a modern scientific perspective fundamentally based on the concepts of bio-logical adaptability and lifefulness amidst complexity and constant change. The book introduces the new concept of the Gaia organization as a living organism that consciously helps perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet. It is subject to the natural laws of transformation and the principles of oneness, emptiness, impermanence, balance, self-regulation and harmonization. Readers will find applied Eastern systems theories such as the Yin-Yang and the Five Elements operationalized through practical methodologies and tools such as T-Qualia and the Zen Business model. They are aimed at guiding Gaia organizations and entrepreneurs in leading sustainable transformations and qualifying economic growth.

The book offers a vital toolkit for purpose-driven practitioners, management researchers, students, social entrepreneurs, evaluators and change-makers to reinvent, create and mindfully manage sustainable and agile organizations that drive systemic transformation.

Josep M. Coll is a professor of Strategy, Sustainability and Innovation at EADA Business School, visiting professor at Yonsei University in South Korea, and research associate at Maastricht School of Management. He works as an independent consultant for a wide range of private and public organizations, such as the European Commission and the United Nations. In the United Nations system, he co-led the first corporate developmental evaluation and adaptive management movement in UNFPA. He regularly speaks internationally on sustainable transformation and coaches organizations, managers and entrepreneurs in transitioning to the new sustainable, regenerative and inclusive business paradigm.

Systems Thinking

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Transformation

Josep M. Coll

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To Siam and Suri, with love

To Suk Man Yu, in memoriam

To the future generations, with hope



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Writing a book is like growing a Chinese bamboo tree. You sow and water the seed. You irrigate and nurture it for days and months and years but nothing happens apparently. Finally, around the fifth year approximately, something astonishing awaits. The tree starts to grow, and it does so for around thirty metres in only a few weeks. What happened during these five years? The tree spent this time developing a complex root system with expanding connections, thus building a strong yet unseen foundation to sustain the outward growth that is bound to come.

In a similar fashion, writing a book is like nurturing the bamboo tree. The seed of a book is an idea, and once you plant it in your mind you start nurturing it. The fertile soil is your experience, the water is your curiosity and the perseverance is your passion. For some time, your mind makes the necessary connections to expanding and developing your idea into a system of knowledge that sustains the content of the book. And finally, this content is literally written in far less time. But for seeing the final piece growing, the tree needs sunshine. For a book, sunshine is equivalent to the help, support and inspiration of the people that care for and resonate with the message and spirit of the book.

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Introduction

The consciousness gap

The history of civilization is the story of the ascent of humankind. An ascent full of light and shadows. At their best, humans have taken advantage of their distinctive capacities to think and create to build complex global, social, techno-economic, political and cultural systems that have guided unprecedented levels of social progress and economic development. At their worst, human intelligence has been used to cause damage, suffering, conflict and divide across the world.

The latest sufferings are related to the degradation that human behaviour is causing to the environment and to humankind. The negative impact of humans on the planet have led to the Anthropocene, the human-made era that is provoking rapid geological, ecological, biological and socioeconomic changes on the planet. The deterioration of our natural systems has been alarmingly accelerated since the advent of a global extractive economic system that trades natural and human resources for profit.

This system is blinded by an economy based on the premises of infinite economic growth and endless needs. With the exponential growth of technologies and human population, the negative consequences of such economic system have become ecologically, socially and economically unsustainable. Ignorance of these consequences—or of the causes behind them—has enlarged the human–nature divide. We have basically forgotten that we are part of nature, that we are actually nature.

I am sure you have at some point wondered why structural global challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, economic instability, unemployment, chronic and infectious diseases, drug addiction, terrorism and war, for example, persist over time despite the brilliance of human intelligence, technological know-how and economic means that have been directed at eradicating them.

The unintended consequences of our economic system are happening at a time characterized by enormous and increasing complexity. The management field states that we are living in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex

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and ambiguous) world, a world where events occur and decisions need to be taken amid growing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The Covid-19 crisis is a vivid portrait of this fragile world: an exponential VUCA or turbulent world, where disruptive events emerge out of the blue, constantly challenging the status quo.

Have you found yourself in a situation where you had to make a quick, real-time decision without having any evidence to support it? Or, even worse, have you found yourself in a situation where you had contradictory evidence and yet you had to make a decision? That is often the situation for those who work in managing business and sustainability. So, how do we prepare for such a world?

This book is for seekers, for people in search of ideas, concepts and solutions to make this world, our beautiful planet, a better place to live, in peaceful harmony among humans and other sentient beings. Seekers are driven by an inner curiosity to learn and experiment with new things. This curiosity brings along with it a subtle sense of discomfort that makes seekers constantly challenge their status quo, ask questions and reflect upon life.

The 1960s saw the emergence of a scientific interdisciplinary field—coming from physical and life sciences—to study the inherent complexity of life, called general systems theory or systems science. Back then, it was a breakthrough. Today, it is still so. Systems science offers a new paradigm of holistic—or systems—thinking to precisely capture and understand the dynamics of complexity in order to find answers to complex global challenges. This thinking is based on the concept of system, which environmental scientist and systems thinker Donella Meadows defined as “an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something”.¹ A galaxy, the Earth, a city, an organization, a forest, a tree, a person ... They are all systems. A system can be embedded in other systems, such as people that work for an organization, or the trees of a forest. The whole system is larger than the sum of its parts, and it has its own structure and patterns of behaviour, mutually influenced by external and internal factors from other systems.

This type of thinking emerges as an alternative to the traditional—and predominant—linear thinking that has long characterized the functioning of the world’s economic system. It is the kind of thinking we have been exposed to, based on the reductionist division of the world into small and comprehensible units.² The traditional economic system uses the logical-rational analysis, the ability to trace direct linear paths of cause and effect in order to find solutions that allow us to control our “reality”.

However, and despite its relevant contributions to management science, there are two problems with systems theory. The first problem is about oversimplification. The danger of system as a concept is that, as

complexity theorist Edgar Morin describes, “its holism becomes a new kind of reductionism by reducing everything to the whole”. We definitely need to simplify reality in order to organize it and make agile decisions, but without falling into the generalization of complex reality. System is a root-word for complexity, a concept that should illuminate and not hide all the interdependent connections between elements and among systems.

The second problem is that systems science does not take into consideration the subjective experience of the observer for healing and transforming the system. As part of the system, the degree of perception and level of consciousness of the person who observes, studies, tries to understand and acts upon the system has a direct influence to transform it for the better or for the worse. Reality, and, therefore, systems, is a function of how we perceive and see the world. It is directly conditioned about our expectations, fears and motivations. The assumptions and mental models we hold about the world influence this reality.

I think that the study and, above all, the application, of systems thinking require the recognition and integration of the perception of the observer (the agent) into the process of knowing. As systems scientist Anthony Hodgson suggests, we need to rehabilitate the observer as a first step to heal our fragmented world.³ My point is very pragmatic: the observer’s level of awareness and consciousness directly influences the system. It does so because our level of consciousness and awareness directly influences how we think, behave and act in the systems we belong to and participate in. The observer is also an agent, a change-maker that transforms the system. If you see the world as if you are part of it, you are likely to treat it better and that affects how the systems operate.

The absence of the observer in systems theory and in management science overall (including the management of sustainability) is what I call the *consciousness gap*. Bridging this gap is precisely the focus of this book. Systems science has primarily developed in the West, especially in the United States. Although it represented an attempt to break from the deterministic paradigm, it did not include an Eastern perspective in the process of knowing. In this context, the consciousness gap carries an implicit sub-gap: the East–West knowledge gap.

The East–West knowledge gap assumes that most management concepts, theories and models are created in the West, especially in the United States. Who has not studied Michael Porter’s competitive strategy and five forces? Peter Drucker’s management principles? Philip Kotler’s marketing fundamentals and 4Ps? Clayton Christensen’s innovation theories? Or Osterwalder and Pigneur’s business model canvas? The business and management world is mostly influenced by ideas grounded in Western-thinking cultures and frameworks.

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I have no problem at all with Western-based theories and the fact that the West is a powerhouse in management thinking. On the contrary, I learn a great deal from these theories. But the deeper I go into studying the consciousness gap, the more I think that we have ignored a wealth of wisdom based on the natural study of human nature and consciousness. A wealth of wisdom that originated in the East. This is the case of Buddhism and Taoism, two philosophical streams that have empirically studied the liberation of human suffering in light of the fundamental nature of the universe.

We are facing global Anthropogenic problems for which management and systems science as we know them are not enough. And that is because they cannot capture the essence of some of these problems that are not only complex and systemic, but also a product of our consciousness. The Western lens is not enough for us to help capture them, understand them, and act upon them. I think that Eastern knowledge is what is missing, so that systems and management thinking get the upgrade needed for these disciplines to help us in the current world we live in. That is why this book is of the essence. We have the possibility to review, illuminate and update management science and practice with Eastern-based complementary approaches that are grounded in the conscious exploration and transformation of the self.

I have long been fascinated by the enquiry into human nature. I was attracted to the study of perennial philosophies rooted in indigenous knowledge that have long enquired about that nature, in a context in which the premise of humans as nature is considered a universal law. My learning journey brought me to South Korea, where I started practising Zen Buddhism and studying the hidden jewels of Taoist philosophy and metaphysics while working as a consultant and lecturer on international business and economic development.

It is extraordinary how, millennia ago, Buddhism and Taoism developed such an advanced systems' view of life by studying and observing nature. The fundamental principles of these life philosophies have now been discovered by modern science, especially in the fields of quantum physics and neuroscience. These recent discoveries reveal the major innovations of such Eastern-based empirical methods of enquiry into human and universal consciousness. Renowned physician and systems theorist Fritjof Capra, in his seminal book *The Tao of Physics* provides an insightful exploration of the parallels between these indigenous philosophies and modern physics. Can you imagine the potential benefits of applying these universal principles to organizational learning and sustainable transformation? This book explores such potential.

As a westerner educated under the Newtonian/Cartesian scientific paradigm, studying Buddhism and Taoism was a breakthrough for me. For some time, I explored these two fields of enquiry—business and

Buddhism–Taoism—separately. How could I make sense of combining my spiritual pursuit with my professional passion? They seemed at odds with one another. This nonetheless, the more I deepened my study and practice, the closer they were becoming. I finally realized that the real value was in bridging both apparently opposite but complementary disciplines: applying Buddhism and Taoism to sustainable business management. The result is a radical new conception of business and management, which is the subject of this book.

Buddhism and Taoism are essentially ways of liberation. Centuries ago, in a period called the Axial Age,⁴ these two philosophical streams emerged—both in the East—as methods to free individuals from suffering; a kind of suffering that is inherent to the cycle of living, called the cycle of birth and death, or *samsara*. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his book a *Call for Revolution*, affirms that the aim of his spiritual quest is to free himself of the fundamental ignorance that has led to the notion that there is a division between people and the natural world, which is at the root of all our suffering. To escape from this suffering, Buddhism and Taoism both offer a process of self-awareness grounded in the personal experience of human nature in relation to universal nature. This experience directly influences our level of perception, consciousness, thinking and behaviour.

More than two thousand years later, the face of the world has completely changed. It is much more complex. But suffering remains in our lives. This time, it is not only about our individual suffering, but also about the suffering we are causing to our planet, and, ultimately, to ourselves. This suffering is mostly caused by an extractive economic system that takes nature as a mere resource that can be exploited mercilessly. We need a new software of the mind that can allow us to free ourselves from this *samsaric* state of the world.

In this context, Buddhism and Taoism are more relevant than ever. They offer a systems view of life based on the interdependent nature linking all living phenomena. In this regard, individual liberation or freedom is empty from a separate self. So, it is full of everything. This is what Zen master Thich Nhat Hahn calls interbeing. Applying this idea of interdependence represents an opportunity to expand our mental boundaries towards personal and organizational development in the service of people and the planet.

Applying interdependence with wisdom, compassion and humility, three fundamental principles that converge in Buddhism and Taoism, provides a path to liberate this economic system from *samsara*, in a way that allows us to reconcile with our own nature, bridging the human–nature divide. In doing so, these Eastern philosophies reveal the self and the organization as living systems, constantly changing and adapting in flow with the natural path of transformation.

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I write this book as a curious human being in search of transitioning ways to a new sustainable paradigm. I know I'm a son of the old extractive business paradigm who is realizing that he is also an architect of the new. I take with passion my bridging role, of integrator between the East and the West, between human and nature, between business and society. I'm well aware of the limitations of writing about Buddhism and Taoism. These are philosophies that can only be genuinely understood by experience. As Alan Watts puts it, Zen (the symbiotic philosophy resulting from the interaction between Buddhism and Taoism) "deals with the domain of experience that can't be talked about".⁵ But I hope this book at least triggers an intellectual experience that sparks your interest to practise what resonates with you. Following a fundamental principle in Zen, let me warn you: do not believe anything that is written in this book, validate it with your own experience.

In this context, I do not pretend to write a scholarly treatise on Buddhism and Taoism. My focus hinges upon the application of Buddhist and Taoist systems thinking to organizational learning, adaptation and sustainable transformation in the face of the emerging problems of our world. I understand Buddhism and Taoism as a universal asset available to humankind that transcends all kinds of geographical, mental and identity borders. This book provides a renewed interpretation of Buddhist and Taoist systems thinking in light of the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The first challenge addressed in this book is related to finding new strategies and solutions to managing the sustainable transformations required in our organizations and the economic system at large. Can we create profitable businesses inspired by nature, that create life and take care of life? How can that be done? We all have seen companies that aggressively focus on profits while externalizing social and economic costs: how can we identify these unbalances and solve them? The second challenge, and related to the first, is to find new adaptive strategies and management approaches that can allow people and organizations to adapt, anticipate, transform and navigate across the VUCA world.

Contextualized in the transition to a sustainability driven business paradigm (described in Chapter 1), this book introduces new approaches grounded in Buddhist and Taoist systems thinking. These include the application of Taoist principles into organizational development and adaptability (described in Chapter 2); the Yin–Yang creative tensions (described in Chapter 3); the T-Qualia as an experiential model of learning for transformation (described in Chapter 4); the Zen Business as a bio-logical model of sustainable organizational design and transformation (described in Chapter 5); the principles-driven Gaia organization and entrepreneur that illustrate the practices of the Zen Business model (described in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively); an analytical framework for managing abundance in the present times (described in Chapter 8); and the concept of business mindfulness as

an analytical framework to guide the evaluation of the impact of the transformation (described in Chapter 9).

The concepts, frameworks and tools presented across the nine chapters have two objectives. The first is to provide *simplicity*, that is, to clarify complex problems and shed light on the complexities that frame our challenges in a simple manner. The second is to help organizations and entrepreneurs understand the mechanisms and dynamics that generate those problems as the basis for designing and applying solutions.

The novel contribution of this book is, therefore, to apply, for the first time, Buddhist and Taoist systems thinking to a nature-based, biological approach to manage sustainable transformation. Buddhism and Taoism have long been applied to other disciplines, such as medicine, geobiology, architecture, and martial arts, but not to business and management yet.

Joanna Macy, a pioneer scholar in studying the parallels between Buddhism and general systems theory, affirms that “encounters between modern Western thought and ancient Asian philosophies figure among the more fruitful feature of the twentieth century”.⁶ However, the business and management field has yet to discover the value and recognize the utility, from a systems perspective, of the Eastern approach to the process of learning, knowing, behaving and, overall, designing and managing organizations.

I believe there is so much we can learn from the systemic thinking ingrained in Buddhism and Taoism. Despite the catastrophic and sometimes apocalyptic news associated with the Anthropogenic challenges of our time, this book is about potential. Frankly speaking, I do not know whether we have time to save the planet. But this is not the point of this book. I grew up watching the insightful documentaries of Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente, a renowned naturalist and environmental broadcaster who said, “it is too arrogant pretending to save nature; the really sensible thing to do is to let ourselves be saved by nature”.

Taking a planetary time-whole perspective, humans are quasi-new on Earth. I assume that the planet as a self-regulating living system can manage without us. So, I will not bother you with a self-guilt sense of urgency such as “do this or the planet is gone” type of narrative. I leave this assumption to open interpretation. I’d like you to enjoy this journey with no strings attached. The book is written with hope, which, as Vaclav Havel once said, “is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out”.⁷

After more than 20 years as a manager, executive, researcher, consultant, evaluator and entrepreneur, studying and working in more than forty countries, I have realized the potential of business as a positive and transformational force if consciously and purposefully directed towards solving the pressing global challenges of our world. However, to fully realize this

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potential, the paradigm of sustainability requires a profound transformation of the way we think. This book explores this transformation by reformulating our own conscious participation in shaping the reality we want.

The focus of interbeing and living in harmony with nature opens the door to a life of possibility, of opportunity, of lifefulness, geared towards nurturing and creating life. Applying harmony to the organization is the opportunity to build conscious businesses that qualify economic growth, regenerate ecological and human systems and drive the transformation towards the new sustainable business paradigm.

In this spirit, the book is written for purpose-driven practitioners, business and management researchers, business executives, consultants, students, social entrepreneurs, evaluators and change-makers looking for new effective ways to reinvent, create and mindfully manage sustainable and agile organizations that drive systemic transformation.

Notes

- 1 Meadows, D. (2015). *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. Chelsea Green.
- 2 Edgar Morin calls this reductionist, linear type of thinking blind intelligence. Morin E. (1985) Blind intelligence. In: Shoham S.G., Rosenstiel F. (eds) *And He Loved Big Brother*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- 3 Hodgson, A. (2020). *Systems Thinking for a Turbulent World*. Routledge.
- 4 Philosopher Karl Jaspers coined the period comprised between 800 BCE to 200 BCE as the Axial Age

because it was a gigantic axis around which the future promise of humanity revolved. Everything we need to know about happiness and fulfillment, peace and prosperity, love and family, creativity and art, good governance and sustainable civilization can be learned in the Axial Age.

- 5 Watts, A. (2017). *Out of Your Mind*. Sounds True.
- 6 Macy, J. (1991). *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*. State University of New York Press.
- 7 Havel, V. (1991). *Disturbing the Peace*. Vintage.

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