



MINDFULNESS FOR EARTH

Charting a Path for Higher Education



March 6, 2023
Virtual Plenary



Meeting
Minutes



Mindfulness for Earth in Higher Education

Plenary Meeting

March 6, 2023 | 9am-12pm EST

[\(see time zones\)](#)

Attendees

César Abadía-Barrero, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Human Rights, UConn
Iyad Abumoghli, Founder and Director, Faith for Earth, UN Environment Programme
Zahra Ali, Ph.D. Student, Department of Plant Science and Landscape Architecture, UConn
Kumanga Andrahennadi, Co-Founder of Mindfulness for Earth and Founder, CALM
Erik Assadourian, Director, Gaian Way
Oksan Bayulgen, Department Head and Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, UConn
Jeanne Ciravolo, Assistant Professor in Residence, Department of Art & Art History, UConn
Jeremy Geller, Affiliate, Gateway International Group
Audrey Girard, Assistant Teacher, CALM
Phoebe Godfrey, Professor in Residence, Department of Sociology, UConn
John Grim, Co-Founder, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Yale University
Tina Huey, Associate Director of Faculty Development, CETL, UConn
Alexandra Hussey, Student, Wellesley College
Nashaw Jafari, Project Administrator, Sadhguru Center for a Conscious Planet
Cindi Jones, Professor Emerita, Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, UConn
Kinga H. Karlowska, Global Initiatives Coordinator, Office of Global Affairs, UConn
Sam King, Research Associate, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
Maria LaRusso, Assistant Professor, Human Development & Family Studies, UConn
Karen McComb, Director, Health Promotion and Community Impact, SHAW, UConn
Patrick McKee, Senior Sustainability Program Manager, Office of Sustainability, UConn
Emily Pagano, Health Promotion Manager, SHAW, UConn
Crystal Park, Professor, Department of Psychological Sciences, UConn
Rana Qaimari, Program Manager, EcoPeace Middle East
Venerable Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Tibetan Master of Kagyu Order
Anji Seth, Professor & Interim Head, Department of Geography, UConn
Mary Evelyn Tucker, Co-Founder, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Yale University
Tolga Turker, Director, Global Partnerships & Outreach, Office of Global Affairs, UConn
Sean Vasington, Landscape Architect, Office of University Planning, Design, Construction, UConn
Daniel Weiner, Vice President, Office of Global Affairs, Professor, Department of Geography, UConn
Antonio Willis-Berry, Director, Educational & DEI Initiatives, Department of Residential Life, UConn
Dimitris Xygalatas, Associate Professor, Department Anthropology, UConn
Juan Pablo Yepes, Student, UConn

MINUTES & REMARKS

9:00 AM - 9:20 AM – INTRODUCTIONS AND OCTOBER WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS

Daniel Weiner, *Vice President for Global Affairs & Professor of Geography, UConn*

Daniel Weiner opened the meeting, noting that this group is a continuation of a conversation that began five months earlier at the October Workshop in Connecticut. As such, the goal of this meeting is to continue that work in charting a path for Mindfulness for Earth in Higher Education. Everyone gave a brief introduction and stated either a reflection from the workshop or one thing they wished to share with the group.

9:20 AM - 9:30 AM – OPENING MEDITATION

Kumanga Andrahennadi, *Co-Founder of Mindfulness for Earth and Founder of CALM: Centre for the Advanced Learning of Mindfulness*

9:30 AM - 9:40 AM – MINDFULNESS IN THE UN ENVIRONMENT AGENDA

Remarks by Iyad Abu Moghli, *Founder and Director of Faith for Earth, UN Environment Programme*

We live in an exceptional time: the era of climate catastrophes, nature degradation, and biodiversity loss, unacceptable levels of pollution, pandemics, and all the associated social and economic impacts. For too long, humans have taken nature for granted, treating it as a commodity, to be used and discarded in the name of consumption and progress. The environmental crisis we are facing today is the result of reckless and environmentally unsustainable development paradigms that we have adopted since the industrial revolution.

This development paradigm is driven by the underlying reasons that are often not acknowledged, not understood, and not accounted for. These reasons include the crisis of greed, apathy, and indifference in attitudes of institutions, and individuals, leading to over consumption beyond the capacity of our only planet. Moreover, increased blind nationalism that does not recognize the global impacts of national actions is harming the environment. It can lead to severe ecological consequences, hinder climate action, threaten wildlife, and fuel eco-oppression. In order to face our common challenges and achieve our aspirational goals of people living in harmony with nature, multilateralism is crucial. Effective multilateralism includes effective interfaith collaboration.

At the launch of Our Common Agenda, by the UN Secretary General, he said: "Humanity's future depends on solidarity and working together as a global family. For people, for the planet, for prosperity and for peace. " Living in harmony with nature is better than living in conflict with it. We need to be mindful that we are not the only beings on this planet if we want to be at peace with nature. We need to recalibrate the human nature relationship. We also need to recognize the rights of future generations, those who will inherit the planet after us, not only in the next 50 years or so, but as long as the planet can hold life. The good thing is that we live in the era of a greater understanding of these challenges, and the global

movement towards sustainable development, and the role of stakeholders including spiritual and religious leaders and youth in changing the behavior and attitude of not only the public, but also decision makers. The UN Secretary-General, working with member states, and being mindful that future generations do not have a voice at the decision-making table, is proposing the reconstitution of the Trusteeship Council, as the forum through which Member States exercise their collective trusteeship for the integrity of the global environment and common areas such as the oceans, atmosphere and outer space." However, this is not just a technical matter; it requires us to look inward and cultivate new qualities of consciousness. We need a different way of tuning in to our relationship with nature, one that offers a deeper sense of understanding and connection. This is where mindfulness shines.

Incorporating Mindfulness into our lives is important if we are to be successful in achieving our global goals and effectively engage thought and religious and spiritual leaders. Mindfulness can help us stay focused on our goals, increase our capacity for connection with others and with nature, open pathways for creative solutions, and cultivate greater joy in our lives. Regardless of how mindfulness is practiced, being aware of our surroundings helps foster an attitude of care for all life on Earth - something that can quickly transform into decisive action at all levels from local to global. This is especially necessary when making decisions that not only affect our wellbeing, but also the wellbeing of our planet, as our only support system. We need to take a holistic view of our planet, recognizing not only our direct actions on the environment, but also how those actions that may affect others down the line. We can become more aware of how interconnected we are with one another and our planet and this creates a strong sense of responsibility towards protecting it for future generations.

Leaders, in both the public and private sectors, play a crucial role in facilitating change. This requires that leaders **Foster Empathy**. As empathy ties into emotional intelligence, which helps leaders better understand the implications of decisions they make, aiding them in making clear-headed decisions that take everyone into account. Seeking consensus when making decisions requires an **Inspired Collective Vision and Focus on the Process**: Mindfulness helps enacting change instead of striving for immediate results or short bursts of attention. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has adopted a mindful approach through its Faith for Earth Coalition which involves governments, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, and civil society groups working together to protect the environment. We have understood the role of interfaith collaboration in environmental governance by being mindful of the interconnectedness and interdependency principles of different religions with nature.

The future of our planet relies on our ability to take mindful and purposeful action today. By incorporating mindfulness into the environmental sustainability agenda, we create a space to identify the root causes of climate change and other global challenges - from considering different values and perspectives to strengthening resilience. By combining mindful practices with action, we can create long lasting solutions that consider all stakeholders. Mindful considerations will open up pathways that increase the effectiveness of our actions and ensure that current efforts are sustained well into the future.

9:40 AM - 10:05 AM – THE ROLE OF MINDFULNESS FOR EARTH IN EDUCATION

Remarks by Venerable Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, *Tibetan Master of Kagyu Order*

The Buddha talked about the Noble Path in the eight parts. Mindfulness is regarded as right mindfulness, and the right efforts are regarded as the main ways or tools to work on the whole transformation. This part- is it education? Is it training our wisdom, our view? How we see things, our understanding about everything, about ourselves, including interdependence. Training and meditation are not just sitting in a meditative posture, but to bring an understanding. Not just an intellectual understanding, but an understanding that would transform our behavior and change our way of doing things. That is meditation. That will lead to our right way of living- right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, and so on. To do this is with mindfulness and right efforts. So, mindfulness is very important.

If we want to know something, if we want to change something, if we want to understand something, how do we start? We try to be aware of, then try to research, then try to see what other people see, and how the great masters have thought. We call it listening. Listening and understanding what other people have said, then reflecting. Once we have some understanding of that, we try to allow our mind to relax and rest on it, so that the mind can itself illuminate and become more one with the truth. Our understanding becomes very clear and more confident. That would also change our way of doing things with our body, speech, and mind. That is what we call educational training. Therefore, mindfulness from a Buddhist point of view has a very important role, not only to calm our mind down, but to let our mind be more together with how things are going on and how to understand and transform ourselves. We consider this real education.

Sometimes we feel that the earth is outside there, but often we forget that we are part of this environment, and our environment is a part of us. It is difficult to separate them, because if one is not there, we are not there. This understanding, if it becomes strongly, clearly, and directly experienced, then we can see the interdependence. Once we understand that, there is no “I have to use this” or “I have to exploit this”. It is about how we can live together because it is not possible for us to live without all the elements around us. Therefore, this education becomes extremely important, because as already mentioned, the misuse of our resources, technology, and development to spoil or degrade the environment is very much related to the way we understand, we see, and we feel. Not just an intellectual thing, but a deep and experiential way of understanding. Once that becomes clear, we can start with very little things.

I have attended many different environmental conferences and there is a lot of very good, up-to-date data. When we listen to them, sometimes we become quite unhappy and lose hope, feel almost depressed. When this happens, I think it becomes not very useful. We need to have some hope, a feeling, that there is something that we can do to change the situation, to give some kind of courage or hope. Encouragement is very important; I think that is something that some research and education could help.

If we do not understand the interdependence, the nature of things, and everything that is there, we do not solidly understand the situation. There are so many causes and conditions coming together, whether good ones or negative ones, hundreds and thousands of elements involved. Maybe we do not know every element that is there, but if it is possible to take away one element from this situation, it is possible that the whole thing can change. Also, if we can put one element in the whole process, it is possible everything can change too. When you have that idea and understanding, then it becomes a bit more hopeful.

If we put our efforts, resources, and studies to ask why the earth has become the way it has become, it is because of our inner problem of too much greed. There has been so much industrialization and so many new scientific products. We have done so many technological things very quickly. If it is possible to put young minds, intelligent people, and resources into this, I think it is not impossible to find ways to change the situation, change the things that created the problem. If that is done with the right motivation, if the people really care, maybe they can bring a solution. With understanding, empathy, compassion, and seeing humanity together, it is not impossible to move forward.

Education and mindfulness is an important place. Just to calm our mind down. When we see how grave the situation is, everybody becomes sad, and sometimes desperate. I have heard many young people say that I do not want to live anymore because the future is so bleak that there is nothing worth living for. This can change, because we can find a way to being certain calmness, peace, and joy in ourselves. This is the place where we can start, then with understanding and patience we can work together.

10:05 AM - 10:20 AM – QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Daniel Weiner underlined Ven. Rinpoche's points on the centrality of behavior change and how Mindfulness for Earth has to be linked to education. He noted that this fundamentally point to the need for a paradigm shift. "Mindfulness for Earth cannot only focus on helping individuals feel better about themselves. Rather, it must be a holistic and interconnected process which leads to Erik and John's challenge: the question of the 'E'."— referring to John Grim and Erik Assadourian's question about whether this should be changed from Mindfulness *for* Earth to Mindfulness *with* Earth. "The danger everywhere, but particularly in the Global North, is Mindfulness for Earth for *me* makes *me* feel better, calms *me* down, and makes *me* a better person. However, the broader question of ecosystem destruction and lifestyle has to be part of the equation."

Phoebe Godfrey commented that what she found most inspiring was the realization that we do not know all the parts and elements fully. As such, we do not know if putting in or taking out a little piece could dramatically shift things altogether.

Erik Assadourian shared that upon reflection, he felt that both *to* Earth or *with* Earth are correct and that it did not need to be either or. Furthermore, mindfulness practices ideally reinforce a relationship with Earth. He provided some examples of practices he does to strengthen this relationship, such as fasting

along the lunar cycle, meditating outside, and doing yoga in the backyard or at the beach. Rana added that besides strengthening relationships with Earth, mindfulness practices like the ones we are doing also strengthen our relationships with one another.

Cynthia Jones pointed out that more people are moving to urban environments, which results in the connection to Earth being lost. This underscored why it was necessary for universities to try to re-establish students' connection to Earth. She cited a paper showing that people's connection to Earth varies with their stage in life. The paper contended that the connection is high during childhood, drops very low during high school, then starts to increase again from the late teens to the early twenties. However, what is established at age 25 typically sets the standard for the rest of their lives. Consequently, establishing a connection to Earth in the curriculum and as part of the culture of the university is essential.

Alexandra Hussey spoke about her experience working with high school students, where she notices an increase in apathy as a result of traumatizing and violent events such as natural disasters and Covid-19. She then posed the question- how do we use mindfulness to grow their compassion for what is around them? Jeremy Geller responded that apathy among high school students is troubling, as he views empathy as crucial for students. He suggested that mindfulness *for* or *with* Earth might be a tool for instilling empathy.

Anji Seth shared that during the climate summit in Egypt, she recalled indigenous groups saying that we *are* nature, nature defending itself. So similarly, how could we ask students and ourselves, what would it mean to think of ourselves as nature? Cesar Abadia added that there is a lot of healing from these indigenous elders in the process, they are killing themselves, yet while healing the Earth in their ritualistic practices.

Juan Pablo Yepes remarked that in considering how mindfulness could lead to action, it is necessary to think about consumer culture that tends to co-opt mindfulness to make it more palatable. As a result, it often gets lost that this culture itself must be drastically shifted. He added that one step is to reject that humankind is destroying the world, but rather recognizing that it is those within civilization, and not indigenous people active in protecting natural landscapes. Therefore, learning from indigenous cultures is necessary for the reformulation of our culture.

10:20 AM - 10:30 AM – BREAK

10:30 - 10:50 AM – COMMITTEE REPORTS

I. Mindfulness for Earth Research (M4ER)

Crystal Park stated the charge of the M4E Research Committee is to encourage knowledge and collaboration on research on mindfulness, very broadly defined both in and for nature. They aim to form

a knowledge-sharing network to share information and research, solicit research collaborations with other universities and research entities, identify priority areas of research, and help formulate research questions. In sum, the M4ER Committee will act as an incubator to form research collaborations and explore funding opportunities. To that end, there are members on the committee with experience working with various foundations and the National Institute for Health.

Daniel Weiner added that an item to discuss during the breakout is, how do we do research the work our group is doing? How do we monitor and evaluate?

II. Natural and Built Landscapes (NBL)

Cynthia Jones shared that the first project of the NBL Committee is underway with the design of a labyrinth or remembrance garden. So far, the location has been chosen and the design is mainly completed. Sean has been working with a second group of stakeholders on funding for the project. Also, a pollinator garden has been proposed for the Hillside Environmental Education Park (HEEP) by Discovery Drive. For now, that has been tabled, however, they have put in a pollinator meadow at the new science building and they are working on establishing a pollinator garden in the flat lawn areas between the chemistry and pharmacy building in collaboration with the Office of Sponsored Projects.

Additionally, the NBL Committee is looking to leverage existing resources, such as building a more comprehensive view of all the trails in the area and linking information, safety, awareness, etc. The first trail project will be in collaboration with Phoebe Godfrey's class, where the students will be designing signage for a temporary installation along the Red Trail for the DEEP. Godfrey noted that the students are still discussing the project, and at this time, there seems to be more interest in having the signs on the main campus rather than the Red Trail. Along this walk, there would be surveys asking if they enjoyed the mindfulness walk. And did it change anything for you to be invited to breathe with a tree or pause for a moment and look at water? JP Yepes confirmed that the class was still brainstorming and will be discussed at their next class meeting.

Jones mentioned another possibility would be to make more use of the arboretum that exists, along with a map for directing people to engage with trees in a mindful way directly. This will start with the thirteen quiet places identified on the NatureRx site. The current question is whether to integrate mindfulness into the NatureRx site, or to develop another set of maps specifically for mindfulness and outdoor classrooms.

Maria LaRusso asked if the NBL had any proposed projects for the Hartford campus. She said that working with nature would benefit Hartford students, in particular, and she believed there were people on the Hartford campus interested in connecting to make that happen. Jones responded that, currently there are no plans. However, they could, and that she would be willing to help facilitate.

III. Curriculum Development and Student Services (CDSS)

Karen McComb explained that the charge of the CDSS Committee is to explore the potential for curricular and extracurricular integrations of Mindfulness for Earth practices, including, but not limited to, integration into FYE, Experiential Global Learning options, and providing trainings to faculty, staff, and students. Their current focus is asking how we integrate Mindfulness for Earth practices into classrooms and academic settings, as well as how we integrate Mindfulness for Earth practices into all of our experiential and co-curricular offerings at the University. She noted that the CDSS Committee has been brainstorming ideas and employing a sociocracy approach to decision-making.

Godfrey also affirmed that they were committed to practice, so they begin meetings with meditation. For the upcoming breakout sessions, she encouraged those joining the group to push the envelope of what is the curriculum. Reflecting on Ven. Rinpoche's remarks, she reiterated that academia has knowledge, but lacks practice. As such, opportunities are not offered to students to practice in a gentle, empathetic, compassionate way. Although students may practice because there is an exam, there lacks a collaborative and transformative understanding. With this in mind, the CDSS Committee aims not just to add to the existing curriculum, but also to rethink "the whole package."

10:50 AM - 11:10 AM – BREAKOUT SESSIONS

11:10 AM - 11:30 AM – BREAKOUT REPORTS

I. Mindfulness for Earth Research (M4ER)

After returning from breakouts, Crystal Park reaffirmed that there was wide interest in UConn serving as a hub to bring together and catalyze interdisciplinary work both within UConn and more broadly. The next steps are to get a sense of what is out there and identify gaps and places where more understanding is needed. After some research, areas will be prioritized and then the group will move forward once they have a better sense. At this time, the committee is focusing on getting oriented before deciding on a direction.

Weiner added that Global Affairs is committed to helping to institutionalize Mindfulness for Earth research to have a structure in place. Furthermore, he asked the group how do we monitor the research, practices, and curriculum that we are working on. As this is a valuable piece, research on our campus with our own faculty, staff, and students.

Park noted that research is already happening on campus, with a lot of data published and unpublished. For example, SHAW recently asked the campus community if anyone had data on students, particularly on mental health. Overall, there are several researchers using participant pools on campus to study mindfulness and related topics.

II. Natural and Built Landscapes (NBL)

Jones shared that a prominent project discussed during the breakout was the possibility of outdoor classrooms, with the idea that it will facilitate students spending more time outside. To start, we would need to identify spaces that could be casual outdoor classrooms. Then by sharing that information, the space would be available on a first-come-first-serve basis. Sean suggested that the spaces be selected based on where there might be a favorable microclimate. For example, on the south side of some highly reflective buildings where it would be warmer or warming with heaters. A canopy would be desirable as it could provide shelter and potentially hold solar panels that would produce heat. Sean suggested developing partnerships on campus to identify a location and then define a plan for how it would work.

Another aspect to consider with outdoor classrooms would be how to encourage faculty and existing classes to create assignments outdoors. For example, if faculty offered extra credit assignments, it would be likely that students would go outdoors.

Moreover, Sean Vasington noted that we could look for opportunities to make more biophilic spaces in already existing classrooms. Cindi elaborated that this may include rearranging seating to take advantage of natural light or bringing in living plant material to classrooms.

To promote students going outside, Weiner shared that the office had a meeting with the FYE office to propose adding Mindfulness for Earth components to a one-credit course which all freshmen take. He pointed out that, at minimum, it would be nice if freshman could have a tree book given to them since they often walk by trees on campus without looking or thinking about them.

III. Curriculum Development and Student Services (CDSS)

McComb expressed that the theme of their breakout asked how to integrate Mindfulness for Earth practices into classroom spaces. How do we take advantage? Some ideas included using Mindfulness for Earth as a topic in assignments or integrating mindfulness practices into high-stress moments, so as to provide a tool before a student goes into an exam.

Additionally, the group discussed hosting a panel out of CETL where different faculty who may already be integrating mindfulness practices into their daily classroom activities could showcase their work to other faculty.

Godfrey continued, that following a training that Kumanga Andrahennadi delivered to her students, she is presently encouraging the students to ask their professors if they can lead two-minute meditations before class or before an exam. To not depress students before a lesson on climate science, “student mindfulness ambassadors” could demonstrate using mindfulness to stay grounded and find some hope, peace, and joy in their own ability to change, therefore realizing that that could be a model for the rest of society to change.

Zahra Ali offered that it may be helpful to engage with Neag School of Education and the teacher training. She pointed out that by the time students come to university, it is almost too late. Since UConn trains

future teachers, how do we train them to implement these tools to younger student audiences? Another area of collaboration could be with the Writing Center. This semester Ali was co-teaching a writing course in landscape architecture, and they are considering how to integrate mindfulness practice in some sessions. For example, taking students outside to write with the five senses is both a good writing tool and has the potential to teach students to engage with their senses in nature.

Oksan Bayulgen proposed putting signs around campus in certain areas with heavy foot traffic which display messages to relax them and let them know that they are loved. In effect, those messages could have an impact on people to make them feel like they are part of a community. It would likely be an inexpensive and easy project, although she is unaware of rules regarding putting signs on campus. Godfrey noted that this connects to the mindfulness walk project that she is working on with her students. She added that by working with the NBL committee and other campus representatives, they could likely figure out how to put up some signs. In the past, the campus had a grandmother tree with swings that were inscribed with positive messages. Can we bring back a swing or space to share positive messages once more? John Grim linked this to Ven. Rinpoche's comment on the emphasis on little things just while walking by made him think of art. For this reason, he thought that the inclusion of aesthetics in research language, curricular groups, and writing would be helpful.

11:30 AM - 12:00 PM – FINAL REFLECTIONS AND GROUP DISCUSSION

Weiner remarked that today's discussion on the conceptual aspect of "the E" was notable. "As such, we need to find a way to continue to talk about "the E" piece since it is a political project and can be approached in various ways. Notably, "the E" needs to link to consumption and behavior change, ultimately rethinking a whole epistemological change connected to "development". The idea that we can turn off the fossil fuel "switch" and turn on the renewable "switch" while still maintaining current consumerist lifestyles is not possible. In sum, the conceptual conversation of "the E" and its political ecology is a topic to continue to think about."

In addition, Weiner emphasized that the three committees must work together in parallel. To avoid three separate committee conversations, the steering committee will connect the conversations to ensure we move forward concurrently.

Lastly, Weiner highlighted that this project is a joint venture with SHAW and that Global Affairs is honored to add to the great work that SHAW is already doing on mindfulness across campus. With the time and energy put into building Mindfulness for Earth practices at UConn, it is essential to embed research into our work. In effect, we are studying ourselves in a living laboratory. On the note of studying ourselves, Tina Huey suggested creating a space for the group to write together in addition to meditating together.

Kumanga Andrahennadi brought up that Dr. Richard Davidson is an advisor for the Mindfulness for Earth in Higher Education initiative at UConn and a research expert on integrating mindfulness within higher

education. As such, she suggested inviting him to talk so that we can learn from him. Dan agreed this would be a beneficial event for the ongoing group discussion.

→ **Action item**: Invite Dr. Richardson to speak at virtual event on topics discussed in meeting.

In the meantime, we are continuing to build an inventory of metadata on Mindfulness for Earth. As such, we request you pass along any books, articles, research projects, or courses that would be of interest to Kinga.

→ **Action item**: Send relevant research to Kinga at kinga.h.karlowaska@uconn.edu.



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