Article

Embracing the Paradox: A Bodhisattva Path

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Abstract: This article addresses the significance of paradox as a steady presence in our lives. Contradictions and ambiguities often lead to aversive states of anxious uncertainty where straightforward answers are often unavailable yet sought after to alleviate existential insecurities. In conditions where narratives of ambivalence intensify, such as during the worldwide COVID-19 crises, our traditional socio-evolutionary inclinations to avoid them either through denial or active resistance become more noticeable. It also leads to distress in intersubjective spaces especially when uncertainty and perceptions of threat stand as correlates, and we start to fear what we do not understand. In this paper, I consider wisdom responses from a Buddhist perspective to help us acknowledge the value of paradox, highlighting how changes in the formulation of our self-concept can help with that. I draw upon select principles and insights from the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra, two texts within the Mahaprajnaparamita sutras of Mahayana Buddhism. Through these, I examine some inherent paradoxes as vital components of a larger ontological unity, the recognition of which can act as an enabler to the Bodhisattva path. This path is worthy of exploration, allowing us to move past the need for closure and instead focus on reconciliation, disclosure, and epistemic humility.

Keywords: uncertainty; paradox; the Diamond Sutra; the Heart Sutra; wisdom; consciousness; nature of reality; identity; otherness; intersubjective spaces

1. Introduction

The article is an attempt to enable the reimagining of personal and collective wellbeing based on denaturalizing the need for constant certainty as a pre-requisite for the above. It introduces the idea of acknowledging and valuing the prevalence of paradox as an integral component of life, leveraging on Buddhist insights that are able to highlight unified realities emerging from divergent forces, the push and pull of which point toward the richness of middle paths. This is vital in a world ridden with anguish on various levels and driven by certainty-seeking behaviors, with the staying power of certainty often insufficiently understood or overestimated in the flux that is life. In the present context in which I write, specifically in the immediate as well as the more slowly unfolding but sustaining scenarios over the past few years, a troubling feature has been the rise in divisiveness and polarization in the sociopolitical arena intensified further by the economic upheaval and psychophysiological anxiety generated by the pandemic as the world tries to keep up with disagreements over statistical projections, civic restrictions, vaccine camps, and conspiracy theories. These disagreements can be lived with; we only need to learn how to.

The current crises are not really current; they have always been there with the only change being in terms of how they manifest. That said, they are becoming more complex in settings of heightened connectivity and plurality marked by multiple realities and rationalities. We have never been this connected yet disconnected at the same time, a pivotal aspect of our lives that finds ample mention in Giddens (1990) work on the structural changes of modernity with specific references to the reformulation of time and space. Zooming in on the current context, the pandemic has been a great unifier and differentiator on various levels but the one constant it has generated is a sense of pervasive anxiety over endless what-ifs and what-thens. Often, when that happens, we tend to outwardly project our problems onto others and can quickly deviate from the norms of civility. Although it is

generally easy to maintain peace and decorum in a seemingly well-regulated society, peace is not just the absence of conflict, and it takes surprisingly little to disrupt that decorum in an assumed normalcy that is more fragile than it looks, as was evident in the controversial Milgram (1974) experiment (as cited in Kupperman 2005) where 'good' people continued to render shocks of increasing severity in a situation where the normal rules did not apply and where the disturbing changes were quickly normalized. Although there has been research since the 1960s that has revealed various loopholes in the original experiment, evidence from historical and contemporary incidents ranging from the Holocaust to Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo to the more visible racial riots in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in the summer of 2020 as well as the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol Hill to overturn the results of the presidential elections lend testimony to the unsettling unpredictability of human conduct under altered circumstances. The purpose of this article is to provide alternative ways to strengthen our resilience against intersubjective disruptors through developing an acceptance and appreciation of uncertainty and contradiction and knowing how and when to exercise one's moral agency in response to that.

It might help to lend some clarity, even if briefly, to indicate how the term *uncertainty* is presented here and if and whether it overlaps with the idea of *ambiguity*. There are definite overlaps, but for the purpose of this paper, *ambiguity* refers to the possibility for multiple interpretations caused by and/or producing insufficient information whereas *uncertainty* refers to an existential state of uncomfortable doubt based on probabilistic items on different sides. In the world of business, the acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) has come to describe constantly evolving conditions where uncertainty and ambiguity, even if qualitatively different, are part of the same constellation.

The prime concern of this paper lies in how such uncertain conditions adversely affect intersubjective spaces. To that end, I offer an ethical and philosophical pathway from Buddhist literature that offers scope for growth through the acceptance and appreciation of the ubiquity of contradiction. It goes deeper than just saying that a certain way of being is desirable; we may all agree that it is but could still struggle with understanding why it is so or how we can come to understand it better and thus be able to put it into practice. It is important to emphasize here that although the key teachings from the Buddhist sutras that I refer to in the paper are grounded in the seminal philosophy of sunyata and non-attachment, the intention of the paper is not to convince readers to adopt that over a different worldview. Instead, it mainly calls for reverse engineering into the mind, conditioned to fear and defend, asserting that once this fear is transcended or at least accepted, it finds it easier to facilitate an open attentional awareness of the essential dichotomies that hold the world together.

In the article, I present the integrative aspect of compromise by means of glimpses into three paradoxes through a Buddhist lens connecting each to a relevant theme in our current context. These are (1) emptiness and form in relation to identity, (2) detachment and compassion in relation to charity, and (3) thought and awareness in relation to autonomy. Some of these pairs could seem less oppositional than others, and my intention is not to show that they are so but instead their complementariness and why that matters. By understanding how these co-exist and how we might be able to tilt the axis for better balance, we will likely be able to support better relationships with our own selves and others, to find strength in our vulnerability and grounding unity in our continually branching diversity.

The paper is divided into two main sections. The first introduces the idea of paradox and provides a brief overview of the problem in relation to it that I seek to address within the current sociocultural climate. Such a climate is marked by constant uncertainty and the concomitant relational struggles aggravating in a more globally mixed, materially driven, and mobile world characterized by the dissolution of erstwhile social boundaries, the rise of the global market economy, and the collapse of some sort of grand narrative which might have kept things relatively together in the pre-globalized world. The second section offers insights through select meaning-making tools from Buddhist contemplative practice in order to get around this problem.

2. The Foundational Presence of Paradox

As humans, we have evolved to identify and value certainty, predictability, and order by virtue of the discriminatory power of the senses and the evolutionary schematic scaffolding of memory. It allows us to plan ahead, weigh in priorities, and be safe. Whether in school, at work, or at home, there is value in having and following a plan. And yet, as much as we wish to have it, we often find ourselves experiencing what John Lennon once said about life always happen(ing) while we are busy making other plans. While there are areas in life where certainty in the form of accuracy is an undisputed necessity, especially where it concerns immediate safety and determines the lines between life and death such as in the coordination of traffic lights or in the braking systems of automotive technologies or the exact dosage of anesthetic to be administered, these are mostly value-neutral zones where clarity and certainty are preconditions for biological survival. What is required for our social and affective survival, however, is not as straightforward though and is spun around an array of convergences and divergences.

Two of the most pivotal events in our lives—birth and death can never quite be predicted, let alone with accuracy. So why is it that we expect certainty for the most part during our time in between and get distressed by the lack of it? Contradiction is abundant and gives to life its beauty and mystery—the birth of a baby meant to bring happiness begins with tears and pain both for the mother and child. Some may argue that those are tears of joy, but neither of the immediate participants is likely to second that in those excruciating moments. They might agree with the adage of 'no pain, no gain', though—another important paradox at play. The forest fires that raze the land also nourish and enhance the fertility of the soil, the charred ashes renewing life anew. The prototypical fragile balance between time, money, and energy—of young people with time and energy but insufficient finances at hand, middle-aged people with energy and money but little time to spare, and the elderly with money and time aplenty but often running low on energy reserves—holds quintessentially true in the modern industrialized world. Contradictions and paradoxes are everywhere; they permeate our lives, and the sooner we make peace with them, the easier it becomes to make sense of them.

In exploring an integral aspect of the Buddhist philosophical tradition, the article also sheds light on a common strand in contemporary western wisdom literature, which is that of the recognition of uncertainty through compromise. Sternberg's (1998) balance theory that posits the art of becoming wise through consideration and integration of conflicting intra-, inter-, and extrapersonal interests guided by ethical values and situational sensitivity is in line with Igor Grossmann's (2017) wisdom framework that lists compromise and recognition of uncertainty and change as integral to wisdom practice. What does it mean to compromise though? What does it look like to integrate those conflicts, especially when the conflict concerns us in first person? Is it possible to practice the art of temporarily only witnessing it rather than diving straight into perceptual and volitional participation as we usually tend to do through typical modes of understanding and constituting reality? Finally, does this delayed participation aid in fuller understanding in the long run?

I will explore these questions by connecting the ideas of paradox and integration with the Buddhist insights into the Bodhisattva path, traversing on which one can realize the Bodhisattva mind in practice. This path is, in fact, built on paradoxes, offering moments of promise around what it is (with 'it' being almost anything) in synchrony with what it is not, thereby stretching our apperceptive abilities. In the Diamond Sutra, Ting Fu-Pao cites Vasubandhu's Bodhicitta Utpadana Shastra, saying:

> In order to cultivate good karma and seek enlightenment, bodhisattvas do not renounce the phenomenal world. And in order to cultivate compassion for all beings, they do not stand in the noumenal world. In order to realize the marvelous wisdom of all buddhas, they do not renounce samsara. And in order to liberate countless beings and save them from further rebirth, they do not stand in nirvana. Such persons are bodhisattvas who thus embark on the bodhisattva path. But

> if bodhisattvas should stand in neither the phenomenal nor the noumenal, in neither samsara nor nirvana, where should they stand?
>
> (Red Pine The Diamond Sutra, pp. 67–68)

2.1. Outlining the Problem in the Current Context

We are living in uncertain times where the panic caused by the pandemic has spiraled us onto unprecedented times. As fear becomes an easy currency, we also witness noticeable cracks in intersubjective spaces, as evident in the 2020 racial riots in the United States or the more recent attacks on the Asian community in the highly diverse and plural settings of Vancouver, where overt instances of racializing the virus were unimaginable yet true. It did not take much to realize that the pandemic was merely a catalyst and not the cause, and that the undercurrents of racial tensions were not out of nowhere. Current events are usually only partial visible aspects of insufficiently manifested reality in a cyclic chain of oft-forgotten causes and effects of dysfunctional interpenetrations in our everyday civic lives. In a 2017 Vancouver Sun news report (Todd 2017), the city of Vancouver was called 'the most Asian city outside of Asia' citing forty-three percent of Metro Vancouver residents as having Asian heritage. Yet, as the pandemic unfolded in 2020, so did the hate crimes against Asians, particularly the elderly, with a Bloomberg 2021 report now calling it the Anti-Asian hate crime capital of North America (Pearson 2021). This is a clear indicator that an apparently well-regulated society is no guarantee of mutual harmony, and that grace and moral virtue remain expensive entities. The news report did call COVID-19 the trigger, but it provided a deeper albeit brief glimpse into the real problem—that it was not just about the virus and its alleged origin in Wuhan but a sense of growing alienation 'building up over decades' which, if I consider myself an insider at this point, having lived in Vancouver for close to a decade, would consider it more to do with the affordability crises in relation to foreign investments in the real-estate sector.

The specific cause of the problem, although pertinent, is not the immediate concern of the paper; instead, it is the deeper underlying causes of the generalized otherness, divisiveness, and dehumanization that are. Such fervent fissures, whether it be over mask mandates or climate change or refugee crises, are on the rise the world over, dividing people along racial, political, and ideological lines, and fueling populist politics that aggravate rather than alleviate. Identity salience based on egoic differentiation without sufficient moral will or skill can be problematic. Although the surface-level manifestation may appear ideational, ideological, or policy-based, multiple research studies from the psychology and cognitive science literature imply that a lot of it is, in fact, pre-cognitive in nature and linked to more fundamental belonging needs. The lack of these can produce and promote a sense of 'principled dislike' of the other (Iyengar et al. 2012). Van Bavel and Pereira's (2018) research on partisan brains also points at the competing demands of accuracy goals and identity goals and the distorting power of the latter over attitude formation and belief perseverance when they are not fulfilled. This would require a two-pronged approach: (i) to build a greater acceptance of uncertainty and ambivalence stemming from divergent perspectives, and (ii) to work on moderating and reimagining identity goals such that they do not interfere with the former. The second takes work, serious work, and an overhaul of the ego-based identity mechanics prevalent in the world as we know it. However, when the two aspects work well together, they hold much potential for insulating us against the need to draw binaries, profess loyalties, and seek constant validation as a buffer to counter a range of existential insecurities.

The reasons for seeking identity salience and the quick dislocation of stability and epistemic equilibrium are closely related and may be divided into two parts, the greater part lying in the embedding of bounded egoic identities in a materialist worldview and the other in the growing expression of plurality, which in essence is a gift but cannot go far within the economized paradigms and conventional egoic bandwidth it functions within. The capitalized market economy keeps us in a state of both hyperstimulation and slumber, ensnared in matter and material concerns that do little to facilitate the right conditions for

us to value the dimensions of ours that matter but are not matter. The meritocratic and technocratic praxis is at its core a profit-driven model of market economy with a monetary value attached to everything and everyone (read net worth) where people are primarily units and instruments of production. Such a worldview profusely contributes to a sense of perennial lack, distraction, and dissatisfaction, and with debt becoming an instrument of political control, we remain too busy paying bills and procuring material promotions to help us pay yet more bills. We also remain too busy to realize how such maladaptation works to deepen inequity, insecurity, and otherness. When problems are perceived, we are given to an externalized approach of trying to fix them from the outside but seldom through internal inquiry and revision. Heesoon Bai (2012) quotes Joanna Macy (2000) in one of her papers saying 'Action is not something you do. It's something you are' (p. 313). Thus, it greatly helps to figure out who we are, why we act the way we do, and ways in which we may be better versions of ourselves when our perceptual and conditioned frameworks do not allow us to live freely and have us in the grip of their automaticity. Intersubjective strife cannot be solved by just polishing dialogue. The real work must start inside.

The growing plurality of cultures in a globalized world comes with benefits and risks. Interesting forms of hybridization appear leading to increased social awareness and behavior regulation, where positionalities, intersectionalities, and issues of equity get better highlighted, but many also feel the pressures of forced cohabitation when their salient identities sense discomfort. When conditions turn more unsettling, this plurality can quickly turn into perceived threat and trigger reflexive defensive mechanisms to protect the identities at risk. This is not a new problem because aversive forms of tribalism predate the modern human, but our growing complexities in modernized, fast-paced societies, and the collapse of stabler grand narratives as a result of that, do much to make it more felt. Increased plurality amidst a global capitalistic culture brings with itself multiple ways of being and belonging, diverse rationalities, as well as numerous conflicting and unstable narratives that when combined with threatened egotism spell trouble.

Adding fuel to the fire is the plurality and decentralization of information and communications where large swaths of misinformation and disinformation float around with disarming ease, allowing people to find like-minded believers in faraway corners of the world, lending a strange twist to social-identity mechanisms that can satisfy and sabotage in equal measure. Glück (2019) in an insightful article on wisdom, populism, and polarization describes our propensity to engage in a range of confirmation biases which are self-soothing behaviors seeking confirming evidence that aligns with our own views and rejects those that do not. In describing our tendencies toward such biases, she explains how we naturally tend to want to avert complexity and prefer simple answers promising simple solutions even if the situation could not suffice with those and how these tendencies escalate when threat is sensed. The role that social media serves to play in this is also crisply pointed out:

> Unfortunately, modern media, particularly the so-called social media, may exacerbate the negative effects of these evolution-based tendencies. As someone recently wrote in the online discussion board of an Austrian newspaper, "There have always been idiots. They just didn't know about one another." Nowadays, people can meet like-minded others online who share and, thus, reinforce even the craziest beliefs . . . These developments cause increasing polarization of worldviews—people on different sides of an ideological divide don't seem to be talking to each other anymore. They just click on "thumbs down" and move on to chat with their more like-minded friends.

> (Glück 2019, p. 83)

Clearly, this shows that our situatedness in a diverse setting is no guarantee for inclusion and acceptance. Rather, it can backfire when our neurotic selves in moments of heightened anxiety kick into survival mode and rely on simple low-resolution narratives and heuristics that temporarily comfort and justify rather than clarify. This was always there but remained geographically restricted in the past. With new modes of knowledge-

transmission and information-dissemination and new ways to seek like-minded believers seeking validation rather than the truth, this is a new force with contend with.

We are in urgent need of cultivating spiritual awareness and intellectual humility now more than ever. This is irrespective of the religious or philosophical affiliation as long as they do not become instruments of wielding political control as has often been the unfortunate case through human history. All religious faiths can offer unique ways to awaken consciousness transcending the salient egoic level. As I mention repeatedly throughout this article, egoic salience is not a problem because it serves as a functional tool for survival in the world that we inhabit. It is the unconscious overemphasis on it that skews our development in transpersonal realms, preventing us from realizing our real potential as truly conscious beings that are more than just physiologically conscious. The insights from Buddhist contemplative practice that I offer in the next section could serve as a way to wean us off the need to attach ourselves to this bounded salience. It can also hopefully bring to light the illusory appeal of control and certainty. These call for a reimagination of reality and a deeper appreciation of its inherent contradictions.

2.2. The Antidote from Buddhist Contemplative Practice

In the following sections, I draw upon teachings from the Diamond Sutra, translated from Sanskrit and Chinese by Red Pine, as well as the Heart Sutra translated by Andre Doshim Halaw, both of which are part of the *Prajnaparamita* or Perfection of Wisdom collection of sutras. The word *prajna* in Sanskrit refers to 'wisdom', *paramita* to 'perfection', and the mention of the word 'diamond' in the title of the first implies how this sutra, like a diamond, is intended to cut through delusions, stay strong in the face of resistance, and illuminate core realities around the realization of the ontological voidness or sunyata. The central aim of most of these teachings is geared toward loosening those roots, and the key expressions are almost always paradoxical along the lines of showing what something is by showing what it is not. This can get confusing to a strictly modular mind, but it is important that we allow ourselves the chance to purposefully engage in the exercise of uncertainty, the acknowledgment of the partiality of our knowledge and understanding, and of the insufficiency of conceptual frameworks. The translator's preface begins this way:

> The Diamond Sutra may look like a book, but it's really the body of the Buddha. It's also your body, my body, all possible bodies. But it's a body with nothing inside and nothing outside. It doesn't exist in space or time. Nor is it a construct of the mind, It's no mind. And yet because it's no mind, it has room for compassion.
>
> (Pine 2001, p. 29)

This leaves us thinking about what not to think about or how to engage in the surprisingly arduous task of thoughtless thought. Red Pine calls Buddha's approach a 'homeopathic' one where thought is applied to let go of thoughts. This can throw the cerebral, conceptual mind off guard as it tries to get busy with wanting to organize and categorize information into mental buckets. People trained in academic and discursive practices are more likely to avoid heuristics and hasty conclusions, but they too are conditioned to put too much emphasis on verbalized arguments which sometimes dull other faculties. It is, thus, best to proceed with measured thought and remain mindful of its limits and possibilities. What helps at this stage is a conscious suspension of these organizing tools accompanied by a conscious invocation of a beginner's mindset that receives, attends to, and participates not just with rational logicism but also with humility and openheartedness.

Factually speaking, the timeline of the sutra is not clear; according to Chih-yi, the founder of the Tiantai school of Buddhism of China, it was sometime around 400 B.C., with the early teachings being orally transmitted, and then later through verse and prose between the centuries 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. when they were likely compiled into encyclopedias by Dharmagupta and subsequently expanded and condensed from eight thousand lines as believed by Western Buddhist scholar Edward Conze. The setting is of the Buddha in the ancient Indian city of Shravasti, the capital of the then Kaushala kingdom, where he presides over an assembly of over 1200 monks among which is the venerable Subhuti, one

of his senior disciples on the bodhisattva path who, as the primary interlocutor, is asking a number of questions about how we can all become buddhas. Buddha's responses to his questions comprise the Diamond Sutra. There are thirty-two sutras in all, presented as questions and responses and the questions they further elicit.

The Heart Sutra is the shortest, most condensed of the sutras that Britannica (2016) calls 'a highly influential distillation of the essence of Prajnaparamita' and, like its counterpart, talks about the nature of reality grounded in sunyata. Here, Avalokisteshwara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, is seen addressing Shariputra about this reality through a series of paradoxes.

3. The Core Offerings and Key Contradictions

To begin with, I outline the fundamental idea around which the two sutras are developed, which is that of ontological voidness or sunyata. As indicated in the previous section, to explicate this idea is hard because a lot of it is beyond the reach of words and discursive communication, and I will tread this territory with caution because here I attempt to apply some of these insights to a world rooted in constructs, abstractions, and built upon supposedly stable, independent identities which sunyata seeks to dissolve. My intention is not to sell or impose the idea of sunyata or no-self but rather to elaborate on how I see it, to build upon the interpretations of Red Pine and Andre Halaw, and to decipher its applicability and potential in plural, multicultural settings. Such settings could work in both ways; there may be more scope in terms of openness to alternate worldviews but at the same time more hindrances to recognizing ontological unities due to multiple construals of reality and meaning making. The greatest motivator is for this awareness to aid in the realization of the value of uncertainty, movement, and interpenetration and the impact this might have on loosening our grip on a supposed stable and bounded self. When these arbitrary boundaries start to dissolve, they could resemble bubbles popping and becoming one with the air. Among many, I broadly outline three paradoxes and relate them each to a certain construct that holds meaning for us in our everyday contexts with the intention of expanding how we usually understand these and reimagining how we might reconstruct realities based on such an exercise. It is not likely to be a quick or easy experience and would depend on both our openness and readiness to figure out how they fit into our current schemas rooted in a form- and perception-based psyche.

3.1. Emptiness and Form in Relation to Identity

Avalokiteshwara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, in deep meditation of Prajnaparamita, responds to the monk Shariputra on releasing suffering through the realization of the emptiness of the five skandhas (form, sensation, perception, volition, and cognition).

Shariputra,

Form does not differ from emptiness,

Emptiness does not differ from form.

That which is form is emptiness,

That which is emptiness, form.

The same is true of feelings,

Perceptions, impulses, consciousness.

(Halaw 2014, p. 5)

Ting Fu-pao says, "The perception of a self refers to the mistaken apprehension of something that focuses within and controls the five skandhas of form, sensation, perception, volition, and cognition. The perception of a being refers to the mistaken apprehension that the combination of the skandhas creates a separate entity. The perception of a life refers to the mistaken belief that the self possesses a lifespan of a definite length. Finally, the perception of a soul refers to the mistaken apprehension of something that is reborn, either as a human or as one of the other

forms of existence . . . The nature of buddhas and beings is not different. But because beings suffer from these four perceptions, they cannot achieve complete liberation. To employ these four perceptions is to be a being. Not to employ them is to be a buddha. When they're deluded, buddhas become beings. When they're awake, beings become buddhas . . . You must vow to free all beings without becoming attached to the perception of a being . . . To do this, you need to make use of wisdom, not intelligence. Intelligence differentiates, wisdom does not."

(Pine 2001, pp. 81–83)

In both sutras, there remains a steady focus on emptiness, but this is not emptiness the way we know it in our common language. Firstly, this emptiness is more of a verb signifying 'emptying-out' of accumulation that impedes attention by blocking space. Secondly, this emptiness is a means to demonstrate how everything that we see as having a form is actually dependent on a host of other conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to be what it is, thus rendering its inherent completeness and independence questionable. The core Buddhist process of *pratitya-samutpada* or dependent origination explains that well. The Buddha explained it as:

When there is this, that is.

With the arising of this, that arises.

When this is not, neither is that.

With the cessation of this, that ceases.

(Feldman 1999)

This process may be understood on two temporal levels, the first one spanning a number of lifetimes through life, death, and rebirth being determined by the many links in a cyclic chain of conditioning, how these lead to suffering, and ways in which we may bring about its cessation. The second one governs this in a moment-to-moment way where one feeling, sensation, or happening arises because of another and gives rise to yet another. We have little control over the first but relatively more over the second. Thus, if we practice becoming conscious of how we are spinning the wheel at each point, it brings us closer to realizing how we can spin it better. Everyday events, too, have their interdependencies, especially in the intersubjective domain where our becoming and mattering in the phenomenal world effects and is affected by fellow subjects and their circumstances, volitions, and actions.

The above may be explained through a simple example. A man whips up a special meal for his wife. She is pleased, and he feels accomplished. He is a good cook and a caring husband. However, even for that simple act of preparing a meal, various conditions needed to have been met: the local store had to have the produce available, the truckers had to be punctual with collecting them from the distributers and transporting them to the store, the farmer who grew that produce possibly hundreds of miles away had to ensure the soil was well tended to and the harvest picked on time. The farmer alone could have gotten nowhere had there been a drought or a flood that year, and so on. On the cook's side, he needed to be in good enough shape to be able to get the groceries on time, have had enough time to spare for the planning, preparing, and cooking, in addition to being in a positive frame of mind which again depends upon his relationships at home and at work among others. In addition, the availability of a kitchen, gas connection, the right wok, and cooking equipment also matter. These factors often go unnoticed in the modern world where material amenities abound; yet they are worthy of consideration to see how the parts intertwine to make a gestalt of the whole. There are more factors that went into this example than mentioned, with the most important one being the man's intentions and the current dynamics of the couple, but my motive here is to show how even insignificant day-to-day affairs need so many variables to fall in place and work in tandem. Thus, to claim complete ownership or doership of the meal, in this case, is tricky. Closely linked to this interplay is the form of the man or the woman or their relationship or the meal.

By form, I am not referring to their physical forms, although those too are certainly not immune to change. Form here refers to the projection or representation of themselves and others they hold on to in their minds, the life and flow of which precludes fixedness and solidity. In fact, the Buddha is not attached to the appearance of Buddhahood, and what it means is an attempt to break through this created self which by virtue of being in a constant state of flux and interdependency belies concreteness.

With that being said, we cannot, for the most part, refer to a shapeshifting mobile formlessness when it comes to questions of action and enaction by responsible agents in the phenomenal world. Thus, the need for a concrete projection that serves a purpose but one that requires mindfulness to avoid attachment to it is a required contemplative exercise. The Buddha too has various forms; an *arhat* when experiencing freedom from passion and rebirth, a *sugata* for having gone beyond the mundane world, a *tathagata* when he comes back to teach others, and a fully enlightened one when he attained complete awareness. Even as a tathagata who has come back, he is a mix of both form and formlessness. Etymologically, *tatha* refers to suchness and *gata* to appearance thus combining formless essence with formful appearance where we do not need to go for either/or choices but instead opt for the 'and' that completes the equation. In our everyday lives, this amalgamation of form and essence is often misconstrued in limiting ways, often committing the foundational error of attaching to what we think is a stable representation and in the process othering stable monochromatic representations of the other. In this study of form and emptiness, the body is not negated. The embodied self is not the problem; it is the disembodied mind restrained by its conceptual memory and attachments that is.

To better understand the restraints, I begin by investigating what I think is the greatest restraining factor, which is located at the busy intersections of egoic functioning and perceived uncertainty playing out within our social identity mechanisms. I begin with the assumption that our egoic selves are erected upon identities we consider desirable and conducive to our emotional and belonging needs. The social aspect is imperative because our sense of self is often derived from our membership in groups, and although that is not in itself a problem, extreme or imbalanced pursuits of this, which can happen quite easily and unconsciously, can lead to problems associated with identity fusion with the desired group and low-resolution reduction and oversimplification of the assumed other. This happens because we hold on to a stable representation of who we think we are and how that makes us better than who we think we are not. Social identity theories from the 1970s and 1980s shed light on this, such as the realistic group conflict theory (Campbell 1965, as cited in Campbell 1965) and the social identity perspective (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987 as cited in Insko et al. 1992). The first explains inter-group conflict, out-group rejection, prejudice, and ethnocentrism in connection with competition over valued outcomes or finite resources such as territory, jobs, power, material, and economic benefits. In contrast, the second emphasizes the role of relativistic social comparison as the root cause of these issues with the onus being on maximizing inter-group difference rather than on in-group profit as a means to maintain and strengthen their sense of self-worth through differentiation. Therefore, as a rather simplistic example, if the greed for winning money and competing with others to gain that valued outcome forms the basis of the realistic group conflict theory, it is instead the need to not just win money but more money than the other group that drives groups according to the social identity theory.

In the paper by Insko et al. (1992) that investigated inter-group discontinuity from these two theoretical standpoints that are stated above, the researchers conducted two experiments to test the likelihood of these two phenomena and found that sequence was important, wherein participants were less likely to give into relativistic comparison at first because of concerns over its confrontational nature and appropriateness, but that its incidence increased in the second round possibly after being primed for competition. In our consumerist material frameworks, we are naturally primed for that, with deeply embedded attachments to material signifiers in addition to the unconscious primal ones.

Strong identity anchors are not a palpable problem while the ingroup favoritism happens at the cost of outgroup indifference, although apathy itself can be dangerously deceptive because not only is it non-inclusive but also because it can be fragile and quickly deteriorate toward hostility through stereotyping and low-resolution judgment of the other when environmental conditions are not right. In a paper on inter-group schadenfreude by Cikara (2015) of the Department of Psychology at Harvard, she found that the phenomenon of schadenfreude, which involves the act of deriving pleasure from others' pain, is frequently experienced by people who identify strongly with a social group. These people are not pathological misanthropes and may in fact be quite averse to causing harm to others but a strong identification with a group and the pleasure at the misfortune of members of the outgroup may be explained by a form of reinforcement learning via the ventral striatum through a consistent pairing of subjective pleasure with out-group distress. This might also explain the sequence of increased likelihood of confrontational behavior involving competition and relative comparison through repeated exposure and priming over time as observed by Insko et al. (1992) in their two-stage experiment. This priming fundamentally stems from the dualistic paradigm where what is not subject becomes object. The capitalistic climate of consumerist materialism concerns itself chiefly with what can be used and produced to procure profits, most of which things possess a physical or virtual form, often at the cost of dismissing the formless as nothingness. This extends to identities where subject–object divides sharpen and strong attachment to forms associated with the subject correspondingly affect perceptions of those forms that are not subjects and so objects.

This paper does not imply that identity pursuits are innately problematic because personal and social identities precede transcendental states. They also serve beneficial purposes for our evolutionary coalitional dispositions, giving us our place in the world and a platform from where to engage intersubjectively. When balanced and unthreatened, they can serve as optimal functional tools to help us thrive in civic society. In the absence of or renunciation of such identities in the phenomenal world, the pursuit of thoughtless superordinate identification without the right intentions can lead to states of accepting injustice and inequity, as well as to unhelpful assimilation or worse still, to malpractices from unhealthy identity fusion such as in the case of victims of abuse who continue to want to stay with their perpetrators. Thus, training for the cultivation of stable, healthy identities is not without merit. The problem occurs when we become too overidentified with it, when we become our identity and our identity becomes integral to us. Linguistically, it still implies that it is something that we have but is not 'us'. It is something that we acquire. We do not become that. This is the witness-mindset that can be very beneficial. This is an important distinction in the form-emptiness dialogue. The intention here is to draw attention to some of the easy slippages that arise from excessive or unhealthy investment in identity when that is fragile and bounded. Firstly, the dualism it entails in its process of differentiation where the self and the other get distanced is a tricky place to be in. This is a natural process, but in the egoic desire-driven realm, what is not identified as subject automatically becomes object. When this distancing happens on a collective level, the instances of externalizing dysfunctional intersubjectivity aggravate, which get further heightened in times of uncertainty. The assumed stability of this social identity is equally problematic because it assumes an autonomy that it does not possess. Environments that nurture the separated ego also engage in a compensatory mechanism of fusing it with those within its limited social category. Excess differentiation and fusion in identity dynamics can often lead to a recipe for intersubjective disaster, as evident in the history of human civilization through its many genocides and hate crimes. These are not merely psychological or ideational problems. These are existential ones, and no one is immune to these. Sadly, we grow up delving little into these important matters as our school-systems remain restricted to form-based curricula where the terms 'change' and 'progress' often refer to form-based aspects of technocratic glamour.

The Buddhist approach seeks to untighten the stronghold of identity, the dependence on form, the need for strong differentiation, and the resultant identification with exclusive

groups and affiliations such that we may expand opportunities for opening up to larger, cosmic identities or, in the process, to no identities at all. The idea of sunyata or no self may actually be understood as no attachment to a form-based self. If we come to understand that what we are desperately clinging on to is not as stable or immutable as we think it to be, that it lacks a core essence and co-emerges with other factors, then we become more willing to gradually release it. When we can let it go, we empty up space to accommodate more, to accommodate who we previously dismissed as the other, to accommodate the possibility of what it is like to not have to protect a definite or limited I- or we-entity and the freedom that that offers.

3.2. Detachment and Compassion in Relation to Charity

A fundamental principle underlying all Buddhist epistemologies, in particular the Mahayana school, is compassion or *karuna* that constitutes one of the four sublime states along with *metta* (loving–kindness), *mudita* (empathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). Unlike in conventional western scholarship where wisdom is considered a more intellectual exercise and compassion a sentimental one, Buddhist philosophy considers wisdom and compassion to be mutually constitutive and inseparable. In the Essence of Heart Sutra, His Holiness, The Dalai Lama says:

> compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive—it's not empathy alone—but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and lovingkindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom), and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is loving-kindness).
>
> > (XIV Bstan-'dzin-rgya and Jinpa 2002 as cited in Guha 2020)

This requires active empathy with the strong willingness to ease the suffering of others, irrespective of the relationship with the sufferer, by blurring the lines between subject and object, the individual me and the individual you. There is a clear dearth of this in our social milieus, not just in our busy fast-paced worlds but through millennia, given the wars we have waged and the bloodletting we have all partaken in. This closely ties in with the identity premise discussed in the previous section, where strong identity fusion with a closed group results in a passive-aggressive stance of being passive to repressive group ideologies and aggressive toward the perceived other that appears to threaten the group's wellbeing. According to the Indian sage, Sadhguru (2019), if we are willing to die for somebody or something, we are automatically willing to kill for them too. This is what unchecked identity attachment does to us. Through it all, we are left devoid of compassion and entrenched in one-sided sentimental loyalty that sustains itself on the binaries and echo chambers of us and them.

In order to understand the workings of karuna or compassion, it is helpful to understand the intentions of the bodhisattva. Subhuti in the Diamond Sutra is a bodhisattva nearing Buddhahood. In his interpretation of this Sutra, Osho offers an impressive insight into what it means to be one:

> Bodhisattva means one who is ready to become a buddha, who has come close to it: one more step and he will become a buddha. Bodhisattva means bodhiessence, bodhi-being: ready 99 degrees—and on the 100th degree he will evaporate. But a bodhisattva is one who tries to remain a little longer at 99 degrees so that he can help people out of his compassion, because once he has jumped the 100 degrees, he has gone beyond . . . gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhiswaha. Then it will be very difficult to make contact with the people who live on this shore. The greatest help is possible from those who are at the 99-degree point. Why?— because they are still not enlightened. They know the ways of the people who are unenlightened. They know the language of the people who are unenlightened.

> They are yet with them, and yet in another 99 percent they have gone beyond. That 1 percent keeps them linked, bridged.
>
> (Osho 2010, p. 17)

Osho's language can be emphatic and passionate, sometimes inciting strong reactions. However, here, I share this quote in order to show what compassion looks like and what it entails. We do not need to be at a 99 percent, but with the right intention and right mindfulness, the path to alleviating suffering gets easier and more tangible.

Another variable to consider along with compassion is *upekkha* or equanimity which is a 'liberating quality that allows us to keep our hearts open and balanced, quiet and steady, in the midst of all (these) changes' (Liebenson 1999). That brings us to a kind of moral quandary—can we feel active empathy without any sort of attachment or affective disruption that propels us to intervene and take corrective action? The research on critical literacy and critical affect studies calls for us to enter into a state of affective equivalence (Anwaruddin 2016) inviting us to stand in the shoes of others. Can we participate in affective equivalence without experiencing the phenomenological effect of that affect? Additionally, how can we enter into this state of equivalence without the affective dimension given that our ability to do so is also determined by our frames of recognition and recognizability (Butler 2010) that are heavily skewed by our identity mechanics, when our sympathies are leaning toward the ones that we identify with and likewise, compensated by the lack of it, for those that apparently threaten the former? This is a double-layered situation: one, to feel someone's suffering like one's own but with dispassion and, two, to continue to do so when our ability to feel it is determined by regulatory mechanisms of proximity and recognizability. I argue that the first may hold the key to the second because the latter stems from a passion-oriented preference that decides who to and not to empathize with. When egoic-identity-generated passions are absent, empathy extends to all, and it is the combination of non-attachment and compassion that can allow us to fulfill the first, activating upekkha (equanimity) through ego-decentering while also enabling us to 'think through' things, mobilizing mindful affect without the overwhelming and destructive powers of negative emotions. This is an exercise in the experiential being dimension of the Bodhisattva path, not a destination where one needs to reach, because the latter assumes some sort of attachment to that place, which the Buddha cautioned against. In Chapter 3 of the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha tells Subhuti that he must vow to free all beings without being attached to the perception of a being, and in order for which wisdom becomes a necessity because 'intelligence differentiates, wisdom does not.' (p. 83).

Equanimity plays a pivotal role in detachment. Detachment itself needs to be understood more fully as should its linguistic connotations and cultural bearings in relation to that. Dictionary definitions of 'detachment' range from 'not showing emotional involvement or interest' to 'not connected structurally' and offer synonyms such as 'apart', 'indifference', and 'objectivity'. Some of these definitions are limiting and do not quite reflect what the Buddha and his bodhisattvas practice(d). In fact, most other eastern wisdom traditions offer a similar and shared understanding of detachment, which roughly translates to freedom from the captivity of identity- and preference-based form. In the Vedanta tradition of India, this is succinctly explained via the love–attachment axis and how in our egoic contexts we frequently use the two interchangeably. Swamy Parthasarathy in the Vedanta Treatise (XVII edition) puts it curtly:

> What the world understands as love is personal, preferential attachment. Attachment binds you. Makes you dependent upon the object of your attachment . . . You must give up this clinging, selfish, personal attachment which passes off as love . . . Dissolve personal attachment. Rise above egocentric motive and desire. You thus merge with the fundamental element of love.
>
> (Parthasarathy 2015, p. 109)

Such love expands our capacity to relinquish egoic desire and attachment through valuing our interconnections and shared, mutual responsibilities. Karuna and upekkha

work together to widen inclusiveness without the egoic need for differentiation guided by calm centering through ego-decentering. Yet, the very same process of extending inclusiveness calls for altruistic individuation from the binding nature of ingroup exclusivity, allowing us to change the structure of our schema by questioning the forces that conditioned it into what it is to the point that the conditioning agents turned invisible. It is an agentic intention to do away with attachment that comes with the promise of superficial personal gains in order to enable compassion and equanimity to encompass otherness in ways such that larger ontological unities and interdependencies turn more visible.

In connection to the issues of attachment and compassion, it might be relevant to talk about charity and how it plays out in the phenomenal world. As humans with developed limbic systems, we have mastered the art of giving, in order to help, to relieve, as well as to please and impress. However, more often than not, charity and charitable deeds typically reinforce dualistic divides between giver and receiver, benefactors and beneficiaries, the privileged and the disadvantaged, where we give to the other but not without conditions or expectations, typically making them indebted economically and emotionally. Paulo Freire (2000) was instrumental in pointing out the difference between false charity and true generosity in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed where the former, although providing aid, sustains and deepens the dependency of the oppressed on the oppressor rather than liberating the latter. In Buddhist philosophy, this tantamounts to holding on to forms and projections of oppressor and oppressed and breeds narcissism and attachment to the perception of the giver, thus defeating the purpose of the charitable deed or of any possible genuine karuna from which it arose. The Diamond Sutra warns against charity with attachment to the ideas of all—practitioner, beneficiary, as well as practice—saying that 'by not dwelling on anything, bodhisattvas do not see the self that gives, nor do they see the other that receives, nor do they see anything given' (p. 88). This is what ensues when compassion, detachment, and charity come together: to give freely, without bounded-identity-based motives, to employ embodied form as a tool of enaction, not differentiation, to engage simultaneously in action and renunciation, with the deep intention to ease suffering and magnify joy unhindered by self-serving attachments. For such a condition to flourish, it would require a massive overhaul of the first paradox of emptiness and form. Once we are able to go past deep subject–object divides and cater to others as fellow subjects not attached to specific forms in the sociocultural order, we will find ourselves in a better position to exercise greater compassion and equanimity. Likewise, if we are able to move past the need to secure a stable and cohesive ego-identity, and reconcile with the idea that our constant evolution in the dance of existential bearings renders that highly improbable in the first place, we can love freely in a no-strings-attached fashion with this not implying a lack of responsibility but in fact extended responsibility for larger communities encompassing human others and more than human entities in postanthropocentric dimensions.

3.3. Thought and Awareness in Relation to Autonomy

This marks another important spectrum and, depending on where we are situated on it, also decides or at least contributes to intersubjective harmony or the lack of it. This, however, requires a clearer explication in the Buddhist context to show how so because in our everyday consciousness, thought is often considered a value-neutral construct, with thoughtfulness being a virtue and the lack of it a problem. In Buddhist philosophy, thoughts manifest as the mind obstructed by the world and the constant urge to escape from the world that it begets, thus calling for a 'homeopathic approach' of thought to end all thoughts and resting in awareness. The underlying assumption here is grounded in the proliferating nature of thoughts enabled by the skandhas of impressions and perceptions and how unchecked thoughts are directly responsible for strengthening the schema of ignorance. Such ignorance holds a direct link with strong belief perseverance, attitude polarization, and intersubjective negation. Contemporary literature in Psychology and the Social Sciences focuses on the need for deliberative dialogue and debiasing techniques.

While helpful, going a few layers deeper into where biases are originally formed and becoming internally motivated to find ways to manage that might prove more helpful. First, I briefly go over the skandhas and their role in identity formation. Then, I introduce the concept of neti-neti to help manage the mechanics of the skandhas. When that is made possible, thought recedes and awareness expands, closing in the dualistic split between knower and known, perceiver and perceived, although ironically it can do so by facilitating a helpful split between an inner observation of the outer manifestation. Progress is made on the bodhisattva path. Deeper autonomy is gained through freedom from persistent thought and its spiraling effects. Greater intersubjective wholeness ensues as a natural by-product.

The skandhas (or aggregates) comprise the building blocks of experience. In the Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra, all beings are created by a combination of the five skandhas of form (*rupa*), sensation/feeling (*vedana*), perception (*samjna*), volition (*samskara*), and cognizance (*vijnana*). These are vital to the discussion on thought and awareness because of the intricate connections they bear with the mind, thought, and resultant responses and actions. Many aspects of skandhas overlap each other. Form (rupa) refers to external objects or matter, material available to the senses as well as material that blocks what is behind or inside them when viewed from certain angles. Sensation (vedana) is the feelings produced by the interaction of the six senses with the world, guiding likes, dislikes, pleasure, and pain—thus also conditioning beings toward craving and avoidance. Perception (samjna) guides recognition based on sensations responding to stimuli. It is the filing and filtering system that works via recognition, association, and memory giving things their labels and value judgments. When we experience something, we tend to unconsciously identify and sort it based on prior perceptions founded on sense evaluations. For instance, we know that a bag is a bag because of our prior experience with bags as containers or receptacles that can hold things. Such quick associations are helpful and save us time through cognitive filtering that gets hardwired into memory. On a relational level, however, a pause could be beneficial, but we are usually surprisingly quick to make judgments sometimes based on our own past experiences but more often, without enough direct experience and only based on secondary data from perceptions of ingroup members, anchored to the collective evaluation of groups that help us affirm our identity. This allows easy categorization and saves cognitive effort but results in unhelpful stereotypes and problematic volitional actions (karma) that constitute the next skandha of samskara which governs mental habits, ideas, thoughts, biases, as well as the decisions and actions that are then put to effect based on those. Cognizance (vijnana) combines the knowing of sense organs and the resultant objects they create, such as ear and sound, eyes and sight, mind and thought. The last one is significant because it marks the difference between what really happens and how we experience it. Usually, we are a result of the massive storehouses of schemas that often interfere with direct experience but are seldom aware of that. The components of the skandhas are often so overlapping and enmeshed that they provide a steady semblance of stability and continuity. They create concepts, conditions, mental frameworks for sifting and filtering, categorizing, and differentiating, as well as the subsequent actions that constitute karma which then sustain this cyclic chain of cause and effect. Because each builds upon the other, conditioning happens on all levels, most of which remain beneath the threshold of conscious awareness, and almost always generates further conditions and dependencies true to the law of pratitya-samutpada that keeps the wheel spinning. The continual conditioning and dependency lead to dukkha or suffering, with thought and memory being the primary tools of operation through which it receives, responds, and enacts.

> The nature of Buddhas and beings is not different. But because beings suffer from these perceptions, they cannot achieve complete liberation. To employ these perceptions is to be a being. Not to employ them is to be a buddha. When they're deluded, buddhas become beings. When they're awake, beings become buddhas.
>
> (Pine 2001, p. 82)

> Buddhism instructs us to abandon all of our conceptual representations of reality in order to fully experience the highest truth that exceeds all descriptions. This is not an option but a requirement—we must relinquish objects of body and mind. A general rule of thumb that the Buddha would endorse, is that if you can argue about it, it's not IT. Anything we can verbalize is an abstracted representation that falls short of the ineffable, sublime truth, regardless of whatever name you assign to it.

> (Halaw 2014, p. 11)

By now, it has probably become clearer as to why thoughts, especially patterns of thought, are problematic. Thought occupies vital real estate. In the right measure, it serves various purposes such as keeping us safe and alive from an evolutionary perspective or helping us sift through abundant and often distracting data without which we are plunged into a cognitive deluge. However, in the vast and complex subjective and intersubjective landscapes, it can also obstruct understanding and prevent fair discretion due to the mental shortcuts involving hasty judgment and labeling. At a very basic level, it comes in the way of simple communication, of which listening is a key aspect. Osho explains it candidly in his interpretation of Chapter 3 of The Diamond Sutra:

> The mind goes on spinning a thousand and one thoughts, and the mind goes on moving all over the world—in the past, in the future. How can you listen? And howsoever you listen, it will not be right listening at all. You will listen to something else which has not been said at all, you will go on missing that which is said—because you will not be in tune. You will listen to the words of course, because you are not deaf, but just that much is not listening. To listen well ordinarily means to listen in deep receptivity. When you listen, if you are arguing, if you are judging, if you are saying, "Yes, this is right because it fits with my ideology, and this is not right because it doesn't appeal to me logically … " if you are continuously sorting things inside, you are listening but you are not listening well. You are listening with your past mind interfering. Who is this judging? It is not you, it is your past (continuously interfering). The past wants to perpetuate itself. It does not allow anything that can disrupt it. It does not allow anything new; it allows only the old that fits with it."

> (Osho 2010, pp. 45–46)

Thus, good listening would require us to realize the limitations posed by the skandhas and their relentless colonization over the mind. Realizing is the first step to unlearning it. It would be strange, even impossible to escape thought, but it is well within our reach to avoid being consumed by it. An effective way around it is to develop the dual ability to observe thought at work alongside the consciousness that traces it. Anne Buchardi (2007) of the University of Copenhagen as part of an intended cross-cultural dialogue talks about the maps of consciousness in the Abhidharma texts and the practice of rang rig or self-reflexive awareness through auto-noetic cognition (Buchardi 2007) that posits an inwardly focused awareness of an outwardly focused mental state to make sense of it in a non-conceptual direct way with the greater goal of freeing the mind from harmful or destructive identification. As part of the vital toolkit for observing consciousness, Buchardi (2007) talks about training the layers of consciousness that would conduct this neutral observation. She also admits that there may be dissenting voices objecting to what could seem like splitting the self, but it may also be understood as the real self-freeing itself from the imposed and constructed self, loosening oneself from the stickiness of continual conditioning which constitutes the practice of neti-neti.

Awareness training through consciousness mapping is not just a singularly Buddhist perspective. Advaita Vedanta also offers a framework of the self that classifies the vasanas of the body, mind, and intellect. Here, the Vedanta approach could also help us understand the undivided nondual consciousness freed from the skandhas. The intellect manifests itself through what Vedanta dharma refers to as *gross* (thinker) and *subtle* (contemplator),

with gross referring to thoughts whose functions lie within the periphery of the terrestrial plane to understand the world of matter. The subtle intellect moves from the terrestrial to the transcendental, the formless unified reality beyond the transitory, evolving, and artificially bounded forms of reality separated by physical barriers and material equipment. What Buddhism refers to as sunyata is in fact strikingly similar to the Vedanta notion of atman, the formless all-encompassing all-connected consciousness unobstructed by bounded thoughts and experienced through non-conceptual awareness. The no-self of Buddhism and the self-realization of Vedanta *sanatana dharma* are in fact quite similar, notwithstanding the polarity of superficial surface-level terms; no self/all self may well mean quite the same if understood in totality. Parthasarathy (2015) explains this in his chapter on the human composition:

> The Atman is said to be a homogenous mass of pure consciousness. The same in all beings. Immaculate, Unconditioned. Yet it appears conditioned by material equipment. Functioning through the body, mind, and intellect, it becomes the conditioned consciousness, the human being. Nevertheless, the immaculate Atman is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. Like the sun above whose rays are all-powerful, all-pervading. The sun above is singular. Untainted, unconditioned. But its reflections are manifold in the numerous reflecting media. It appears tainted, conditioned by the properties of the media. The sun seen through a blue mirror appears blue. Through the broken mirror, broken. Similarly, the supreme Self appears so by the limitations of the equipment through which it functions. And becomes the limited, restricted human being... When a spiritual seeker rises above his body, mind, and intellect and their objects of consciousness, transcends the limitation of perception and action, emotion and thought, the conditioning ceases. The individuality is no more. He merges with the pure, absolute consciousness. It is akin to the phenomenon of reflection and sunlight. When the reflecting medium is removed the reflecting image disappears. What remains is the all-pervading sunlight.

> (pp. 174–75)

The conditioning of consciousness is also explained along the same lines through the Buddhist skandhas thus explaining the Bodhisattva's attempt to free oneself and others from these. As easy as it is for us humans to get rooted in the rupa skandha (body, matter) and project it on to what we egoically desire, it is equally easy to get sucked into the successive skandhas of sensation, perception, volition, and cognizance as they seamlessly roll into one and sustain and deepen the unhelpful cycle of conditioning. The metaphor of the sun being reflected through all material media in Parthasarathy's exposition helps us detect the pure unconditioned consciousness underlying these tools of conditioning that become one with the outcomes of it. Buddhism only makes the extra effort to reiterate the fact that non-attachment to these extends to non-attachment to the intended outcome of this process, which is to not identify even with formless transcendental consciousness lest it leads to spiritual narcissism or judgment of those that are not ready for it yet.

Although the term 'consciousness mapping' may not explicitly be part of the Buddhist dharma or doctrine, it is a common experiential practice for awareness training to put mind over matter and balance out thought overload and awareness deficit. It can be a powerful pedagogy of encounter to examine the layers of consciousness and skandhas that build up bounded egoic identities, allowing us to unlearn and decenter these through gradual and committed practice, minimizing limiting thoughts and, in the process, freeing up space for expanding awareness. This, however, starts with thought, and although it is not guaranteed that there is indeed a thought to end all thoughts or any right way to go about it, it is important to get a grip on our thoughts, not necessarily to negate them but to acknowledge that we are more than our thoughts through the mindful cultivation of awareness. When thought and awareness work in fair synchrony, they enable autonomy from the entrapments of conditioning forces for seeing through these and for realizing the fundamental substratum of realities underlying material and social constructions. A

question that may arise here is whether awareness training through consciousness mapping is the same as metacognition and if not, then how they are different. Both processes require us to observe our thinking, but metacognition carries a pedagogical aim of intentionally thinking about how we think and learn. Awareness training is autonomy enhancing through providing respite from the constant burden of skandha-supported thinking and may be experienced through certain types of meditation, the consistent practice of which can render those on the Bodhisattva path to be able to remain in constant meditative states despite acting in the phenomenal world. For those that are not on the path yet, awareness of this mapping technique through self-reflexive experiences can still help navigate around the usual inescapability of thought by being a way to direct thought to uncover the processual work of perception in the making and unmaking of the self and of its mattering and unmattering in the world.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to offer some Buddhist meaning-making tools to make peace with our gnawing uncertainties and to help us see how these aggravate perceptions of otherness. Although the former can often lead to the intensification of the latter, they usually go hand in hand and feed into each other. Taken together, the resultant perception of threat disrupts the assumption of familiarity, sense of control, and general epistemic equilibrium. It is not a new problem by any means and has been part of our human fabric for centuries. This article presents an alternative way of viewing the world, especially with matters pertaining to perceptions of threat and control, where the limitations on it posed by our current contexts also ironically point at why we need it now more so than ever.

Although Buddhist wisdom philosophy is quite unequivocal in its emphasis on non-attachment through sunyata, this paper does not espouse that as an end goal to indicate any sort of hierarchy pertaining to developmental paths. It is in the exploration of the ebb and flow of contending forces that it lends itself to understanding some deeper truths with grace, poise, and secular accessibility. Through outlining the paradoxes of emptiness and form, detachment and compassion, and thought and awareness, the paper tries to demonstrate that these polarities are perhaps not so and certainly not mutually exclusive. Each part is required to complete the other. Each serves a purpose in the equation, and success lies in developing skills to tread the fine line, developing the component that is lacking while minimizing the one that is overidentified with or overinvested in, such as, for example, our social identities or material immersion. Because we humans have become overidentified with these, the balance or equilibrium of the middle ground has been lost. The concept of sunyata, which on cursory reading, is often misinterpreted as a meaningless void is instead a way to recalibrate the scales to restore balance. A good interpretation of sunyata is that this recalibration takes place through the 'regular emptying of fixed notions, power struggles, judgmental attitudes, and other ego preoccupations that mark the phenomenal plane of human existence' (Bai 2012). The experience of sunyata, as in meditation, gains us an insight into the non-reified and impermanent nature of all things (Orr, personal communication). Being on the bodhisattva path requires that we become aware of this and try to aid ourselves and others in reclaiming this balance by navigating our existential needs with transcendental resources, seeing value in both realms of the phenomenal and noumenal.

In considering how the understanding and appreciation of the paradoxes could facilitate intersubjective homeostasis in the face of a growing climate of cultural crises compounded by social, economic, and environmental instability, it would help to sum up a core idea from each of the three sections and explicitly draw out its key offering in this context. They are as follows:

(1) In the emptiness–form axis, we tend to overidentify with form, especially bounded physical and social forms without acknowledging their ephemerality or their dependence on other forms and conditions. Fixation on social-identity forms bears a direct correlation with ingroup loyalty and outgroup antagonism. Identity as such

is not a problem per se; on the contrary, it is essential to our being in the world, but it is our misplaced attachment and overidentification with it that augurs distress. In troubled times, this grasp tightens further and in unhealthy ways. Thus, a vital step here would require us to try to (i) periodically engage in purposeful exercises of emptying the constructed self through awareness training around the workings of the skandhas and the related practice of neti-neti and (ii) acknowledging our inherent emptiness as a gift. When we are no longer the bounded I- or we-entity, we are more readily available to identifying with larger superordinate identities but in appropriate ways. This might be problematic in socially inequitable conditions involving racism or homophobia where courageous identification with a social group is a pre-requisite to seeking justice. Qualitative nuances of form-based salience and emptying are thus important. Also, this works best as a collective enterprise, but we do not live in an ideal world. Integrating this contemplative practice in Education offers major developmental promise as a society for its consciousness to flourish.

(2) The detachment–compassion paradox is most well-suited to developing equanimity and detachment as antidotes to selfish preferential attachment and increase our bandwidth of compassion and active empathy to extend it to those who are now not limited in our perception by their bounded socio-cultural identities. They can now become equally deserving of our attentional care as we become better able to see them as composite, multifaceted people rather than flat, homogenous stereotypes.

(3) The third pair of thought and awareness is typically clearly skewed in favor of the former and making sense of the overlapping skandhas can offer a helpful pause where awareness training can gain traction by superseding destructive cycles of thought. In the Diamond Sutra, it is said that the presence of thought and the absence of awareness makes for a world of mortals, the absence of thought and the presence of awareness for the world of sages, and the presence of thought and the presence of awareness a world of worthies (p. 124). The last bit is most relevant to our condition and a state that is accessible enough to be striven for. With the purposeful reduction of the overemphasis on thoughts pertaining to bounded identities and attachments, awareness grows and makes it much easier to work on active empathy and intersubjective inclusion.

These call for larger systemic changes and are naturally hindered by our current modes of constituting reality that are quite distant from what has been suggested here. Change is hard but it is not really a choice in a world beset by increasing challenges. The first step of the puzzle is to acknowledge malfunctions and maladjustments in the subjective and intersubjective realm as being mutually constitutive and then to work on ways to mitigate these. Contemplative practices from Buddhist traditions offer a viable alternative that can lead us on a more harmonious path to discovering our shared storehouses of cosmic wealth that come from reconciling with the beauty and power of paradox as a basal self-sustaining reality facilitating the flourishing of plural communions that co-opt their superficial differences into the celebration of deeper unities.

Glossary

Atman	Inner self, the spirit/soul, innermost essence. The nondual school of Advaita Vedanta considers atman (soul) and brahman (supreme existence or absolute reality) to be the same.
Bodhisattva	A person on the path toward Buddhahood characterized by attaining liberation from worldly suffering but who delays doing so out of compassion to ease the suffering of fellow-beings.
Diamond Sutra	A Mahayana Buddhist text from the Prajnaparamita ("Perfection of Wisdom") collection of texts. It comprises a series of dialogues between the Buddha as teacher and Subhuti, a disciple as questioner in the presence of other bodhisattvas. Also includes commentaries.
Heart Sutra	A Mahayana Buddhist text from the Prajnaparamita collection focusing on the idea of sunyata.
Karuna (Buddhism/Hinduism)	Compassion
Mahaprajnaparamita	A Mahayana Buddhist text based on the perfection of wisdom.
Metta	Loving-kindness
Mudita	Unselfish Joy
Neti Neti (Hinduism)	Not this; not that. A gradual process of negation to realize the Brahman (ultimate absolute/ pure consciousness)
Nirvana (Buddhism)	State of bliss brought about by freedom from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (equivalent to Moksha in Hinduism).
Pratitya-samutpada (Buddhism)	Dependent origination that is based on the understanding that everything arises in co-dependence and interlinkages.
Samsara (Buddhism/Hinduism)	Cycle of birth, death, and rebirth as a ceaseless process of suffering in the material dimension
Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism)	A transcendental Hindu philosophy that focuses on universal principles/laws and spiritual freedom that are not limited by specific creeds/beliefs.
Skandhas (Buddhism)	Aggregates from the sensory domain that constitute clinging/holding on to
Sunyata (Buddhism)	Non-self, undifferentiated ontological unity; lack of an essential enduring identity due to interdependence and flux
Sutra (Buddhism)	A scripture or expository text; Hinduism: string
Upekkha	Equanimity

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