

Article

Knowing Our True Self and Transforming Suffering toward Peace and Love: Embodying the Wisdom of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra

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Abstract: The biggest crisis that we are in nowadays is existential, which is the state of not knowing our true natures or our true selves; hence, we suffer from deep anxiety and we fail to find safety and a way to ground ourselves. In this article, we share our practical experiences of encountering and practicing the teachings of two important Buddhist scriptures: the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra. We show how both sutras, and especially their teachings on emptiness, allow us to remove our attachment to a sense of a separate self, which deepens our understanding about life, and transforms suffering toward peace and love. We further demonstrate the importance of meditation, contemplative chanting and reading, and experimentation with Buddhist teachings as pathways towards understanding our true natures. In sum, both sutras help us to go beyond the materialistic, capitalistic, narrow vision of who we are and to access the higher dimension of our existence, which allows us to discover our cosmic selves in the ultimate reality. It is through experiencing one's true self that one gains a greater capacity to seek social transformation in times of crisis.

Keywords: Buddhism; enlightenment; Heart Sutra; Diamond Sutra; true self; interbeing; love; transformation



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1. Introduction

The biggest crisis that we are in nowadays is existential, which is the state of not knowing our true natures; that is, we are more dimensional and richer than we believe we are. The competitive society in which we live reinforces a very narrow, monotonous, and individualistic idea of the self. Our daily communication with each other further perpetuates this sense of the self as fixed, separated, and isolated. For instance, through the usage of names and pronouns such as “I”, “me”, “mine”, and “myself” in our daily language, we start to perceive that *I* refers to something that is autonomous and permanent, and that exists separately from everything else (Loy 2008). As a result, we learn to believe that what we see in the physical world is all that there is, and we suffer from high levels of inadequacy, anxiety, fear, and loneliness, without a way to ground ourselves. When we are emotionally and physically unwell, we become part of the problems in the world instead of part of the solutions to the problems that we want to solve.

Two important sutras, or scriptures, in Buddhism, the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra, are the great vehicle or Mahayana sutras, which can help us to realize who we truly are, and which can bring us to a place of deep understanding and peace and love, with a greater capacity to engage in social transformation. Mahayana Buddhism is one of the main branches of Buddhism. It pertains to the understanding of the true nature of the self and it helps all people who still suffer to reach higher knowing and to end suffering. Early Buddhism had a focus on the “individual consciousness knowing itself”; however, as Buddhism developed further with the emergence of the great vehicle tradition, its emphasis

shifted towards understanding “how the limited individual consciousness may be opened up to the potentially unlimited universal or cosmic consciousness” (Soeng 2000, p. vii). During a religious experience, such as the realization of nirvana, one realizes one’s true nature. As Bose (1994) states, “Once the self attains true knowledge it overcomes bondage and suffering, which afflict mundane existence, and achieves total freedom. Self and its existential condition are transformed as the conception of the self and the world are transformed” (p. 145).

Recent Buddhist scholars also consider Mahayana Buddhism to be “a textual movement” that focuses on the revelation, preaching, and dissemination of the Mahayana sutras, which were developed within traditional Buddhist social and institutional structures (Drewes 2010). The Mahayana sutras have certain characteristics that distinguish them from earlier Buddhist sutras, such as expanded cosmologies and mythical histories, new ideas about the nature of the Buddha, and new philosophical perspectives (Drewes 2010). The Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra are two interrelated great vehicle sutras that are also known as the *Prajnaparamita*, or the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Both sutras have been widely recited in East Asia and are gaining popularity in the West.

In this article, we interweave our narratives of encountering and practicing the teachings of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra from the standpoints of educators and researchers who are interested in applying Buddhist philosophy to our lives. We show how both sutras allow us to deepen our understanding of the self and to transform suffering into peace and love. We also discuss how experiencing one’s spiritual true self leads to seeking social transformation, especially in times of crisis. Our article demonstrates that we do not need to become Buddhist philosophers or scholars to understand and/or benefit from the teachings of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra. There are practices that we can use and insight that can be gained from other spiritual traditions that we can adopt to help us experience the wisdom of both sutras in order to heal ourselves and our world in crisis.

2. Encountering the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra: Experiencing the Silent Self, the True Self

In this article, we first share our own experiences of encountering the two sutras. While I (Jing) was listening to a Buddhist master’s talk about the Heart Sutra, I experienced my true self, or the sense of a higher spiritual self, that was “falling through” or “slipping out” of the physical ego-based self. The master, who was talking about non-attachment, as everything is empty, urged repeatedly that “we should let go of our attachment and our Heart will appear”, and that “non attachment is the condition for the Heart to appear”. The master was relating to the Heart Sutra, which states that “form is emptiness and emptiness is form”. Before that, I had started to practice meditation, but I had no knowledge about Buddhism, and I had only listened to the talk by the master at the strong urging of two of his followers. While his talk was going on, with his repeating that “no attachment is necessary for the Heart to appear”, I entered an awareness that my physical body was not myself anymore, and that there was nothing to worry about, as “I” have always existed, and “I” will always exist. This body that I have is almost irrelevant and external to me. I am a pure consciousness, which is not bound by a physical body. I experienced a deep sense of peace, with a profound inner knowing of who I truly was. This true self was not what I knew as me; it was not my name, my gender, my look, my body, but this Self was one that was linked to all beings and existence. While writing this article, it just happened that I found a poem that I wrote after this experience as I proceeded in my meditation practice:

I am empty,
 Light shining into my heart, and rivers flowing;
 I am empty
 Spirit dancing, merging my heart with the millions of things and people
 The emptiness is like the virtue of a bamboo tree,
 Great open space inside, embracing all possibilities.

Emptying ignorance, letting light to shine in;
 Emptying greed, letting Love to flow out;
 In emptiness there are worlds, and in emptiness there are divines . . .

I, Yishin, have been practicing Buddhism in the Zen Buddhist tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh (or “Thay”, as his students affectionately call him) since my college year. Jing’s sharing reminded me of my experience of applying Thay’s teaching of “interbeing” in my daily life. “Interbeing” is a term that Thay uses to help people to understand the Buddha’s teaching of emptiness, which is presented in the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra (Thich Nhat Hanh 2010, 2017). The term “interbeing” describes our deep interconnection to everything else and the fact that we do not exist independently (Thich Nhat Hanh 2017). Thay teaches his students to see that a sheet of paper and a cloud “interare”. “Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make papers”, said Thay (Thich Nhat Hanh 2022). Similarly, when we look deeply into ourselves, we can see our parents and ancestors, and the cultures, plants, and minerals in us, and how our selves are made of non-self elements (Plum Village 2020a). Thay points out that even our happiness is made of non-happiness elements, similar to how the flower is made of non-flower elements:

When you look at the flower, you see non-flower elements like sunlight, rain, earth—all of the elements that have come together to help the flower to manifest. If we were to remove any of those non-flower elements, there would no longer be a flower. Happiness is a kind of flower. If you look deeply into happiness, you see non-happiness elements, including suffering. Suffering plays a very important role in happiness. (Thich Nhat Hanh 2021)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have found it helpful to engage the insight of interbeing to broaden my understanding of life and to handle the feelings of grief and loss, as well as of anxiety about the future. Similar to Jing, who experienced an experiential shift in her sense of self when listening to a master’s talk and when reading the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra, I experienced a different, more expanded sense of self when I was able to touch the insight of interbeing through Thay’s teaching of the two sutras. Perhaps the most memorable experience was when I was performing a walking meditation one morning by the Detroit River, with my full attention placed on my breathing, my bodily movement, my steps, and the contact between the sole of my feet and the Earth. As I brought my mind and body together and practiced walking mindfully on the Earth with full concentration, suddenly, I was able to feel that the Earth and myself were one. In that specific time and space, I could sense the Earth’s water flowing in my blood stream, giving me life and nourishment. I could feel the air entering and leaving my body to become a part of my environment, as well as the Earth’s energy of love, stability, firmness, and solidity in my body. The boundary between my “self” and my surroundings dissipated, and there was a moment of ease, freedom, timelessness, oneness, and love that was experienced in the present moment.

Who is the one doing the walk? I contemplated.

3. So, Who Are We?

What the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra (just as all the Prajnaparamita Sutras) do is cut through, deconstruct, and demolish all of our usual conceptual frameworks, all of our rigid ideas, all of our belief systems, and all of our reference points, including any with regard to our spiritual path. They do so on a very fundamental level, and not just in terms of thinking and concepts, but also in terms of our perception, how we see the world, how we hear, smell, taste, and touch, how we regard and emotionally react to ourselves and to others, and so on.

Thus, we do not have a self, or we have a no-self nature. The doctrine of the no-self (*anatta* in Pali, or *anatman* in Sanskrit) is one of the core teachings of the historical Buddha, Gautama Buddha, and it has been used to understand and develop the theoretical and theological foundations of Buddhism (Thay Phap An 2014). Through stopping and looking

deeply into his life experiences, Gautama Buddha, who was once a prince in ancient India, awakened to the fact that humans do not have a permanent and non-changing substance called a “self” that underlies their unique personalities (Thay Phap An 2014). Instead, there are only five *skandhas*, or aggregates: form (which is our physical body with its sense organs), feelings, perceptions, mental formations (including our habits and dispositions), and consciousness (Loy 1992). The Buddha emphasized that these five aggregates are always changing. They do not constitute the self; their interaction creates the illusion of a self, which causes individuals to suffer (Loy 1992). In order to help deconstruct the idea of the self to understand the true self nature (that is, the no-self), the Buddha taught us to see that an aggregate (e.g., a feeling or a perception) is not mine, that I am not this feeling/perception, that this feeling/perception is not myself, and so on and so forth (Loy 1992). He also transmitted the understanding of dependent origination. Dependent origination, or “dependent co-arising”, is the interconnectedness of all things, which structures empathy as an inherent aspect of human nature (Orr 2018). Bose (1994) elaborates:

Interdependent-origination means that entities are in immanent relationship with one another in their dynamic unfolding. Since beings are in intrinsic relationship with one another, none has a discrete, independent self-identity or self nature. Everything participates in everything else. The self reflects all other selves, and all other selves reflect the self. (p. 148)

By understanding the principle of dependent origination, we realize that all things and all phenomena are interrelated and are the results of interdependent co-arising. We do not have a separate self-entity. Rather, we are part of all creations: the Earth, the Sky, the Sun, the plants, and the animals. We are empty of separate self-entities. We inter-are and we inter-be. We inter-exist. We can learn to see ourselves and others as continuous and ever-changing streams of the five aggregates, which are always flowing and in connection with, receiving from, and contributing to other streams of phenomena (Chân Niêm Hỷ 2016). The emptiness is a vast boundless energy field, where all existence comes from. Everything is interrelated. When we see others as ourselves, our compassion grows (Lin 2019).

4. Waking Up

In Mahayana Buddhism, there are two kinds of truth: relative truth and ultimate truth. Relative truth is said to include all the dualistic phenomena (self vs others, birth vs death, being vs non-being, living being vs non-living being, and so on and so forth), whereas absolute truth is beyond duality and reveals the true emptiness of the nature of all relative phenomena (Bose 1994; Lion’s Roar 2018). At the level of relative truth, we can talk about having a physical self, but, at the ultimate level, we talk about not finding a self, or that we have a non-self. Thich Nhat Hanh (2021) further said the following about the ultimate truth:

The ultimate truth transcends the ideas of separate selves, separate species, and even the idea of “birth” and “death”. At the level of the ultimate truth, there is no such thing as death; there is only continuation. The ultimate truth is not something that is separate from the conventional truth. When we touch the conventional truth deeply, we touch the ultimate. (pp. 44–45)

This is a succinct explanation of another famous phrase of the Heart Sutra: Emptiness is Form, and Form is Emptiness; Form is non other than Emptiness, Emptiness is non other than Form. This indicates that the physical world is also part of, and not different from, the eternal; therefore, we, in our physical forms, can transcend our ignorance of a separate, isolated self and can be in touch with our ultimate true natures. When we go beyond discriminative, dualistic thinking, we attain true knowledge and achieve total freedom (Bose 1994). The Diamond Sutra further reminds those people who want to touch the ultimate truth to remove four discriminative notions: the notion of a separate self, the notion of a human being as separate from non-human elements, the notion of a living being

as separate from non-living beings, and the notion of a life span, or the idea that we only exist between the time that we were born and the time that we die (Plum Village 2020a). Through contemplation on the teachings of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra in our daily life, we have an opportunity to walk on a path towards a deeper understanding of the two truths that form the heart of the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, and to realize our no-self nature (Thakchoe 2016). We can wake up to the reality of life, let go of old notions and concepts, and find our true selves in the ultimate while inhabiting our bodies in the present moment. This self walks along with us, but it is deeply hidden. As quoted in Zajonc (2009):

I am not I.
 I am this one
 Walking beside me whom I do not see,
 Whom at times I manage to visit,
 And whom at other times I forget;
 The one who remains silent when I talk,
 The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
 The one who takes a walk where I am not,
 The one who will remain standing when I die. (p. 31)

When we start to recognize our true selves, we can feel a shift in our identity, which leads to a broadened sense of our identity. This summer, as I (Jing) was teaching a course about contemplative inquiry and holistic education, a student was engaged in an activity that asked everyone to describe their identities, and this poem flowed out of my pen:

Identity
 Life
 Love
 Equanimity,
 All beings in Peace and Joy:
 No illness, no death, no fear,
 Like a young child, happy and curious,
 Light, laughter, ocean waves,
 Deep tranquility; miracles;
 Fascinating Universe; Yay!

I felt as though I was a child, as well as an Earth and cosmic citizen at the same time. I was in the light of all Lights, and in the waves of an ocean of divine joy. This poem represents the state in which I felt the realization of who I truly am.

4.1. Meditation as the Pathway to Love and Infinity

How do we reach the realization of Brahman and nirvana, which “is the transcendence of the false understanding of the self and the world, and the realization of the true nature of the self and the world” (Bose 1994, p. 145)? In Buddhism, there are more than 86,000 doors to gaining such freedom. For instance, the freedom of the original self may come from being immersed in the light of the Buddha, which literally means the “enlightened one”, or the “awakened one”. One inhabits the heart-mind of the Buddha in order to have deeper communication with the Buddha, through reading and chanting, through meditation, and through arts, such as sculpture and paintings (Lin 2019). Learning experientially from an enlightened master is similar to learning from the Buddha. When we are in touch with the energy of the Buddhist masters (who have an immense amount of energy, being “enlightened” through prolonged meditation) and cultivate a character of unconditional love and wisdom, our true selves can be revealed. In Zen Buddhism, there is a strong emphasis on the practice of not knowing, and on the letting go of notions and perceptions so that the right understanding of the self can develop. On the basis of our experiences of encountering the Heart and the Diamond sutras, we highlight three general approaches

that diverse individuals can use to approach the sutras to broaden their understanding of the self and to become in touch with its true no-self nature.

In the Heart Sutra, Avalokiteshvara (Sanskrit), or Guan Yin (Chinese), in deep meditation, saw all things as empty, and, hence, saw that suffering is no longer what we believe and is transcended. The emptiness is not nothingness; rather, it is a pure energy state, where all existence manifests as pure consciousness. Essentially, everything we see in a meditative state is this emptiness, or pure consciousness energy or spirit. In this level of existence, all are perfect, and there is no suffering, no death, and no fear. In our normal state of consciousness, where we hang on to a world of matters, we are essentially living in a state of illusions, judging and fearing, and hanging onto wealth, fame, relations, etc. In a “deeply meditative state”, the inner light of all beings shines through, wherein all are seen in their original light or energy. The first two sentences in the Heart Sutra (Guanyin was in a deep state of meditation and saw that all is emptiness; hence, she stated: Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form) indicate meditation as the tool to use to journey into the deep realm of our existence, as well as to reveal the ultimate truth about our lives. The deep meditative state that Guanyin entered into is often said to contain two qualities: *samadhi*, or deep concentration, and *vipassana*, or insight into the true nature of reality. It is essential that we practice insight meditation in order to remove delusions and to set free our inborn spiritual abilities, or the abilities that are embedded in all spirits, as is described in the Heart Sutra: “All Buddhas in the past, present, and future, by practicing the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore, are all capable of attaining Authentic and Perfect Enlightenment” (Thich Nhat Hanh 2017). [三世佛，依般若波蜜多故，得阿耨多三藐三菩提]

Ken Wilber (1998) has this to say about meditation:

But I would like to emphasize that meditation itself is, and always has been, a *spiritual* practice. Meditation, whether Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist, or Islamic, was invented as a way for the soul to venture inward, there ultimately to find a supreme identity with Godhead. “The Kingdom of Heaven is within”—and meditation, from the very beginning, has been the royal road to the Kingdom. Whatever else it does, and it does many beneficial things, meditation is first and foremost a search for the God within. (p. 5)

Indeed, the whole point of meditation or contemplation—whether it appears in the East or in the West, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu—is to free ourselves from the “optical delusion” that we are merely separate egos set apart from each other and from eternal Spirit, and to discover instead that, once released from the prison of individuality, we are one with Godhead and thus one with all manifestation, in a perfectly timeless and eternal fashion. (p. 17)

The realization of the true self results in our embodying peace and love, and in a greater capacity to alleviate suffering and to engage in social transformation. When we are free from dualistic thinking and our incorrect perceptions about reality, enlightenment (a large energy field with light filling one’s being) (Lin 2019) becomes literal. As Hawkins (2012) elegantly puts it:

At this level of realization, the sense of one’s existence transcends all time and all individuality. There is no longer any identification with the physical body as “me”, and therefore, its fate is of no concern. The body is seen as merely a tool of consciousness through the intervention of mind, its prime value that of communication. The self merges back into the Self. This is the level of nonduality, of complete Oneness. There is no localization of consciousness; awareness is everywhere equally present. (p. 116)

By realizing our true selves, we want to cultivate and do good for the world. Hence, the spiritual teachers have all committed to overcoming many unthinkable difficulties in order to become enlightened, and they cultivate their vital life energy to form the “great vehicle” to help transform suffering and to bring compassion and love to the world (Lin 2018, 2019). They do so with a heart of unconditional love. The end goal of the

great vehicle sutras, perhaps, is not to transport someone to a land unknown, but to a peaceful state, where understanding and love exists. In fact, the term bodhicitta, or the mind of love and enlightenment (Plum Village 2020b), is often used in the great vehicle tradition of Buddhism to remind practitioners that both understanding and love are needed for one's spiritual development and for the unfolding of our greatest human potential (Namgyal 2018). Bodhicitta is a strong energy that motivates a practitioner to practice deeply to gain freedom and an enlightened understanding of reality in order to serve others and to fulfill one's aspiration to alleviate all sufferings (Plum Village 2020b). Bodhicitta is not something we either have or do not have, nor is it something that we need to gain; rather, it is a way of relating to our mind and to the world that is based on seeing realities as they are and as clearly as possible (Namgyal 2018). Pema Chödrön (2019) explains that there are two levels of bodhicitta: (1) Unconditional bodhicitta, which is "an immediate experience that is refreshingly free of concept, opinion, and our usual all caught-up-ness . . . something hugely good . . . like knowing at gut level that there's absolutely nothing to lose"; and (2) Relative bodhicitta, which refers to our ability to embrace and work with suffering without shutting our hearts and minds down. It is through shining the light of understanding and love into others that a buddha is born.

4.2. *The Power of Sacred Texts and Contemplative Chanting and Reading*

Many spiritual traditions emphasize the role of spiritual/sacred texts. In Christianity, *Lectio Divina* is practiced. In Islam, the Koran is recited on all occasions. In Taoism, the *Dao De Jing* and the *Tranquility Sutra* are studied by Taoist disciples daily. The contemplative, introspective reading of spiritual texts is much practiced around the world, as these sacred texts play the role of transmitting energy heart to heart when we are in the meditative mindset, and when we are soaking in the light that emanates from the teachers, letting it in, letting it rise in our bodies, and allowing it to heal us. The meditative, concentrated reading and chanting of sutras can create an empty space, where the ego recedes, and where there is room for our true selves to be revealed. Similar to how vibrations that are created through the human voice, such as humming and singing, can calm a baby, the chanting of sacred texts has the power to cleanse emotional energies in our body and to give rise to healing.

In Buddhism, and especially in Zen/Chan Buddhism, the reading and chanting of sutras, such as the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*, is a daily practice (Soeng 2000). While the sutras can be studied word by word, when one is chanting them, the vibration from the chanting can cause one to enter into a state of being that is similar to that of the Indigenous shamans who achieve an altered state of consciousness and ascend to higher dimensions of knowing. When chanting, we can "come back to the deepest place in ourselves, the place where we are most awake and alive" (Thich Nhat Hanh 2007, p. 11). Chanting or contemplatively reading the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra* can create a quantum field when we enter into the universal energy field, where dualistic notions of the self, humans, living beings, and life spans do not exist (Lin and Parikh 2019).

In the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, in Paragraph #44, it is stated: "Through spiritual reading, the disciple gains communion with the divine Power on which his heart is set". Charles Johnston (Patanjali and Johnston 2010) provides the following interpretation on this paragraph:

Spiritual reading meant, for ancient India, something more than it does with us. It meant, first, the recital of the sacred texts, which, in their very sounds, had mystical potencies; and it meant a recital of texts which were divinely emanated, and hold in themselves the living, potent essence of the divine.

Our experiences of encountering the two sutras explain why listening to a great master or contemplating his/her teaching can lead to inner transformation, which inspires us to want to be as the master teachers, transforming our inner hearts, and sharing love and hope in the world. This is the true meaning of a great vehicle.

4.3. *Experimenting with the Insight in Our Daily Lives to Transform Suffering and Embrace Light*

Perhaps one of the best ways to understand the real meaning of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra is to experiment with their teachings in our daily lives in order to see if the teachings can lead us to a deeper understanding of realities and reduce the sufferings in us and around us. As pointed out by [Thich Nhat Hanh \(2017\)](#) in his commentary on how one should practice with the Heart Sutra:

Heart Sutra intellectually, as philosophy, will not have any effect on the suffering that we carry inside us. But if we are able to read every word and phrase of the Heart Sutra in the light of our suffering and our deepest aspirations, it will become meaningful. If we know how to apply our understanding of emptiness to our daily life and the many challenges and difficulties we encounter, we will be able to overcome our suffering and experience relief and happiness. This understanding will have the power to liberate us. (p. 35)

In other words, experimentation with the teachings of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra requires that we go beyond a theoretical understanding of the sutras and that we engage with their core teachings, such as the emptiness of the self and the emptiness of all phenomena, when resolving the problems of suffering in our lives.

For Thich Nhat Hanh, the essence of Buddhism consists of “living principles that cannot bear any specific formulation”, and that one shall turn to in one’s daily life and experiment with by using different tools and techniques to examine how the principles may help one to live a joyful and peaceful life that is free from pains and sorrow ([Thay Phap An 2018](#), p. 16).

In my (Yishin’s) experience, the core teachings of both sutras can be applied in my daily life:

I got a kitten during the COVID-19 pandemic. The kitten is a shy and timid cat, as her mom, because of anxiety, could not nurse her at a young age. Before welcoming the kitten to my home, I spent many days transforming my living space so that it could become a safe harbor for the kitten. The second day I received the kitten, I started having an itchy throat and coughing to an extent that, whenever I noticed her, fear came up and I had a hard time breathing. My mind went right away to accusing the kitten of being the culprit of my physical symptoms. I even thought of sending her away. I no longer wanted the kitten and avoided being with her in the same room for one month, until one morning, perhaps in a state of interbeing or unity consciousness, when I was able to see that the kitten’s birth mother is in me and I am in her birth mother, that suddenly my heart cracked open. I saw the deep connection between the cat mother and me and how we were both unable to provide safety for the kitten. Seeing that the mother cat, the kitten, and me all want happiness and safeness, and remembering my original intention to provide the kitten a safe home, I decided to approach the kitten, with my mask on, and to send love to my kitten through petting her mindfully, compassionately, and with all my concentration. Guilt, fear, and sadness dissipated when I was able to touch interconnection and compassion. From that moment onward, I never had any problem of an itchy throat or any hard time breathing when my kitten was around. Something in my mind and body was healed when I let go of all the stories and notions and touched the cat with love and understanding. I was no longer afraid. My cat taught me a lesson on how we are empty of a separate self. When I let go of myself, we become one. Interestingly, I had given my cat the name, Bodhi, meaning “the awakened one”. So, in a way, Bodhi the cat gave me my most unforgettable teaching on emptiness during the pandemic. I made a promise to care for her in a way that brings out the lion in her.

5. Buddhist Practice for Solutions to the Crises We Are in: From Experiencing Our True Selves to Social Transformation

When we realize our true selves, we live in a state of Love. David Hawkins conducted years of research on the energy fields of concepts, values, beliefs, etc. According to him, love is a high-energy state of being, which calibrates at 500. According to [Hawkins \(2012\)](#),

The 500 level is characterized by the development of a Love that is unconditional, unchanging, and permanent. It does not fluctuate because its source within the person who loves is not dependent on external conditions. Loving is a state of being. It is a way of relating to the world that is forgiven, nurturing, and supportive. Love is not intellectual and does not proceed from the mind. Love emanates from the heart. It has the capacity to lift others and accomplish great feats because of its purity of motive. (p. 112)

In the Diamond Sutra, Buddha emphasized that it is through the work of unconditional love that we generate unmeasurable merits. When we do good to beings and things, without any discrimination and without thinking about the fruits of our actions, we enter the power of a buddha, or an enlightened one.

Buddhism aims for us to end suffering, or *dukkha*, and to transform suffering and find a path for enlightenment. Meditation, in the form of right mindfulness and right concentration, plays a big role in building our capacity to walk along the path to enlightenment. These are attempts to turn inward and to cultivate our vital life energy, which is called “Qi”, “Ki”, or “prana” in various traditions, and which connects to the energy of all existence. Moreover, Buddhism advocates doing good to boost our merit, or prana, which is our vital life energy, and to set the true self free (meditation interbe with sila, or mindfulness trainings). Thousands of methods have been explored to bring tranquility to the mind and to penetrate the deeper realms of our being beyond six-sense consciousness. When one is enlightened and freed from greed, hate, and delusions, one literally inhabits a high-energy state that is accompanied by an incredibly expanded consciousness. This brings us to the realization that our “self” is beyond concepts, and that it is undying, nonperishable, above division, selfless, loving, and connected to the whole universe. We embrace love in its many dimensions: as joy, loving kindness, compassion, forgiveness, yielding, and equanimity. In our experience, when we focus on our interbeing with the world, and even with the universe, healing happens because love is always there. Joy happens when we see other people’s joy as our own joy, and when we see that we are not separate.

According to the Diamond Sutra, we are living in the “end of the world” period. In our time, we are facing huge problems, and a lot of these problems are caused by our ignorance of who we truly are, as well as when we see ourselves as separated from people who look different from us; when we disrespect the intrinsic values and rights of non-human beings, such as animals and plants; when we hoard wealth to the maximum while many suffer extreme poverty; when we have no, or minimal, awareness of our interconnected destiny with the ecological system; when we cut down forests, pollute the environment, and cause the extinction of many species; when we do not know that we have richer and more dimensional selves, which can be accessed and embraced; and when we fall into despair, fear, and anxiety. However, if we let go of our attachments to the dualistic notions of self vs others, birth vs death, living being vs non-living being, etc., we could release a great amount of energy within us, which would allow us to touch the miracle of life in the midst of difficulties and uncertainty, and to do what we can to serve all beings.

Scientists now believe that human-made environmental crises, such as the climate crisis, can no longer be solved through the current problem-solving strategies and modes of scientific inquiry, teaching, and learning, technological innovation, and improvements in governance and policies because these solutions do not touch upon the root of the problems, which is spiritual ([Grabow et al. 2018](#); [Wamsler and Brink 2018](#)). Significant cultural and behavioral shifts by way of sustainable human behaviors and lifestyles need to take place in order to address issues such as climate change, energy, waste, biodiversity loss, and water management, which are highly complex ([Wamsler et al. 2018](#)). At the heart of the

cultural and behavioral shifts is the transformation of the inner dimensions of individuals, which include their worldviews, values, emotions, beliefs, motivation, and mindsets (Macy and Brown 2014; O'Brien 2018; Thiermann and Sheate 2021). By embodying the wisdom of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra, we can contribute to a paradigm shift that will affect our worldviews and behaviors.

6. Personal Anecdotes of Self and Social Transformation

Here we come back to Yishin's question for contemplation: *Who is the one doing the walk?* Yishin continues her story, indicating the power of the Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra for self-transformation:

Holding this koan or puzzle in my heart, I (Yishin) savored my steps and the intimacy with the Earth in me and around me. The long-felt emotional burden in me dissipated, giving way to love, peace, and warmth, and allowing the light to shine through. In that moment of walking on Mother Earth, I understood experientially how healing can take place when I let go of my attachment to ideas and chattering thoughts, trust the present moment, and look deeply into my "self" as a part of the reality of life. I started understanding why Thay, my Buddhist teacher, always said to his students that "Everything is possible!" when we are able to generate the insight of interbeing or emptiness. Indeed, when I am able to see that I am empty of a separate self and that my "self" is made of non-self elements, such as the sun, the trees, my ancestors, my spiritual teachers, the past, the present, and the future, and the love and support of Mother Gaia, I know, for a while, that I am not limited to this body, and to this time and space. Everything becomes possible in the present moment as I interexist with everything else. *Within such a feeling of ease, love, and freedom, a sense of responsibility was born without thinking.* I realized that my actions (that is, what I think, speak, and do) have a karmic imprint on myself and others in an interconnected universe. Helping others is nothing other than helping myself, and vice versa.

This experience of touching the insight of interbeing, however momentarily, gave me (Yishin) a wider perspective from which to act for social transformation. The first action I took after experiencing a deep interconnection with Mother Earth was to rebuild my relationships with the Indigenous lands, waters, and communities on Turtle Island (or what is colonially known as North America) by learning more about the Natural Laws as well as the Indigenous laws and customs that have governed this place that I now call home. I did my best to be a good guest and a good relative on Turtle Island by sharing my learning journey with students and community members while engaging them in projects around cultural and ecological restoration and healing. This is my way of reciprocating Mother Earth's love and the generosity of Indigenous lands, waters, and peoples, who have hosted me and my family on Turtle Island.

For me, Jing, experiencing my true self led to a significant inner transformation. I started to see all of existence as having a spirit and that all are beautiful and intelligent in their way. Clouds seem to have a meaningful pattern, flowers are designed with various personalities, and animals are all smart and powerful in their own ways. The teachings of spiritual texts come to life, and I sense the suffering of the world acutely and grow a strong sense of social responsibility. I began to want to work for peace, sustainability, and humanity's spiritual growth. I started to teach graduate courses on peace education, environmental education, spirituality and education, and contemplative inquiry and holistic education. I mentor many graduate students to work in these areas. Through the realization that we need a platform for scholars and practitioners to come together and explore our true selves, I founded and co-founded two professional special interest groups in my professional organization: one that centers on peace education, and another that centers on contemplative inquiry and holistic education. I publish many books in these areas, and I serve as a co-editor of four book series that publish the works of scholars and teachers who are calling for the transformation of our world towards a peaceful and sustainable future. I experience that unconditional love is the most powerful

transformative power, which manifests in ways such as when I do my work without thinking about the fruits of my actions, while many opportunities appear to enable me to do more work. The spectrum of my consciousness is much elevated as I continue to remind myself of the Buddha's teaching and of the teachings of many spiritual teachers. As is taught in the Diamond Sutra:

The Buddha said to Subhuti, "This is how the bodhisattva mahasattvas master their thinking. However many species of living beings there are—whether born from eggs, from the womb, from moisture, or spontaneously; whether they have form or do not have form; whether they have perceptions or do not have perceptions; or whether it cannot be said of them that they have perceptions or that they do not have perceptions, we must lead all these beings to the ultimate nirvana so that they can be liberated. And when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.

Essentially, by realizing our true selves, we want to do good in the world, with unconditional love for all beings and existence.

7. Conclusions

Capitalism features selfish interests, an attachment to material wealth, and a competitive mindset that separates oneself from others. Buddhism elevates us above self-interest and our obsession with material gains. It further informs us of the higher truth, which is that we are not this physical being only, but are part of the interdependent web of life, which is what really matters.

Buddhism points the way out of the small house that we put ourselves into. The Buddhist eightfold path teaches us that we should transform our mind and heart with the practice of contemplation. This is an issue of identity, and of conceptualizing ourselves in relation to others, to nature, and to the whole universe, and in relation to our inner being, which is our higher being. Meditation has the impact of generating stronger vibrational energy in our brain (Church 2018), which allows us to tap into the higher reality and to grow our insight or wisdom. With wisdom, we will be able to see through the illusions that we hang on to, and to work for the common good. We can stop chasing after illusions and can focus on examining our life as it is. Suffering stops when we are able to see realities clearly, and when we work not only for our own self-interests. By joining the abundance of the universe to express our true selves, our highest selves, we experience a breathing and intelligent universe, and each being is a spirit that expresses its beautiful sacred nature in cooperation with others, working to make the universe a symphony of Joy and Love.

The realization of our true selves does not mean that we negate our individuality. In fact, in Buddhism, the belief is that we are very blessed to have a body because this body allows us to understand the workings of the universe, in slow motion, and to distill our spirit into pureness and loving. All the conditions on Earth are here to help us to purify ourselves and to reach our universal being. The Heart Sutra and the Diamond Sutra, thus, ask us to aspire to both the formless, empty self, as well as to the self now, which is grounded in the physical realm, by meeting the challenges of physicality and impermanence with courage in order to perform the work of Unconditional Love. The present moment is a wonderful moment.

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