

Article

Elusive Notions of Bodhisattvas: Personified, Idealized, Mystified, Naturalized, and Integral

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Abstract: This paper aims to juxtapose *bodhisattvas*, awakened beings recognized in various Buddhist traditions and contemporary philosophies, as viewed through different lenses: as personified symbols, idealistic visions, mystical manifestations, naturalized sentient beings, and integral visions. Specific attention is given to the contrasting *bodhisattva* motivations and ideals articulated in *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism as well as secularized psychospiritual–philosophical Western conceptions in neurophysicalism (naturalized *bodhisattva*) and participatory spirituality and theory (integral *bodhisattva*). The paradox of the traditional *bodhisattva* is to liberate oneself and all sentient beings by ending suffering and to act compassionately while realizing emptiness (Skt., *śūnyatā*), though with different conceptions undergirding ultimate realization. The paradoxical nature of *bodhisattvas* is discussed in regard to illusional ideation, moral agency, mystical nature, idealized devotion, and naturalized form. The ethical underpinnings of the traditional Buddhist *bodhisattva* notions and non-Buddhist ethics of Western *bodhisattva* conceptions are critically examined. Finally, the Buddhist and secular morals of *bodhisattvas* are discussed in the context of the moral relativism of the Post-Truth culture in the United States.

Keywords: *bodhisattva*; Buddhist ethics; Buddhist philosophy; participatory spirituality; neurophysicalism; *śūnyatā*; liberation; *Theravāda*; *Mahāyāna*



Academic Editors: David
Peter Lawrence and Song-Chong Lee

Received: 28 January 2025

Revised: 20 May 2025

Accepted: 5 June 2025

Published: 13 June 2025

Citation: Grunwald, Sabine. 2025. Elusive Notions of Bodhisattvas: Personified, Idealized, Mystified, Naturalized, and Integral. *Religions* 16: 764. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16060764>

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1. Introduction

The multiverse that *bodhisattvas* inhabit is populated by humans who became *bodhisattvas*, cosmic *bodhisattvas*, gruesome and friendly *bodhisattvas*, past and future buddhas, and servants on the path to liberation (Sanskrit (Skt.), *nirvāṇa*) to end suffering for all (Jennings 1996). Although there are many types of *bodhisattvas* that have been shaped by Buddhist and non-Buddhist views, they all adopt universal characteristics: avoidance of harmful actions, compassion, performance of virtuous deeds, and work for the benefit of all sentient beings (Dalai Lama 2018).

The *bodhisattva* has been studied scholarly through a Buddhist historical lens (Blofeld 2009; Drewes 2021; Kawamura 1981; Duckworth 2019a), epithets (Pelden 2007), Buddhist ethics (Garfield 2022a; Goodman 2009, 2019; Davis 2013), practices (Gold and Duckworth 2019; McLeod 2014), and textual analysis of sutras (Buddhist Text Translation Society 2014; Drewes 2021; Duckworth 2019a). However, novel perspectives of Western non-Buddhist conceptions of *bodhisattvas* have emerged. Surprisingly, the similarity and dissimilarity of Buddhist and non-Buddhist conceptions of *bodhisattvas* have not been explored in the literature. This article is the first to juxtapose *bodhisattvas* from the *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhist perspectives and two non-Buddhist philosophical, psychospiritual

perspectives, namely, neurophysicalism (Flanagan 2011) and participatory theory and spirituality (Ferrer 2017).

This paper juxtaposes *bodhisattvas* in their roles as personified symbols, idealistic visions, mystical manifestations, and naturalized sentient and integral beings. First, the typology of Buddhist *bodhisattvas* (*Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism) and personified, mystified, and idealized forms of *bodhisattvas* are given a voice. Historical Buddhist *bodhisattva* conceptions as well as their views regarding emptiness, compassion, and soteriological goals are presented, as they are relevant to understand *bodhisattva* motivations that inform ethical views. Second, non-Buddhist *bodhisattvas* rooted in neurophysicalism (naturalized *bodhisattva*) and participatory theory and spirituality (integral *bodhisattva*) are placed in juxtaposition to Buddhist *bodhisattvas*. Third, the interrelated and paradoxical moral, ethical, and prosocial underpinnings of traditional Buddhist *bodhisattvas* of the East and emerging contemporary non-Buddhist secularized *bodhisattvas* of the West are discussed. Finally, the case of contemporary morality and cultural perils in the U.S. are debated in the context of the ethics and morality that motivate *bodhisattvas*.

Compassion is recognized as a key tenet of *bodhisattva* conceptions and is inherently implicated as compassionate action in human and planetary flourishing (or lack thereof) in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist ethics (Mickey et al. 2017; Pelden 2007; VanderWeele 2017). The relations between the ethics of care and compassion undergirding traditional Buddhist *bodhisattva* notions and secular *bodhisattvas* (naturalized and integral *bodhisattvas*) have rarely been studied explicitly. In this article, the following thesis was investigated: *Mahāyāna* Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, rather than secular forms of *bodhisattvas*, evoke (1) a deeper level of transpersonal awareness, realize (2) all-encompassing compassion manifesting as (3) care and consequentialist (karmic) ethics that, inspire (4) human and planetary flourishing, with (5) the ultimate goal of liberating all sentient beings. Buddhist *bodhisattva* assertions cover a broad spectrum, ranging from personal (e.g., *arhat*) bio- to cosmos-centric views, extending compassion to all sentient beings in the universe, while secularized de-spiritualized religious conceptions have typically embraced eco- and anthropocentric views, with a specific focus on human flourishing (Grunwald 2023a, 2024).

Ferrer (2008, 2017) posited that human flourishing is associated with fuller expressions of heart-, mind-, body-, and vital-energy-enacting spiritual events (Ferrer 2008, 2017). According to Fowers et al. (2024), human flourishing is grounded in eudaimonic theory (flourishing or good living) and virtue traits as a way of contemporary life rather than a one-time achievement or subjective experience. Though authors have argued that flourishing must be made sufficiently capacious to accommodate the substantial cultural variation in flourishing conceptions. Whether Western *bodhisattva* conceptions evoke ethical views that are anthropocentric or extend toward eco-, bio-, cosmos- and/or metaphysics-centric notions is less studied and will be explored in this article.

The collision of traditional *bodhisattva* ethics and morals with contemporary Western ones poses serious concerns. In contemporary U.S. culture, Post-Truth philosophy associated with moral relativism has created social divides and dysfunctions and amplified human stresses, with harmful psychological impacts on people and communities that may constrain human flourishing (Mooney 2012), planetary flourishing, and environmental care (Airoboman 2021). Moral relativism, a position that endorses opposing views of the same action, lacks coherence and is prone to create cognitive dissonance in individuals (Levy 2002). Compassion and prosocial behaviors are undervalued in Post-Truth culture and moral relativism, which stand in stark contrast to traditional Buddhist *bodhisattva* morals. This moral schism between *bodhisattva* morals and contemporary moral relativism leads to moral distress, injuries, and fatigue, which inherently constrain compassionate action. According to Wong (2023), moral distress and moral injuries are perceived when

one's own moral consciousness and values are betrayed by sociopolitical, economic, and cultural actions that are perceived as harmful to oneself or others. What responses can *bodhisattvas* offer to moral distress and moral injuries? [Effron and Helgason \(2022\)](#) pointed out that perceived moral transgressions lead to moral disorientation, societal alienation, and psychospiritual personal impacts (e.g., perceived stress and depression) that limit human flourishing. The moral psychology in Post-Truth cultures is often experienced as chaotic and confusing blurring moral standards of “right” and “wrong” views. I present an inquiry into tensions between metaphysical, philosophical, and morally idealistic perspectives of *bodhisattvas* living in the contemporary U.S. Post-Truth culture.

2. Historical and Traditional Buddhist Bodhisattva Conceptions

2.1. Buddhist Bodhisattvas

The origin of *bodhisattvas* is found in Buddhism, and its meaning changed over time as different Buddhist traditions emerged—*Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, specifically the *Madhyamika* and *Yogācāra Mahāyāna* traditions. [Rowe \(2024\)](#) depicted the *bodhisattva* as an enlightened hero of compassion. A summary of *bodhisattva* typologies based on Buddhist *bodhisattva* conceptions is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Overview of *bodhisattva* typologies based on Buddhist and secular *bodhisattva* conceptions. The images of *Theravāda bodhisattva*, naturalized *bodhisattva*, and integral *bodhisattva* were generated using artificial intelligence (AI) using the University of Florida (UF) Information Technology Large Language Models, UF Navigator with GPT 4o, Dalle-E-3. The source of the image of the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva*: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wood_Bodhisattva.jpg, accessed on 4 June 2025 (Creative Common public license).

2.1.1. The Bodhisattva in Theravāda Buddhism

The “awakened being” (Sanskrit: *bodhi* (awake) and *sattva* (sentient being)) is one who is to become a Buddha according to the *nikāyas* of the Pāli Canon in *Theravāda* early Buddhism (Buswell and Lopez 2014). The term *bodhisattva* itself, however, has two connotations (Bhikkhu 2005): One refers to the general aspiration to attain future Buddhahood through sustained great compassion for living beings over many eons of cosmic time, which eventually culminates in boundless freedom. The other defines a *bodhisattva* as a human-incarnate Buddha who had to struggle and suffer to attain enlightenment, much like other human beings. An example illustrating the incorporation of these perspectives is Siddhartha Gautama, who is simultaneously seen as predestined from birth to attain Buddhahood based on countless previous lives and as having fulfilled the mission of being a world teacher (Bhikkhu 2005). The *bodhisattva* ideal in Theravāda is primarily restricted to the historical Buddha and few exceptional awakened beings (Samuels 1997).

According to Drewes (2021), historically, the oldest known account of a *bodhisattva* concept is found in the story of the future Buddha’s encounter, eons ago, with the Buddha Dīpaṃkara. Beginning with the *nikāya* and Theravāda texts (such as the *Suttanipāṭa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka* commentaries), the *bodhisattva*’s views focused on the length (from a hundred thousand shorter kappas, Skt. *asamkhyeya*, kalpa to innumerable (eons)) and conditions to attain Buddhahood. A later model, in the *Jinakālamālī* and other texts (from about the twelfth or thirteenth century), depicts the *bodhisattva*’s path in three stages, corresponding to progressively more concrete resolutions (Pali, *patthanā*): mental (*manasā*), verbal (*vacī*), and bodily and verbal (*kāyavacī*). These early *bodhisattva* accounts are complicated because they are impossible to fulfill, for example, to meet specific conditions in the presence of a living Buddha, “making a resolution and receiving a prediction (early *Theravāda* texts), making a resolution without receiving a prediction (*Sarvāstivāda* texts, *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayavastu*), forming a mental resolution (late *Theravāda* texts), or planting roots of merit (*Mahāvastu*).” (Drewes 2021, p. 152). Although all the known *nikāya* models of the path to Buddhahood ask for conditions that make it impossible to become a *bodhisattva* in this life, some Buddhists have tried to work around this restriction, asserting that (a) one must be reborn in the time of the next Buddha (Metteyya) and make a resolution in his presence, (b) dedicating acts of merit to the attainment of Buddhahood, (c) acknowledging the possibility that one might already have become one in a past life, and (d) claiming that they were already *bodhisattvas* because of performing “acts of truth” (Drewes 2021). However, these assertions stand somewhat in contrast to the idealized *bodhisattva* model.

In the *Theravāda* Buddhist tradition, the *bodhisattva* ideal is embodied in the *arhat* (Skt.), the purified saintly one who has transcended all desires, attachment, conditioning, and defilements in personal enlightenment (Leighton 2012). In other words, an *arhat* is an enlightened being who has attained liberation and realized emptiness of self (no-self (Skt. *anātman*); Buswell and Lopez 2014). The *Theravāda* teachings emphasize this lack of an inherent existence of the self and promote a belief in the mutual dependent co-arising of all phenomena, which is denoted as the first turning of the wheel of dharma (Leighton 2012). This view stands in contrast to the second turning of the wheel (i.e., emptiness of self and phenomena) based on the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* ideal. The third turning of the wheel of dharma points to the realization of Buddha Nature (Ray 2000). *Tathāgatagarbha* refers to the embryo or the essence of the *tathāgatas*, the one who has come/ gone, and refers to Buddha Nature or the potential to achieve Buddha Nature in *Mahāyāna* (Buswell and Lopez 2014).

The ability of the *bodhisattva* to attain emptiness of self is tied to the composition of sentient beings based on five aggregates (Skt., *skandhas*)—form (body), feelings, perceptions, karmic formations, and consciousness—in the *Abhidharma* of the Pāli Canon, one of the oldest *Theravāda* teachings (Khensur Rinpoche Jampa Tegchok 2012). These aggregates

are considered as phenomena; they are delusive illusions that obscure the attributeless and primordial Mind, which is considered to be without a beginning and without an end. The *Abhidharma* asserts that conventional existents have no intrinsic nature (Skt., *svabhāva*), whereas *dharmas*' ultimate existents have an intrinsic nature (Williams 2010). The traditional view of no self, as articulated in the *Theravāda* tradition, is arguably problematic because it creates a dichotomy between duality (phenomena) and nonduality (no self). This view has been ontologically critiqued because the subject and object are interdependent, and the subject cannot be eliminated without transforming the nature of the object (Loy 1998).

The oversimplified view that the inferior liberation goal in *Theravāda* is to become *arhats* following the path of disciples (Skt., *śrāvakas*) and lone or private buddhas (Skt., *pratyekabuddha*) while the superior liberation goal of *bodhisattvas* practicing in the *Mahāyāna* is to become buddhas is somewhat fallacious according to the Dalai Lama (2009b). *Theravāda* asserts that *arhats* attain personal enlightenment without extending the same opportunity to other beings, suggesting selfish interest to nirvanize. Therefore, the *arhat*'s realization of emptiness of self has been considered imperfect because they have yet to enter the *Mahāyāna* to progress toward the supreme ultimate goal of perfect omniscient Buddhahood (Dalai Lama 2009b; Williams 2010). These diverse notions of enlightenment point to the different levels of liberation—the ultimate nature (Skt., *dharmatā*; Pelden 2007)—the nonconceptual wisdom considered as the superior wisdom (Skt., *prajñā*; Brunnhölzl 2018).

The *Mahāyāna* pejoratively claims that the personal liberation of the *arhat* is selfish and inferior according to Leighton (2012) and Pelden (2007). Therefore, non-*Mahāyāna* forms of Buddhism come under critique because they are supposedly uncompassionate toward other beings trapped in the prison of cyclical existence (Skt., *saṃsāra*). However, this criticism is somewhat contentious because *Theravāda*, like most Buddhist traditions, acknowledges the Four Immeasurables (Pāli, *brahma-vihāra*) with the intention of bringing happiness to all. The practice of self-compassion through meditation and devotional rituals is prominent in various Buddhist traditions, for example, Pure Land Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. Although Clayton (2018) and Nattier (2003) pointed out that the more limited focus of an *arhat* to achieve enlightenment through the vehicle of the solitary buddhas (Skt., *pratyekayāna*) without the benefit of a buddha's teaching is only great compassion (Skt., *mahākaruṇā*), but it is not universal compassion directed toward all beings as in the *Mahāyāna* tradition (Hamilton 1950). The discerning factor between the somewhat tainted *arahant* ideal in the *Theravāda* and the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* ideal is the amplification of all-encompassing compassion in the latter (Gethin 1998).

The Pāli Canon of the *Theravāda* is ambiguous about the ability of the *arhat* in regard to partial and perfect enlightenments. In the *Buddhavaṃsa* scripture, the *arhat*'s *bodhisattva* vow is to become a completely enlightened buddha but only after *arhat*ship is within reach (Samuels 1997). The *Theravāda bodhisattva* ideal is developed to the greatest extent in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, based on both compassion (Skt., *karuṇā*) for all sentient beings and meritorious acts that go beyond personal ambitions to liberate (Samuels 1997). The *bodhisattva* ideal, as described in the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka*, requires the cultivation of 10 perfections (Pāli, *pāramī*; Sanskrit, *pāramitā*) (Goodman 2017; Samuels 1997). According to Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*, the cultivation of the Four Immeasurables allows *bodhisattvas* to develop the *pāramitās* to the fullest (Goodman 2017). These assertions suggest that *arhats*, like *bodhisattvas* in the *Mahāyāna*, cultivate prosocial emotions extending the self beyond egocentric liberation goals. For example, the most recited scripture in *Theravāda*-dominant Southeast Asia is the *Metta Sūta* (Discourse of Lovingkindness; Goodman 2017).

Bodhisattvas in the Pāli Canon may also refer to past buddhas remembered by the historical Buddha, such as Vipassī, and future buddhas, such as Maitreya, a fully awakened

arhat (Samuels 1997). This expanded view of the *Theravāda bodhisattva* is expressed in the *Khuddakapāṭha* through its assertion of the *bodhisattva-yāna* (Skt., *yāna*, denoting “vehicle”). The *Theravāda bodhisattva* ideal was prevalent among all the schools of sectarian Buddhism in the period preceding *Mahāyāna* Buddhism’s emergence in the first and second centuries CE—an emergence that was formed out of opposition to *Theravāda* doctrines (Bhikkhu 2005).

2.1.2. The *Bodhisattva* in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism

Mahāyāna texts divide the path into three stages, corresponding to *bodhisattvas* who are “first set out in the vehicle” (Skt. *prathamayānasamprasthita*), “irreversible” (Skt., *avinivartanīya*), and “bound by one birth” (Skt., *ekajātīpratibaddha*), that is, destined to attain Buddhahood in their very next lives (Drewes 2021). Early *Mahāyāna* texts depicted the status of new or recent *bodhisattvas* as being largely meaningless asserting that, they had already received a prediction in a past life or had at least gotten close to this point according to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*.

In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the *bodhisattva* ideal becomes applicable to all beings, including lay practitioners. *Mahāyāna* asserts that the *bodhisattva* is a person who is able to attain full *nirvāṇa* (Skt.), the soteriological goal of the Buddhist path. The *bodhisattva* aims for the attainment of Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, the number of which is as infinite as the vastness of space, which is denoted as *mahāsattva* (Great Being or Great *Bodhisattva*, Pelden 2007; Williams 2010). According to the *Mahāyāna* view, the Buddhas have extirpated the self and never again return to *saṃsāra* (Pelden 2007). Though Buddhas are requested not to pass into *nirvāṇa* but to remain for many countless kalpas in verse 6, *Taking Hold of Bodhicitta* in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, one of the most well-known *Mahāyāna Sūtra* (Chödrön 2018; Shantideva 2011). Such a view is consistent with the *upāsaka Chunda*, claiming that some Buddhas may not pass into *nirvāṇa* for months, while other Buddhas may pass fully into *nirvāṇa*, residing in the pure field of the ten directions (Pelden 2007). *Bodhisattvas* have choices; for example, they can make themselves be reborn in the Buddha Field of a Buddha or deliberately travel there in absorbed samadhi meditation (Williams 2010). The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* states that if one only focuses on emptiness (Skt., *śūnyatā*) in the pursuit of Buddhahood, one has not yet been predicted (to become a *bodhisattva*), while skillful means (Skt. *upāyakauśalya*) and the thought of not abandoning all beings makes the *bodhisattva* irreversible and unable to regress from supreme and perfect awakening. The *Akṣobhya-vyūha Sūtra* and *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi Sūtra* relax expectations, stating that even hearing, memorizing, retaining, and learning the dharma discourse enables *bodhisattvas* to be born in the Buddhafield (i.e., to be known as irreversible *bodhisattvas*). These relaxed expectations of just hearing and listening to the dharma are conveyed in numerous *Mahāyāna* texts, such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* and *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa Sūtra*, overcoming the impossible expectation of a living buddha in the world to even enter the *bodhisattva* path that was prevalent in the *Theravāda* (Drewes 2021). Thus, *Mahāyāna* helped to democratize and broaden the path to dharma practitioners.

The *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* motivation is rooted in the arising of *bodhicitta* (Skt.: *bodhi*, “enlightenment” + *citta*, “mind” or “heart”), which refers to “the Mind of Enlightenment or Awakening Mind” (Williams 2010, p. 195) or the spirit of awakening (Duckworth 2019a). *Bodhicitta* is the most crucial in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism as an innate universal principle meaning the intention or the thought of enlightenment, though it still needs to be cultivated (Buswell and Lopez 2014). According to Duckworth (2023), ultimate *bodhicitta* is realizing the unconditioned, unborn nature of reality, while relative *bodhicitta* is the means by which this comes to be. This twofold distinction suggests two directions in which a *bodhisattva*’s practice takes shape: (a) a “top-down” approach through meditative practices that dis-

close pure reality, which is already present but obscured by clouds beyond an ordinary being's comprehension (transcendence, liberation), and (b) a "bottom-up" approach, which entails directed training and discipline, breaking through the cycle of suffering through compassion (immanence, awakening).

"In this kind of "top-down" approach to awakening, it may no longer be correct to say that "deluded individuals have buddha-nature" or that "individuals become buddhas;" rather, it might be more accurate to say that buddhas just appear to be deluded individuals and that all living beings are simply buddhas in the process of waking up from this delusion. That is, rather than saying that buddha-nature is within sentient beings, we can more properly say that sentient beings are within buddha-nature, in the sense that it is buddhas who appear as and for sentient beings. In the same vein, it no longer holds that ordinary beings become buddhas, but rather, that buddhas become buddhas". (Duckworth 2023, p. 96)

Bodhicitta refers to the altruistic aspiration to perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings (Williams 2010). To abandon *bodhicitta* is the gravest and most negative of all the possible downfalls of a *bodhisattva* (Pelden 2007). In Patrül Rinpoche's teachings of the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, the cultivation of *bodhicitta* was emphasized as follows:

"May the precious spirit of awakening
Arise where it has not arisen,
Where it has arisen, may it not dissipate,
But further and further increase". (Duckworth 2019b)

Initially, the *bodhisattva* intentionally cultivates *bodhicitta* (relative or conventional *bodhicitta*) and actively engages in the *bodhisattva* path and activities, while ultimate ("subtle") *bodhicitta* is attained through the recognition of ultimate reality (Pelden 2007). *Relative bodhicitta* refers to the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings together with the practices to achieve this goal (Buswell and Lopez 2014; Shantideva 2011). This kind of *bodhicitta* is associated with the aspiring *bodhisattva* who shows increased awareness of the suffering of others, with feelings of sympathy, empathy, compassion, and kindness (Ray 2000). Ultimate *bodhicitta* is the wisdom of emptiness (Skt., *śūnyatā*), the direct realization of the true nature of phenomena, which is an immediate nondual insight beyond conceptualization (Shantideva 2011). The fully realized *bodhisattva* embodies *ultimate bodhicitta*, which is the recognition of the illusory or empty nature of both self and phenomena that point to two veils of emptiness (Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche 2013; Ray 2000).

Importantly, relative and ultimate *bodhicitta* are viewed as interdependent aspects of the same thing—the realization of the wisdom of emptiness and perfect compassion, as form is emptiness and emptiness is form (Shantideva 2011), while the two truths of the relative and ultimate are also distinct and identical at the same time. As Pelden (2007) stated, "It is incorrect to say that the two truths are distinct on the ultimate level or that they are one and the same at the relative level" (p. 315). Śāntideva's *Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*) is an expose of the *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way) school of Buddhism, which explores the profound benefits of *bodhicitta*, how to generate *bodhicitta* and reduce suffering of *saṃsāra*, while carefulness, vigilant introspection, and patience prevent *bodhicitta* from weakening. Intensifying *bodhicitta* through diligence and meditative concentration and committing to the *bodhisattva* vow result in merit for the benefit of all suffering beings (Pelden 2007). The fruition of the *bodhisattva* path is wisdom (i.e., the direct realization of emptiness). The *tathāgata* (Skt., *tathā*, "thus" + *gata*, "gone"; or *agata*, "come") proclaims truth from the middle position, refuting all views (of 'is' and that of 'is not') as being ultimately real.

Prajñā (Skt., wisdom) refers to the immediate, intuitive insight into suchness, the wisdom of emptiness beyond subject and object (Shantideva 2011).

All *Mādhyamikas* deny the ultimate existence through logic and negation, asserting that all dharmas are empty of intrinsic existence (Skt., *svabhāva*). However, in the *Svātantrika* (“Autonomous”) tradition, *Madhyamaka*, represented by Bhāviveka, maintains intrinsic nature conventionally, while in the *Prāsaṅgika* (“Consequentialist”) tradition, *Madhyamaka*, represented by Śāntideva, Candrakīrti, and Tsongkhapa, claims that all dharmas—conventional and ultimate—are empty of inherent intrinsic existence (“emptiness of emptiness”). These ontological views stand in contrast to the earlier doctrine of the *Abhidharma* (e.g., *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* or *Lokānuvartanā Sūtra*) which had posited that conventional existents (Skt., *rūpa-dharma*, such as tables, chairs, and persons) are mental constructs constantly changing (implying impermanence) in a continuous stream as a result of causes and conditions grounded in the philosophical view of dependent origination (Skt., *pratītyasamutpāda*). According to the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, intrinsic nature is only held to be in ultimate existents (Ronkin 2018; Williams 2010).

The *Ugraparipṛcchā sūtra* (the Inquiry of Ugra), which comprises a dialog about the *bodhisattva* path, represents one of the earliest *Mahāyāna sūtras* (Nattier 2003). According to the *Ugra sūtra*, the goal is supreme perfect enlightenment (Buddhahood), viewed as a heroic path that avoids the *śrāvaka* path of the *arhat*, which pre-emptively empties Buddhahood. The *Ugra* is reserved for monastic *bodhisattvas* devoted to renunciate worldly life and dedicated to meditation and devotional practices in the wilderness, detached from other people, in solitary isolation. The supramundane goals of the *Ugra bodhisattva* path resemble the superhero of Buddhahood according to Clayton (2018). A more mature stage of *Mahāyāna* is attributed to Śāntideva, with two key texts, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* “The Entrance to the Way of Awakening” and the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, the latter focused on righteous conduct for the enlightenment of the aspirant *bodhisattva* (Goodman 2016b; Clayton 2018). Śāntideva proposed the *bodhisattva* vow, cultivating the *bodhisattva* mindset, and the practice of the perfections to achieve full awakening and realize universal compassion for all, which is dependent on insights into emptiness (Clayton 2018).

3. Philosophical and Psychospiritual Views of Buddhist Bodhisattvas

3.1. Buddhist Philosophical Views—No-Self, Emptiness, Personhood, Buddha Nature

In this section, *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhist philosophical views are explored, focusing on the conceptions of no-self, emptiness, personhood, and Buddha Nature. These constructs provide the moral foundation that informs how Buddhist *bodhisattvas* are supposed to live life (the path), understand themselves as personified *bodhisattvas* (personhood and spiritual role models with specific epithets), aspire to realize (the ultimate spiritual goals, such as *nirvāṇa*), and act accordingly as moral beings. There are nuanced differences in view in regard to emptiness and Buddha Nature in Buddhist traditions that either reify spiritual ultimates into a metaphysical absolute (perennial view) or assert the dynamic unfolding of spiritual realizations.

The twofold emptiness of the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* expands the *Theravāda* concept of emptiness. The first fold of the twofold veil of the *Mahāyāna* is the egolessness of self, which means that the “I” or “me” has no inherent existence and is, thus, considered illusory (no-self; Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche 2010; Ray 2000). The second veil is the egolessness of phenomena (e.g., things, thoughts, and mental perceptions), which are also seen as empty—without intrinsic existence (causally independent). All phenomena are posited to be nonconceptual and disjunct from the ideas that one projects upon them. In other words, they are constructed but do not represent true reality. The emptiness of self and phenomena is not mere nothingness (nihilism); instead, emptiness, here, means that

phenomena exist in a realm beyond identification or conceptualization and also that they have an interdependent vs. independent existence, according to the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Heart) *Sūtra* (Khensur Rinpoche Jampa Tegchok 2012). The paradox is that despite the emptiness of self and phenomena, they nonetheless exist from a relative worldly perspective. This paradox was addressed by Nāgārjuna's Middle Way, claiming that relative and ultimate emptiness are the same thing (Garfield 1995). Nāgārjuna refuted any intrinsic nature of reality (Skt., *svabhāva*), positioning his view of emptiness between absolutism and nihilism. In essence, the Middle Way avoids all reifying views and supports a radical openness to reality (cf. Ferrer 2002).

Is a *bodhisattva* still a person if that person is empty? The *bodhisattva* is a person who suffers and experiences happiness like other human beings going through life and the cyclic existence of rebirth. Despite the no-self position, the person's existence is affirmed as a complex, constructed, socially embedded psychophysical being (Garfield 2022b; Garfield et al. 2025). It is believed in *Mahāyāna* that the selflessness of a person (and a *bodhisattva* as a person) means lack of a self-sufficient, substantial existent self, thereby rejecting the view of the existence of a permanent, unitary (with no parts), and independent self. The person (self) is interpreted differently among Buddhist schools. For example, in the view of the *Vaibhāṣika* school, the self depends on the five aggregates, while it is considered a continuum of the aggregates and the existence of mental consciousness in the *Sautrāntika* school of Buddhism. In contrast, the *Cittamātra* school of Buddhism asserts that only the mind is real (Khensur Rinpoche Jampa Tegchok 2012).

The nonduality of the three bodies (Skt., *kāyas*) dissolves the paradoxical situation of the empty nature of the *bodhisattva* in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism (Perrett 1986). In the realization of Buddha Nature, the *bodhisattva* experiences simultaneously the emptiness of the *dharmakāya* (Skt., truth body, which is considered the body of Ultimate reality), the permanence of the *saṃbhogakāya* (Skt., complete enjoyment body, which is the energetic body produced from subtle energies), and the body form of the *nirmāṇakāya* (Skt., a physical manifestation of the Buddha in the form of a gross body; Powers 2007). In such states of nonduality, there is no distinction between subject and object, between form (body) and formlessness (emptiness; Loy 2015)—the *buddhakāya* (Skt., body of the buddha) based on *Mahāyāna* conceptions is realized. From a contemporary psychospiritual perspective, the subject–object union of the tri-*kāyas* implies unified disembodiment–embodiment, in which the subject embodies one's personhood completely, being fully present in the living (human) body and everything that is perceived (Grunwald 2021).

In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, Buddha Nature is not reserved for the *bodhisattva*. It is claimed to be available for all sentient beings in two types: (a) the naturally abiding Buddha Nature, which is the empty nature of the mind (unchanging, immanent Buddha Nature) and (b) the transforming Buddha Nature, which comprises all the impermanent qualities of the mind that can be further developed, gradually becoming the omniscient mind of the Buddha. The emptiness of inherent existence of a person's mind is considered to be Buddha Nature, which refers to the metaphysical nature of something that is inconceivable and inexpressible, existing as clear light (Khensur Rinpoche Jampa Tegchok 2012). *Mahāyāna* Buddhism makes a truth claim of Buddha Nature as immanent and universal that is available as a potential for awakening, right now and here (Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche 2010; Powers 2007).

Views of Buddha Nature differ among Buddhist schools. In the *Geluk* tradition, Buddha Nature is defined as the emptiness of the mind, the mind's absence of essence, innate, unconditional, and all-pervasive, with nothing remaining, not even as presence of the qualities of the Buddha in sentient beings, because everything is empty (a total negation of everything). In contrast, the *Jonang* tradition depicts Buddha Nature as the unconditional ground of all being by asserting that this primordial wisdom is always present within all

beings (Duckworth 2014a). The *Dzogchen* Buddhist school of Mipham critiqued this kind of ‘static emptiness’ because it is derived merely through the negation of essence (self and phenomena), resulting in a naïve metaphysical presence. Although Mipham accepted that the qualities of a buddha are primordial, he asserted a ‘dynamic nature of emptiness’, that is, an inconceivable unity of both appearance and emptiness (Pettit 1999). In Mipham’s view, emptiness is interpreted as the absence of cultural constructs that are deconstructed to know the truth, whereas Buddha Nature carries the notion of an emptiness that is dynamically constructed as the ground of all of one’s ideas. The unity of emptiness and appearances is perceived as an alive cognitive presence and an expressive activity that can be understood as a synthesis of emptiness (ontology) and Buddha Nature (theology), resulting in ontotheology (Duckworth 2014a). This view implies that Buddha Nature is not a transcendent truth that is the same for all *bodhisattvas*, suggesting that there is no Absolute Buddha Nature; rather, the truth is discovered in the unfolding process of life, manifesting in acts of expression as the outflow of creative energy (Duckworth 2014a; Pettit 1999).

3.2. Personified, Idealized, and Mystified Bodhisattvas

Here, various prominent typologies of Buddhist *bodhisattvas* are presented that are relevant to better understand *bodhisattva* ethics inspiring *bodhisattvas* to compassionate selfless actions. A variety of interpretations of Buddhist *bodhisattvas* exist, ranging from idealizing them as transpersonal consciousness beyond ordinary human perception mystifying them as metaphysical phenomena, idealizing them as archetypal *bodhisattvas* with psychospiritual qualities, or personifying them as spiritual beings or worldly human beings. These multiple *bodhisattva* conceptions highlight that there is not only one specific *bodhisattva* in Buddhism but many different ones. These *bodhisattva* Buddha conceptions espouse both dynamic constructivist elements (“the *bodhisattva* in the development of becoming a buddha, or the process of realizing Buddha Nature”) and reified perennialist elements (“the *bodhisattva* is a buddha, or sentient beings are within Buddha Nature”).

In the *Mahāyāna*, the stages of the *bodhisattva* path (Skt., *bhūmis*) to attain *nirvāṇa* follow a hierarchical structure of purification. Although the 10 stages to Buddhahood (described in the *Avatamsaka* (Flower Ornament) *Sūtra*; Cleary 1993) provide a general direction toward awakening, the meaning of *nirvāṇa* differs significantly among Buddhist traditions. Such differences among the Buddhist schools and traditions fall into multiple ontological and epistemological typologies dependent whether *nirvāṇa* is interpreted as a single Truth or multiple truths (i.e., the existence of different kinds of *nirvāṇas* or different kinds of nondualities). Ferrer (2002) outlined the ontological and epistemological perennial typologies for the study of religion, spirituality, and mysticism. The esotericist typology assumes that there is only one goal (e.g., one specific *nirvāṇa*) while admitting many different paths exist to realize the goal (e.g., different Buddhist traditions and meditation and compassion practices). In contrast, the structuralist typology conceptualizes one path and one goal, while perspectivist typology asserts the existence of many different paths and many goals. The latter assumes that there are different perspectives or manifestations of the same ultimate reality (e.g., via Eastern Buddhism and Western contemporary forms of Buddhism/Buddhist Modernism).

For example, solitary personal enlightenment is strived for in *Theravāda*, while the awakening of the *bodhisattva* to Buddha Nature and twofold emptiness are sought for in *Mahāyāna*, esoteric *Vajrayāna*, and *Dzogchen* Buddhism (Ray 2000). *Bodhisattvas* in Pure Land Buddhism vow to create celestial paradises on reaching Buddhahood; a popular example of a Pure Land paradise is *Sukhavati*, created by the *bodhisattva* Amitabha, in which awakened human beings can find liberation (Leighton 2012). The plurality of liberating nondualities in various Buddhist traditions, such as the *Madhyamaka* and the *Yogācāra*

schools of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, was discussed in detail by Loy (1998). *Madhyamaka* takes an extreme epistemological stance refuting all philosophical positions while claiming that the Absolute truth is emptiness and that even emptiness does not in itself constitute an absolute reality. This tradition recognizes that everything is impermanent and devoid of self or essence and that this emptiness does not constitute an absolute reality in itself. In comparison, the *Yogācāra* Buddhist school asserts the identity of subject and object. It claims Mind-Only (Skt., *cittamātra*), implying that only mind or consciousness exist. *Yogācāra* views the apparently objective world not as a projection of ego consciousness. Rather, the delusive bifurcation between subject and object arises within nondual Mind (Loy 1983, 1998). According to Duckworth (2019a), the *Yogācāra* emphasizes a phenomenological approach to infer on the irreducible and inexpressible lived world as experienced, while the *Madhyamaka* adopts deconstructive ontology to infer on the absence of intrinsic nature. Such diversity among the traditions has spawned numerous expressions of *bodhisattvas*, including historical personified forms, idealized deities, and mystified figures, as expressions of energetic and cosmic realities.

One prominent view is that *bodhisattvas* are beings, such as Siddhārtha Gautama, who awakened as Śākyamuni Buddha and dedicated himself to the universal awakening of all beings (Leighton 2012). According to Buddhist beliefs, the Buddha was a historical human being who had found the path to total freedom (Vessantara 2003). The *Jātaka* tales recount that the Buddha reincarnated in many different forms as a *bodhisattva* on the path to Buddhahood (Williams 2010). Śākyamuni Buddha asserted in the *Mahāyāna Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (Lotus) *Sūtra* that he, the corporeal human Buddha, is in fact the embodiment of a universal *Buddha* reality that can materialize simultaneously in many forms at numerous places and times throughout the cosmos (Kubo and Yuyama 2007). The Buddha stated that he is truly eternal and omniscient and has taught countless *bodhisattvas* in the remote past. The Lotus *Sūtra* exemplifies the dimension of cosmic Buddhahood that transcends ordinary ego consciousness, which is beyond space and time conceptions (metaphysical *bodhisattva*). The great cosmic *bodhisattva* figures intentionally descend and incarnate in human bodies for some specific temporary purpose. On the other hand, the Lotus *Sūtra* points to the mortality of the historical Buddha as an ordinary person and not as a superhuman being (Leighton 2012). A variety of different *bodhisattva* types were described in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, mirroring different types of *bodhicitta*—a herder, a ferryman, and a king. As the herder type, the *bodhisattva* first delivers all others to enlightenment before entering enlightenment oneself, like a herder takes care of his flock, while as the ferryman *bodhisattva* type, the ferryman and the passengers arrive together at the shore of enlightenment. As the king *bodhisattva* type, the *bodhisattva* reaches enlightenment first and then helps others to attain it as well, just like a king first ascends to the throne and then benefits other beings (Buswell and Lopez 2014). The nature of the world as seen by buddhas is characterized as the intercausal and interbeing *dharmadhātu* (Skt.), the Absolute realm, Dharma realm (or cosmos) of emptiness—an expression of Mind, out of which reality arises, according to the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Cleary 1993). In summary, the mortal, karmic, samsaric truth and the cosmic primordial truth culminate simultaneously within the *bodhisattva* Buddha, espousing both constructivist and perennialist elements. The latter points to the perennialist absolute truth claim, with the culmination of the *bodhisattva* becoming Buddha and realizing *nirvāṇa*, while constructivist elements point to the relative aspects of human faculties bound to codependent origination, interdependence, and karmic cycles of suffering—a *bodhisattva* in development.

The archetypal, idealized *bodhisattva* figures live and evolve as dynamic embodiments of Buddhist life. *Bodhisattvas* viewed as archetypes are both germane external entities to venerate internal psychic forces serving as potentialities to be realized within the heart,

touching on the *citta* aspect on the path to liberation. As archetypes, *bodhisattvas* are fundamental models of the dominant psychic aspects of the enlightened being, each emphasizing specific aspects of awakening. They combine internal energies and external forces assumed to provide encouragement and support to Buddhist practitioners (Leighton 2012). East Asian Buddhist schools recognize various *bodhisattvas* who resemble wholesome qualities of compassion, loving-kindness, and gratitude. These Buddha deities are personified symbols of the *bodhisattva* ideal and, at the same time, mystical manifestations. Some of them are documented historical figures, such as Mañjuśrī, the *bodhisattva* of wisdom and insight, who expounds emptiness and cuts through delusion. Others, for example, *Avalokiteśvara*, the androgynous *bodhisattva*, embody compassion and empathy (Vessantara 2003). Maitreya is considered as a *bodhisattva* whom the historical Buddha predicted would become the next incarnate buddha in a distant future (Leighton 2012). Personified *bodhisattva* deities embody enlightened and prosocial qualities as virtues, serving as symbols for awakening (Vessantara 2003). Sky dancers (Skt., *dākinīs*) are also recognized as *bodhisattvas* in Tibetan *Tantra*, resembling wisdom, emptiness, and spiritual goals (Simmer-Brown 2001). *Bodhisattvas* personified as real-world contemporary human beings (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, embodying *bodhisattva* qualities of Tara Vasuda, or Maya Tiwari, a teacher of Ayurveda, a humanitarian, a health and peace activist, and an author, embodying the *bodhisattva* qualities of Tara Ushnisha Vijaya) bring them into the social worldly space and are inspirational for *bodhisattva* practitioners (Easton 2023).

Idealized and mystical *bodhisattvas* contrast with ordinary embodied *bodhisattvas*, who vow to live human life based on ethical principles, such as “do no harm and help others”. The idealized principles by which mystical *bodhisattvas* abide transcend human ego narratives because they appear unachievable for ordinary human beings (Harvey 2000). For ordinary people, livelihood involves manifold harmful situations because of social injustice, gender disparity, discrimination, traumatic experiences, and living in war zones or extreme poverty and deprivation. Irrespective of life’s challenges, a key commitment to the path of awakening is the inconceivable *bodhisattva* vow:

“Living beings are infinite; I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to cut through them.

Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable; I vow to realize it.”. (Leighton 2012, p. 33)

The *bodhisattva* ideal embraces to free every single being in space and time from suffering, including loved ones, neutral people, strangers, enemies, and even mosquitos and viruses (e.g., coronavirus) that may bring great harm to a person. This vow seems out of reach for ordinary human beings, who are immersed in delusions about self and other because of the attachment and grasping inherent in everyday life. The gateway to the truth of the *dharma* (teachings) opens to the *bodhisattva* through the arduous study of reality through every person and every situation—an arguably /apparently seemingly impossible task. To become a fully realized Buddha and awaken to the truth of reality seems to be inconceivable (Leighton 2012). A response to the claim that the *bodhisattva* path is unattainable or pointless is provided by the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, which asserts that the *Mahāyāna* path is the path of accumulation through ardent habituation to realize emptiness. The path of the *bodhisattva* is to take refuge in the spirit of awakening according to the *Praise to the Basic Field of Reality* (Dharmadhātustotra; Duckworth 2019b). The *bodhisattva* discerns between taking refuge (in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha) and *bodhicitta*, with the former corresponding to the aim to free oneself for the benefit of oneself (the *arhat* ideal) and the latter aimed at the benefit of others (the *Mahāyāna* ideal). The refuge in the Three Jewels is viewed as a provisional causal refuge, whereby one pledges

oneself to aspire to attain Buddhahood; however, the ultimate refuge is the resultant refuge in *bodhicitta*, with a resolution to act for the sake of all beings (Pelden 2007). Taking refuge is the attempt to purify oneself from the illusion of a solid, personal self, whereas *bodhicitta* transforms the wish of the *bodhisattva*'s ideal into unending spontaneous action for the sake of others (Buswell and Lopez 2014).

In summary, in Buddhism, multiple assertions of *bodhisattvas* are recognized, including (1) idealized *bodhisattvas* in the form of spiritual deities with specific epithets, (2) mystified *bodhisattvas* as metaphysical phenomena with symbolic character traits, (3) idealized archetypal *bodhisattvas* that emphasize psychological energies and psychospiritual feeling tones, and (4) personified *bodhisattvas* with specific psychospiritual qualities and virtues. Importantly, Buddhist *bodhisattvas* are many not only one.

4. Non-Buddhist Bodhisattvas

The Buddhist notion of the *bodhisattva* has inspired various contemporary Western conceptualizations of the *bodhisattva*. These secularized *bodhisattvas* include the naturalized *bodhisattva* and the integral *bodhisattva* (Figure 1). Secularizing means enculturating classical *bodhisattva* conceptions into the cultural context (e.g., in the United States of America and other Western countries), which is distinctly different from cultures in which *bodhisattva* typology historically emerged (such as in Indo-Tibet and other regions in Southeast Asia). The secularization process involves hybridization with some of the traditional *bodhisattva* epithets, psychospiritual and metaphysical conceptions, and/or philosophical view of the nature of *bodhisattvas* mixing with new interpretations from the recipient culture. Secularizing Buddhism involves the risk of the misappropriation of Buddhist conceptions. Though secularizing Buddhist *bodhisattvas* may make traditional religious *bodhisattva* models more accessible to people in the West. A vibrant discussion of secularizing Buddhism was presented by Gleig (2019), Grunwald (2024), and Payne (2021). In the literature, the secularization of the Buddhist philosophy has mainly focused on mindfulness meditation and metaphysical religious constructs. The following sections of this article will fill this research gap and present secularized forms of classical *bodhisattvas* that emerged in the East.

4.1. Naturalized Bodhisattvas

A *naturalized bodhisattva* was proposed to provide a naturalistic, demystified, and empirical expression of the *bodhisattva* (Flanagan 2011). The naturalized *bodhisattva* is situated within Western philosophy and refers to a “reductionist” version of Buddhism without transcendent and mystical states of mind, without deities, without cultural imprints, and with minimalist metaphysics. This perspective is grounded in neurophysicalism, which posits that mental events are brain events or, at least, bodily events; and that the subjective character of the experience is explained completely by the nervous system inside the person's body. The rationale behind the naturalized *bodhisattva* is the scientific method prominently adopted in Western cultures. Flanagan (2011) argued that scientific naturalism and analytical philosophy are bound to measurable facts, allowing one to explain the truth about reality and what is knowable. Flanagan posited that the positive prosocial outcomes of the *bodhisattva* path, specifically, happiness, eudaimonia, and social engagement, are inspiring for those human beings living in a disembodied and disenchanting contemporary material world. The benefits of meditation practice are relaxation, wellness, and health.

In the United States and other Western countries, the neurophysicalism view is prominent, especially in biomedical sciences. Neuroscience and neuropsychology (Kolb and Whishaw 2021) are grounded in the philosophy of Descartes' dualism, perceiving the mind and body as separate entities. Neurophysicalism is bound to solely materialistic views of the human brain and nervous system, including sensory receptors and neural relays.

Brain-imaging technology and electroencephalograms (EEGs) are used to study neural activity and brain pathology. The neurophysicalist model views mind states as epiphenomena of the brain (i.e., mental states are byproducts of brain activity). According to Grosso (2015), for physicalists everything is material or physical, while mental or metaphysical phenomena are denied to exist (e.g., subtle energies, spiritual deities or beings, and Buddha Nature). Neurophysicalism describes the functions of the brain and nervous system as organs of transmission that filter and transmit mental forms of the conscious experience. The implications are that the neurophysicalist view and religious beliefs are exclusive and devoid of religious and spiritual interpretations (Varela 1996; Varela et al. 2016). The scientific and religious communities have long been at odds over scientific attempts to explain religious experiences (Yaden and Newberg 2016). Rosmarin et al. (2022) pointed out that research investigating spirituality/religion and neurobiological correlates has been extremely thin because of differences in philosophical views and research methodologies.

Neurophysicalism has driven the study of emotions and prosocial effects in Western science. Prosocial behaviors, such as compassion, altruism, helping, cooperation, and care, have been extensively studied using quantitative research methods limited to social science, psychology, and neuroscience (Dovidio et al. 2012). For example, positive associations among altruistic love, empathy, compassion, and religiosity/spirituality expressions have been identified (Mahipalan 2022; Mikulincer and Shaver 2010; Thomas et al. 2019). Importantly, these studies define emotions (e.g., compassion and empathy) as psychological constructs devoid of spiritual/religious or metaphysical interpretation.

Ferrer (2017) argued in favor of an openness of science to so-called supernatural claims in transpersonal psychology and adamantly against reliance on a purely scientific approach that would limit the exploration of a possibly multidimensional cosmos. In his view, a naturalistic approach is tied to neo-Kantian dualistic epistemology, which prematurely limits the exploration of alternative participatory approaches. Similarly, Grunwald (2024) critiqued the naturalistic, reductionistic view of Buddhist *bodhisattvas* as physicalist misappropriations, which lack the fullness of psychospiritual dimensions and Buddhists' liberative goals. As Buddhists' mindfulness has been misappropriated as McM mindfulness (Grunwald 2024; Walsh 2017) and unconditional, all-encompassing Buddhist compassion has been McDonaldized as McBody (Grunwald 2024). A naturalized *bodhisattva* may appeal to Western contemporary-science-oriented and materialistic culture; however, it represents a misunderstood version of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* models, which can be called McBuddhism. A naturalized *bodhisattva* model is antithetical to the theoretical, practical, and ethical framework of Buddhism underlying the *bodhisattva* path irrespective of different Buddhist traditions and schools. Likewise, MacKenzie (2014) critiqued the naturalized *bodhisattva* concept, arguing that Flanagan (2011) seriously jettisoned and distorted the inner logic of the Buddhist tradition, radically reinterpreting it to fit neurophysicalism.

4.2. Integral Bodhisattvas

The *integral bodhisattva* and its foundation of embodied spirituality are situated in participatory theory, promoting the collaborative participation of various human attributes in the enactment of spiritual phenomena (Ferrer 2017). According to this view, "an integral *bodhisattva's* conscious mind renounces its own full liberation until the body and the primary world can be free as well" (Ferrer 2006, p. 45). Such an embodied spirituality views "all human dimensions—body, vital, heart, mind, and consciousness—as equal partners in bringing self, community, and world into a fuller alignment with the mystery out of which everything arises" (Ferrer 2017, p. 74). This whole-person psychospirituality is focused on the integration of all human dimensions, without subjugating, disembodiment, or detaching from any of them. Ferrer (2008) stated that embodied spirituality seeks the integration of

matter and consciousness, potentially resulting in a state of “conscious matter”. This view takes a pluralist stance, leaving radically open possibilities for dynamically cocreating the mystery through a multitude of religions and spiritualities (Ferrer 2002, 2011). The enactions of such a mystery can take the form of metaphysical states in Buddhism, such as the three *kāyas*, emptiness, nondual states of consciousness, and pure awareness. ‘Integration’ in participatory spirituality refers to the creative interplay of consciousness and energy while experiencing the fullness of experience in the human body. Coherence, attunement, and groundedness are essential elements of the participatory vision (Ferrer 2008, 2017).

A fully embodied spirituality involves engagement with both immanent and subtle spiritual energies. Ferrer (2017) asserted that an embodied liberation could potentially be attained through freedom from egocentrism, the cultivation of the *pāramitās* of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, or through many other somatic and spiritual practices, including non-Buddhist ones. Embodied spirituality differs from early ascetic-oriented Buddhist approaches, which focused on individual liberation and the sublimation and devaluation of the body toward that goal (Ferrer 2008). The integral *bodhisattva* differs profoundly from a *bodhisattva* on the path of liberation in Buddhist schools/traditions. The Buddhist *bodhisattva* is expected to emulate specific states of consciousness to advance along the *bhūmis* and strive toward a specific ultimate as defined within a given tradition. In essence, Buddhist *bodhisattvas* are asked to replicate the awakening of the Buddha. The predetermined Buddhist paths and dharma teachings may limit the spontaneity of spiritual experiences of *bodhisattvas*, though many Buddhist teachers invite practitioners to openly observe meditative experiences and validate the dharma teachings for themselves. Buddhist investigations generally focus inward, while Western science and philosophies have embraced positivism and empiricism. Through repeated introspection and meditation practice, the practitioner/meditator gains valid subjective experience (Hasenkamp and White 2017). Duckworth (2019a) poignantly asserted that the *Yogācāra* (Mind-Only) Buddhist school emphasizes a phenomenological style of interpretation or orientation of the subjective-experienced-lived world to realize the inconceivable reality. In the Mind-Only view, the percept–concept dichotomy collapses into perception with nondual self-awareness. A Buddhist *bodhisattva* practice that is path- and/or goal-focused may limit the creative and spontaneous insights that arise from “embodied presence” according to the participatory integral *bodhisattva* view (Ferrer 2002).

The integral *bodhisattva* is not constricted by spiritual and religious doctrines, allowing a more spontaneous cocreation of the undetermined mystery to come to the fore—a core tenet of embodied spirituality (Duckworth 2014b; Ferrer 2017). Ko (2010) stressed that the relational self organically seeks a balance between relational (interchangeable) opposites through creative moments of transformation. Creativity and openness are key elements for integration and transformation and to navigate the *bodhisattva*’s paradoxes.

Participatory theory posits that subtle worlds may exist and that no pregiven ultimate reality exists, which creates a boundless openness for the integral *bodhisattva* to explore spiritual worlds (Ferrer 2017). The notion of ultimate reality being undetermined resonates with the Buddhist concept of emptiness and avoids the hierarchical rankings of one claim to reality being better than another (Duckworth 2014b). The cocreated spirituality of Ferrer offers dual freedom from Buddhist doctrine and views as well as from the achievement of a specific predetermined ultimate goal (e.g., Buddhist views of liberation, such as Dewachen, the Buddha-field of Amitabha Buddha, or *nirvāṇa*). Such liberative goals differ among Buddhist traditions and schools (e.g., Pure Land Buddhism, *Yogācāra*, or *Theravāda* Buddhism). However, there are risks for integral *bodhisattvas*, for example, to attach to cocreation, spontaneity, and moment-to-moment consumption for the sake of new mystical experiences, whereby the search for the “knowing” in the mystery can become spiritual materialism, spiritual addiction, or even spiritual madness to enact the unknown mystery.

These important pitfalls are not only relevant in participatory spirituality but are possible distortions of all spiritual paths, including Buddhist paths.

According to Ferrer (2006, 2017), the metamodern integral *bodhisattva* renounces its full liberation until the body, heart, and the primary world are set free from alienating tendencies. This integral vow, which is focused on psychological dimensions, includes the healing of trauma, emotional wounds, unhealthy unconscious impulses, and self-centered behavior, which all limit moral agency, positive prosocial affects, and the transformation of self and communities from the perspective of wholeness. The integral liberation of all sentient beings evokes the vision of going beyond the liberation of the conscious mind to emphasize a fully embodied way of freeing oneself and all sentient beings (Ferrer 2017). Embodiment has been recognized in contemporary Western Buddhism rooted in Francisco Varela's neurophenomenology (Varela 1996; Varela et al. 2016), which eliminates the sharp mind–body distinction between dualistic notions of “internal versus external” (Cho 2017). In contrast, in early Buddhism, bodies have been viewed as a karmic hindrance on the path to liberation, referred to as inferior, impure, and foul (Grunwald 2021). Specifically, the female body was devalued as a mantrap because, supposedly, men were caught up in attachment to womanly charms (Suh 2017).

In summary, the secularized integral *bodhisattva* shows similarities with Buddhist *bodhisattva* conceptions. The participatory theory and spirituality model is pluralistic and compatible with the major tenets of Buddhist *bodhisattvas'* aspirations and goals. The participatory model provides an open spiritual framework to incorporate religious and metaphysical Buddhist beliefs as well as epithets of Buddhist *bodhisattvas*. In contrast, the secular naturalized *bodhisattva* stands in stark contrast to philosophical, spiritual, religious, and metaphysical conceptions of Buddhist *bodhisattvas*. This neurophysicalist, McBuddhism version of the naturalized *bodhisattva* is a radical departure from traditional *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhist views.

5. Buddhist *Bodhisattvas'* Morals: Paradoxes and Obstacles

5.1. Key Tenets and Obstacles to Buddhist *Bodhisattvas'* Motivations

This section provides an inquiry into the thesis that *Mahāyāna* Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, rather than secular forms of *bodhisattvas*, evoke (1) a deeper level of transpersonal awareness, realize (2) all-encompassing compassion, manifesting as (3) care and consequentialist (karmic) ethics that inspire (4) human and planetary flourishing, with (5) the ultimate goal of liberating all sentient beings. This inquiry is supported by Figure 2, which provides an overview of idealized assertions of prominent *bodhisattva* conceptions in *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism and Western philosophies and spiritualities and how they align with ethical and moral views that support flourishing and soteriological goals.

The discussion of transpersonal awareness is focused on no-self, transcending self, emptiness of self, and nonattachment, which make the Buddhist *bodhisattva* a moral agent motivated by compassion. The assertion is that the more pronounced the level of compassion, ranging from ordinary compassion (Skt., *karuṇā*) to great compassion (Skt., *mahākaruṇā*) and all-encompassing compassion (unconditional compassion for all sentient beings, including the *bodhisattva*)—the fuller the level of moral actions of the *bodhisattva* through care and consequentialist (karmic) ethics. Unconditional compassion is developed through *bodhicitta*, the aspiration to achieve Buddhahood in order to liberate all beings from suffering. The Buddhist *bodhisattva's* path is poised to reduce suffering and harm to bring forth human and planetary flourishing. However, multiple obstacles and paradoxes are roadblocks on the Buddhist *bodhisattva's* path, which are explored in depth.

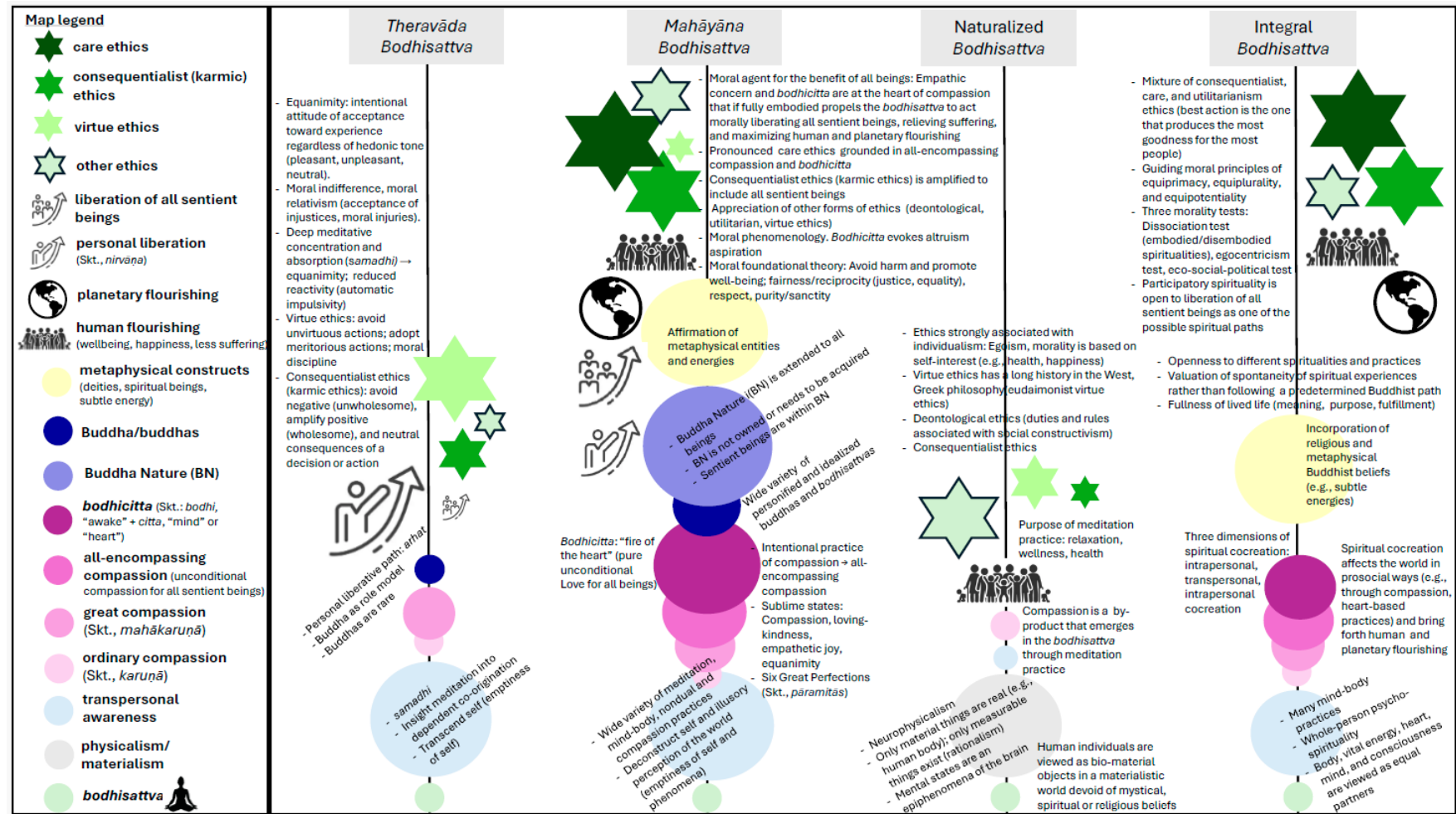


Figure 2. Overview of idealized assertions of prominent *bodhisattva* conceptions in *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism and Western philosophies and spiritualities and how they align with ethical and moral views and goals (e.g., liberation of all sentient beings, human health and planetary health). The relative size of the symbol mirrors the main view in a given typology.

The fundamentals of the *bodhisattva*'s path, in particular, in the *Mahāyāna* school, are compassion (Skt., *karuṇā*), which constitutes one of the four sublime states, along with loving-kindness (Skt., *maitrī*), empathetic joy (Skt., *muditā*), and equanimity (Skt., *upekṣā*). Compassion and wisdom are inseparable in Buddhists' beliefs unlike in Western philosophical and moral conceptions (Bhattacharjee 2022). Buddhist ethics, philosophy, and metaphysics provide a complex amalgam, evoking numerous contradictory views. Why would a *bodhisattva* feel compassion for all sentient beings, including oneself, when, ultimately, there are no individual selves, only empty selves? The moral ideal of the *bodhisattva* is to actualize virtues, but there is no stable agent (self) who bears the initiative and motivation for pursuing these virtues (Coseru 2017). From a Buddhist's perspective, in order to realize emptiness of self and phenomena, the *bodhisattva* needs to let go of attachment, desires, and ignorance and embody nonattachment (Chödrön 2018). Jennings (1996) asserted that in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, self-attachment and ignorance are overcome through mindfulness practice, calming the mind, which brings forth insight, loving kindness, wisdom, and compassion. These Buddhist virtues are enacted through insights into dependent co-origination, interdependence among all beings, and peaceful inward resolution. Buddhist visualization techniques that exchange self and other promote insight into the interdependence of all sentient beings; those techniques were proposed by Śāntideva, an eighth-century Indian Buddhist *Mahāyāna* monk (Tuffley and Śāntideva 2011). For example, *tonglen* visualization practice, a *Mahāyāna* meditation practice, aims to send positive qualities to others while taking their pain upon oneself. This practice aims to deconstruct self-driven perceptions and delusions (e.g., aggression), revealing, at some deeper inner level, the love and goodness for the other person (Ray 2000). *Tonglen* is a typical mind-body practice of *bodhisattvas*, which cultivates compassion (Skt., *karuṇā*) and recognition that a murderer, a mother, or a sick child could have been them in a previous or future life (Harvey 2000).

In Jennings's (1996) interpretation, the *bodhisattva*'s *karuṇā* is the "cool," empty, and dispassionate concern for others, uniting self and other-self into a "both-and". Jennings's (1996) posited that the *bodhisattva* becomes/is one with all other beings and, therefore, will achieve liberation with and through the liberation of all others. According to Jennings, *karuṇā* generally evokes passive altruism without intent to act and relieve suffering, which imbues the *bodhisattva*'s path with a connotation of negativity, while considering Western Christian *agape* (love) as "warm," pure, and passionate. However, Jennings did not discern between relative and absolute *bodhicitta* of the *bodhisattva*. In various forms of Tibetan *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* Buddhism, *bodhicitta* is considered as the fire of the heart, emanating pure and unconditional Love for all beings experienced as an ineffable state of consciousness, which opens space into an expansive energetic realm in which defilements lose potency and positive hedonic tones are amplified (Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche 2010; Ray 2002). Garfield (2010) posited that Śāntideva's understanding of *bodhicitta* is grounded in a phenomenological account of lived experience as a psychological phenomenon with conative and affective dimensions, which evokes an altruistic aspiration in the *bodhisattva* to cultivate oneself as an active moral agent for the benefit of all beings. In Garfield's view, the *bodhisattva*'s path is grounded in a moral phenomenology rather than virtue or consequentialist models of morality. Śāntideva invites us to see suffering as something that is bad, irrespective of whose suffering it is—mine or someone else's (Garfield 2022a).

The notion that a lack of self-agency (emptiness of self) and moral agency are compatible has been disputed by Coseru (2017). In Coseru's view, no-self contradicts the notions of self-agency, self-awareness, and conscious awareness of affects and perceptions. Coseru argued that the mental states of a *bodhisattva*, such as greed, delusion, loving kindness, and compassion, can only be made sense of in terms of the person who possesses them; that

is, they only exist from a first-person perspective. Generic suffering and pain, apart from individually realized sensations, are incoherent from this point of view.

The paradoxical notion of the selfless but functional agent self was addressed by [Schroder \(2017\)](#), who discerned between (a) the biological, evolutionary, and maternal regulatory attachment systems to sustain survival and to function in the world and (b) the spiritual attachment–nonattachment system that Buddhists seek to transcend. The body-bound systems of the former determine the neurobiological-driven ego functions and visceral experiences governed by the polyvagal complex, the maternal attachment system (bonding between a mother and a child), and the hardwired emotional–reactive system in sub-cortical regions, with “seeking” as the affective driver. In contrast, the “spiritual self” is the self that Buddhists aim to transcend, dissolve, and/or deconstruct ([Ardelt and Grunwald 2018](#)). In a Buddhist context, desire and attachment reify the “spiritual self”, and mindfulness meditation, *pāramitās*, and visualization practices aim to attain no-self as a fruitional stage. The body-oriented ‘relative attachment model’ articulated by [Schroder \(2017\)](#) links Western neurobiology, psychology, and Buddhist views, suggesting that a person with no-self (Buddhist emptiness) can still have agency and participate in morally sound and loving ways in worldly affairs. Similarly, [Welwood \(2002\)](#) discerned between ego competence in worldly functioning and the Buddhist ego, with the latter implicated inno-self.

[Coseru’s \(2017\)](#) critique of the *bodhisattva’s* stance of supposed selfless agency has further implications for the *bodhisattva’s* idealistic moral responsibility to liberate all beings. Coseru claimed that the ideal is intelligible only in reference to the conceptions of freedom and human dignity, which reflect participation in, and sharing of, interpersonal relationships. These assertions are relativized from an agent-neutral perspective, demanding an aspiring, yet unenlightened *bodhisattva* to follow normative Buddhist rules that benefit other beings. Moral agency is evoked from a consequentialist ethical perspective because the *bodhisattva* aims to accumulate positive merit for “good” karma and rebirth. Moral agency from a phenomenologist perspective is grounded in *bodhicitta*, which evokes heart–mind, what a psychologist may call compassionate love ([Underwood 2009](#)), as a motivator of boundless openness with all sentient beings (care ethics). To counter [Coseru’s \(2017\)](#) concerns from a psychological perspective, equanimous states of being are perceived as freeing, rather than as impersonal, detached, dissociated, and non-loving. A state of equanimity protects one from emotional agitation and corresponds to the psychological notion of neutral valence ([Desbordes et al. 2015](#)). The *bodhisattva’s* equanimity is manifested as an intentional attitude of acceptance toward experience, regardless of its hedonic tone (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), as well as by reduced automatic impulsivity to the hedonic tone of the experience ([Hadaash et al. 2016](#)). Nonattachment, enacted through the deconstruction of the perceived illusory self, and prosocial outcomes, such as empathy and compassion, are deeply interwoven and serve to liberate the *bodhisattva* ([Sahdra et al. 2016](#)).

In *Mahāyāna*, the *bodhisattva* is said to achieve “threefold purity” and full awakening by practicing the six Great Perfections (Skt., *pāramitās*). *Pāramitā* practice is understood to be only genuine if the *bodhisattva* regards oneself as empty, the action being performed as empty, and the object of that action as not being a real, objectively existing thing. These markers imply nonattachment but not detachment or attachment ([Goodman 2017](#)). Although *Theravāda*-inspired *bodhisattvas* are focused on their own personal liberation, rather than the liberation of all beings, their compassion-inspired morality and care ethics are much more limited compared to those of *Mahāyāna bodhisattvas*. Thus, *Theravāda bodhisattvas* are inclined to follow the path, somewhat selfishly, toward awakening (“in their own co-con”), caring less if other people are harmed, or expressing moral indifference. Here, social, economic, human, and cultural injustices (e.g., any emotional, mental, or physical

harm of other people, organisms, or the natural world) are accepted as they are (moral relativism). This attitude manifests equanimity; however, it evokes less compassionate actions that would reduce harmful effects for others (Grunwald 2023a). From a psychological perspective, the *Theravāda bodhisattva* tends to distance from worldly affairs (e.g., monastic settings, extensive meditation practice, deep absorption meditation practices (*jhana* practices), and social and emotional isolation behaviors), becoming more detached from others (dissociation), detaching from self, expressing an avoidant attachment style (interrelational avoidance), and possessing an attitude of indifference for worldly affairs (“I only care for my own enlightenment”, “I do not care as much about others, moral and social injustices, and planetary problems”, and “I do not need to act compassionately, I rather need to practice for my own enlightenment”).

In contrast, on the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva*’s path, liberative attainments are superlative and elating, but the obstacles are manifold to develop *bodhicitta* and all-encompassing compassion for all sentient beings. *Bodhisattvas* do not turn away from facing evil, harmful actors motivated by greed and self-interests, and all kinds of harm and injustices (based on gender, sex, race, religion, or other) in the relatively conditioned world of everyday life. Although the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva*’s conceptions are idealistic and seemingly unsurmountable, the inspirations for compassionate care ethics and consequentialist (karmic) ethics are boundless. The reason for that is that the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva*’s moral view is deeply grounded in embodying Buddha Nature and the Four Noble Truths, recognizing that there is suffering in the world that can be addressed through compassionate action. The perceived suffering of others and oneself is relieved through engagement (altruistic actions), rather than distancing from it, which brings forth deep gratification and embodies buddha qualities. Unconditional compassionate actions to relieve harm are driven by decisively turning toward all harm in the world out of deep love for sentient beings and oneself. From a psychological perspective, the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* expresses love for oneself, all beings, and the planet (“I care deeply about my own and others’ enlightenments”, “I aspire to relieve suffering irrespective of obstacles and personal risks”, and “I act compassionately out of love for all beings”). In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, this kind of all-encompassing compassion for all beings manifests as care ethics and consequentialist (karmic) ethics. Here, unconditional compassion provides both the path and mental and emotional support for the *bodhisattva* to live and morally act in the conditioned world like a buddha. Because buddhas have attained full realization, they can act in superlative moral ways with all-encompassing compassion toward themselves and all beings in support of human and planetary flourishing.

5.2. The Bodhisattva Paradox

It seems paradoxical that *bodhisattvas* choose intentional rebirth in *samsāra* to benefit all sentient beings, while buddhas are viewed as perfectly enlightened beings who escape it, attaining a formless, permanent, enlightened wisdom state (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2001). Pelden (2007) concurred that “the *bodhisattvas* are reborn in *samsāra* through the power of their *bodhicitta*, and they remain with beings, staying close to them, in order to bring them to the underlying state of supreme bliss” (i.e., the bliss of ultimate Buddhahood, p. 136). The *bodhisattva* paradox outlined by Danto (1987), however, reveals a possible tension or even a contradiction: although the *bodhisattva* can enter *nirvāṇa* because one is fully enlightened, passing into *nirvāṇa* implies selfishness—suggesting that such an enlightenment is partial. This logical impasse is amplified by the expectation that the *bodhisattva* is expected to liberate all sentient beings and the assertion that the Buddha, supposedly the fully enlightened one, did reportedly enter *nirvāṇa*. Danto (1987) added another layer of complexity to the *bodhisattva* paradox by arguing that the *bodhisattva*

cannot pass into *nirvāṇa* because this would be selfish, and a selfish act would disqualify a *bodhisattva* from being a *bodhisattva*. Therefore, the *bodhisattva* cannot reach *nirvāṇa*—and neither can anyone else.

Danto's (1987) assumptions are rooted in the *Theravāda* view of *nirvāṇa*; indeed, the *bodhisattva* entering into *nirvāṇa* would be incompatible with the selfless compassion that characterizes the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva*. The underlying notion is that the act of passing into *nirvāṇa* must be a selfish act, unless all beings simultaneously pass into *nirvāṇa* together, which seems unlikely (Perrett 1986). However, in the *Mahāyāna* view, *nirvāṇa* is equivalent with Buddhahood. Therefore, when a *bodhisattva* attains Buddhahood through the three-path salvation, the *bodhisattvayāna* (Skt., “yāna” vehicle) *nirvāṇa* is attained, meaning that “a *bodhisattva* becomes not just a Buddha but Buddha” (Perrett 1986, p. 57). According to Perrett, the three *kāyas* of Buddhahood ensure that in attaining *nirvāṇa*, one realizes the impersonal *dharmakāya* (ultimate transcendental reality), the *saṃbhogakāya* (complete enjoyment body), and the *nirmāṇakāya* (body form). The *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya* allow the *bodhisattva* to be able to care for and assist other human beings, so that they too can become liberated and bring forth compassion to all sentient beings. The *Mahāyāna* path, but not that of the *Theravāda*, resolves Danto's *bodhisattva* paradox because the *bodhisattva* does not need to selfishly abandon other sentient beings, even though the *bodhisattva* is fully enlightened (Buddhahood) and has realized the oneness of all the *kāyas*. According to the three-*kāya* view in the *Geluk Mahāyāna*, buddhas enter the *dharmakāya* as ultimate truth because the continuum of pure radiant awareness never ceases (referring to emptiness of intrinsic existence). Yet, buddhas also never enter *nirvāṇa* as a final escape from worldly matter because there are some beings who will never attain enlightenment, and buddhas remain to save infinite sentient beings or help to provide more pleasant rebirths. Therefore, buddhas remain in the *rūpakāya* (form body of *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*, called the Buddha's transformation bodies), exerting their infinite compassionate deeds so long as a single being remains unenlightened (Williams 2010).

Pelden's (2007) interpretation of the *bodhisattva*'s paradox stressed that the buddhas of the past were able to enter *nirvāṇa*, although poverty and beggars remained. Still, to this day, there are many beggars, starving people, homeless, and traumatized or deluded people who suffer one way or another on planet Earth. How is it then possible that past *bodhisattvas* have realized Buddhahood despite being bound by endless compassion to help suffering sentient beings until all of them are liberated? The answer is “that it has been achieved by them” (Pelden 2007, p. 168), meaning a personal internal realization (“internal truth”) was attained. This view elegantly discerns relative reality (compassion for sentient beings) and ultimate reality (Buddhahood), whereby ultimate liberation is considered unconditional, irrespective of beggars or other suffering beings in existence, from a relative point of view.

The *bodhisattva* paradox also loses potency from the *Madhyamaka* Buddhist's perspective. According to Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakakārikā*, the root verses on the *Madhyamaka*, *nirvāṇa*, and *saṃsāra* are identical in the sense that they have the same nature, that is, absence of intrinsic existence, which is interpreted as true understanding of emptiness (Williams 2010). The tetra negation of existence (“is”), nonexistence (“is not”), both existence and nonexistence (“is both”), and neither existence and nonexistence are true (“is neither”) from the *Madhyamaka* view undergirds the empty nature of the *bodhisattva* (Duckworth 2019a).

In the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, contrasting claims are made, such as ‘no beings are really saved’ (denial of positive consequences of *bodhisattvas*' actions) and ‘there is no *nirvāṇa* to attain’ (no attainment; Thich Nhat Hanh 1987). This same paradoxical situation of the *bodhisattva* is expressed in the *Diamond Sūtra*, suggesting that the *bodhisattva* has led innumerable beings to *nirvāṇa* and, at the same time, no beings at all have been led to

nirvāṇa (Conze 2001). Williams (2010) pointed out that the *bodhisattva* may manifest Buddha qualities to benefit all beings due to superlative psychic abilities, which are beyond space and time.

Ray (2000), Leighton (2012), and others had asserted that the idealized vision of the *bodhisattva* in the *Mahāyāna* tradition is of one who postpones one's own bliss until all beings are saved as an act of compassion. The view that *bodhisattvas* remain in *saṃsāra* for the sake of others because they cannot stand the unbearable sorrow of suffering beings was corroborated by Pelden (2007). Such a notion of the *bodhisattva* appears to be incoherent and impossible to resolve because of the widely held notion of an infinite number of beings in *Mahāyāna*. Williams (2010) noted that "there is never any mention of really postponing or turning back from Buddhahood. Otherwise, any *bodhisattva* who did become a Buddha would be presumably either deficient in compassion or have broken his (or her) vow" (p. 59). A somewhat ambiguous position was adopted by Kensur Pema Gyaltzen, stating that the notion of postponement to enter *nirvāṇa* should not be taken literally and treated as textual uncertainty because the *bodhisattva* adopts the position of complete renunciation of both—*saṃsāra* and Buddhahood, and, thus, precisely, the *bodhisattva* attains Buddhahood (Williams 2010). Makransky (1997) argued that the *bodhisattva*'s postponement model of *nirvāṇa* is explained by discerning nonabiding or unrestricted *nirvāṇa* of Buddhahood (Skt., *apraṭiṣṭhita*) in the *Mahāyāna* and the more limited *nirvāṇa* of an *arhat*. The *apraṭiṣṭhita nirvāṇa* allows the *bodhisattva* to manifest Buddha qualities of superlative psychic abilities beyond space and time dimensions to benefit all beings without the need to postpone liberation (Williams 2010). For the *bodhisattva* to avoid becoming stuck as an *arhat* and, therefore, prevent attaining *apraṭiṣṭhita nirvāṇa*, the divine abiding (Skt., *brahmavihārās*)—compassion, empathetic joy, immeasurable friendliness, and equanimity—are profoundly critical, as suggested in the *Aṣṭa*. Through the *brahmavihārās*, the *bodhisattva* can simultaneously combine meditative awareness of emptiness with awareness of suffering of sentient beings and help them to reduce suffering. Whereas the *śrāvaka* (disciple), in deep meditation, becomes inactive and enchanted by falsely believing to have attained liberation, the *bodhisattva* moves beyond the *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* (lone or private Buddha) and attains full Buddhahood and liberation in the form of *apraṭiṣṭhita nirvāṇa*. This view of the *Yogācāra* means that the *bodhisattva* completely renounces *saṃsāra* and moves beyond greed, delusions, and attachment; however, they do not abandon sentient beings. In essence, the *bodhisattva* attains wisdom and preserves compassion for all (Kawamura 1981; Williams 2010).

6. Ethical Implications of Becoming and Being a Bodhisattva

6.1. Buddhist Ethics and the Eastern Bodhisattva

Traditional Buddhist notions of the *bodhisattva*, specifically *Mahāyāna bodhisattvas*, have brought forth community and social transformations, for example, engaged Buddhism, altruistic and compassionate principles in conscious economies, and spiritual–ecological activism (Badiner 1990; Queen 2000; Rothberg 2006). In terms of Buddhist ethics (Pāli, *sīla*; Skt., *śīla*), in *Theravāda* Buddhism, the *bodhisattvas* are expected to avoid the 10 unvirtuous actions based on egocentricity (e.g., killing any sentient being, stealing, sexual conduct, lying, slander, abusive speech, idle chatter and gossip, covetousness, thoughts of wanting to cause harm to others, and wrong view) and adopt the 10 meritorious actions (Pāli, *dasakusala-kamma-patha*; Goodman 2009). These itemized *sīlas* are not behavioral absolutes but rather are intended to guide the *bodhisattva* toward generating virtue and positive *karma* by saving and protecting all beings, who are considered as equal in that they all seek happiness (Harvey 2000). Such virtue ethics rooted in internal transformation and the cultivation of virtues (i.e., the *pāramitās*) predominate traditional Buddhist ethics (Vasen 2018).

Goodman (2017) pointed out that *śīlas* are better translated as “moral discipline”, as they codify models of spectacular altruism to be emulated. In early Buddhism, *śīlas* were considered as rules to be obeyed, whereas in the Western context, *śīlas* have been interpreted as moral developmental stages on the *bodhisattva* path (Goodman 2017). One’s intention behind the action and its wholesome/unwholesome impact determine whether an action is considered as virtuous (Pelden 2007). In the Tibetan *Theravāda*, *śīlas* are prominently found in the meditation practices of tranquility of mind (Pāli, *samatha*; Skt., *śamatha*) and clear seeing (Pāli, *vipassanā*; Skt., *vipaśyanā*), the latter being associated with ethical outcomes (Ray 2000).

Theravāda ethics adopt a consequentialist foundation for the path of *bodhisattvas*. *Consequentialism* asserts that deviations from otherwise binding moral rules are justified by a compassionately acting person when they would have good consequences (Goodman 2016a). The discernment of what is considered as the most wholesome moral action is tied to the negative (unwholesome), positive (wholesome), and neutral consequences of a decision or action but not to the act/behavior itself (Goodman 2017). Karma holds accountable *bodhisattvas* and all human beings who are carried into death and rebirth—the cycling from one of the six realms of existence to another that sentient beings undergo in accordance with their *karma*. According to *Mahāyāna* Buddhist beliefs, the human realm is considered as particularly fortunate because it is only in this realm that one can attain awakening, which liberates one from the cycle of suffering (Pelden 2007; Shantideva 2011). The six realms of existence (hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, demi-gods, and god realms) match the physical, mental, and emotional states sentient beings go through in the worldly life. From an individual *bodhisattva* stance, karmic consequentialism to attain Buddhahood is narrowly focused on oneself (Ray 2000).

The stakes for the *bodhisattva* in the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist tradition are substantially higher: all beings are to be liberated instead of just the *bodhisattva* as a person. *Mahāyāna* Buddhist ethics advocates *classical utilitarianism*—a composite of hedonistic, universalistic, aggregative, and maximal consequentialism. Consequentialist theories share in common the belief that certain things are objectively and intrinsically good, and, therefore, they should be promoted (Goodman 2009). Such a consequentialist view is embraced in *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* Tibetan Buddhism by asserting that Buddha Nature (“goodness”) is present in *bodhisattvas* and all sentient beings alike (Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche 2014). Value theories claiming intrinsic values, such as the notion of ultimate truth in Buddhism (Skt., *paramārthasatya*), are the exceptional prerogatives of *bodhisattvas* (Davis 2013). Among the characteristics of consequentialism is hedonism, which denotes the presence of happiness and the absence of suffering as constituting well-being. A universalist consequentialist view was advocated by the prominent *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* Śāntideva, which extended moral concerns to all sentient beings; at the same time, Śāntideva promulgated aggregation, in which the suffering and happiness of all beings form an aggregate whole. Śāntideva also posited the principle of maximization, in which one could sacrifice a small amount of happiness to achieve a larger amount of happiness (Goodman 2017). The *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, composed by Śāntideva around 700 CE, is a guide to the *bodhisattva*’s way of life. For example, Śāntideva declared, “I have made a solemn vow that I will work to liberate all sentient beings from the mental afflictions. I cannot do this for the world if I have not first done it for myself” (Tuffley and Śāntideva 2011, p. 28).

The *Mahāyāna* ethics asserted by Śāntideva is classified as consequentialist and normative in the sense that they assign impartial benevolence to how beings should behave toward one another (Goodman 2017). This assertion was refuted with the argument that *bodhisattva* ethics are both consequentialist and non-consequentialist, as shown by the diversity of *bodhisattva* vows (Davis 2013). There are deontological elements in the *bod-*

hisattva ethics pointing toward a non-consequentialist perspective, similar to Kant's ideal of the moral deliberation of a *kingdom of ends* (Johnson and Cureton 2018). Immanuel Kant proposed that every person contributes equally to a system that safeguards virtue and happiness, whereby, eventually, an equal distribution in sustaining the highest good will be achieved (Davis 2013). Non-consequentialist refers to the concept of realizing a value by not honoring the idealized consequences (Davis 2013). For example, the killing of a mass murderer by a *bodhisattva* may still generate positive karma if the action was sincerely altruistic and beneficial to many others who would have suffered severely otherwise (Ray 2000). The story of Captain Goodheart, who killed Black Spearman in order to protect him from going to the hell realm, protrudes relative morality, weighting negative and positive consequences and what brings the greatest benefit to beings. The radical notion that even attackers, terrorists, tormenters, and enemies deserve the *bodhisattva's* compassion is grounded in emptiness, recognizing that nobody is an independent agent and that beings are inherently empty of real existence (dependent origination). All agents of harm are without autonomy and act due to karma and circumstantial conditions; therefore, they are themselves driven by anger, afflictions, ignorance, selfishness, and delusions (Pelden 2007).

Another non-consequentialist example is the practice of skillful means (Skt., *upāya*), which, in some instances, may mean to act against normative *bodhisattva* guides and standards. In such cases of moral deliberation, it is one's own virtues that matter the most, according to traditional virtue ethics (Davis 2013). This reliance on a *bodhisattva's* individual virtue contrasts with the agent-neutral notion of universalist consequentialism, which asserts that the lives of all sentient beings should go as well as possible (Goodman 2009). Any moral particularism that can be ascribed to *bodhisattvas* serves as a practical moral guide (Davis 2013). Pelden (2007) stressed that all the actions of the *bodhisattva* are expected to directly (through material support or the gifts of dharma) or indirectly (meditation practice and the cultivation of the *pāramitās*) be for the sake of others.

The *Ownerless Suffering Argument* seeks to justify the impartial benevolence of the *bodhisattva* by appealing to the notion of no-self, which the *bodhisattva* seeks to attain (Goodman 2016a). If one considers the assumption that there is no personal self (no-self) to be true, what motivates the *bodhisattva* to act compassionately, maximizing the welfare of sentient beings? Although Buddhist traditions share the eliminativist view of the ontological freedom from self, it is strange that the *bodhisattvas* found within Buddhist scriptures commonly talk as if people and things in the material world are inherently substantial. For example, in the *sūtra of The Inquiry of Avalokiteśvara on the Seven Qualities*:

“The Buddha is approached and asked by the *bodhisattva mahāsattva* Avalokiteśvara about the qualities that should be cultivated by a *bodhisattva* who has just generated the altruistic mind set on attaining awakening. The Buddha briefly expounds seven qualities that should be practiced by such a *bodhisattva*, emphasizing mental purity and cognitive detachment from conceptuality”. (Degé Kangyur 2016, p. 5, s. 1)

Goodman (2016a) noted that fatalistic reductionism, rejecting the ultimate existence of an individual's self, leads either to an extreme nihilistic view or universal, impartial benevolence. The latter is aligned with intuitionism, asserting that because suffering is a reaction to experience, it is bad and should be avoided based on previous experience: “Neither that experience, nor the knowing that arises from it, depends on any of that suffering being yours. Through that experience, you know that suffering is bad, regardless of who experiences it. Because there is no self—whether or not you realize this—the experience of knowing that suffering is bad could not possibly have depended on there being a self who experiences the suffering” (Goodman 2016a, p. 642).

Traditionalist Buddhist scholars and spiritual leaders have never accepted a dualistic split between the spiritual path of awakening and social domains and fully embody social engagement (e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh 1987; Dalai Lama 2009a; Loy 2019), while modernists have argued that engaged Buddhism must be inextricably bound up in the advancement of the modern world and Western ideas. It has been recognized that modern Buddhist encounters in the West require new models for engaged Buddhism rooted in both modern and traditional forms of engaged Buddhism (Gleig 2019; Temprano 2013). Depending on whether the *bodhisattva* practice is more solitary oriented and focused on one's own liberation ("private" *bodhisattva*) or *saṅgha* (community) oriented and focused on the liberation of all sentient beings, different forms of engaged Buddhism emerge. Clayton (2018) pointed out that although the pragmatic and material-oriented relief of suffering (e.g., food banks, medicine, or shelters) are positive, these forms of social engagement are only palliative. The ultimate goal of the *bodhisattva* is to free other beings from suffering (care ethics), and, thus, liberating beings by helping them to achieve complete awakening (e.g., teach others mindfulness meditation or the dharma) is considered as being more important than palliative relief from suffering. Importantly, inner motives need to undergird compassionate altruistic actions to help others and reap merits instead of mechanical outward conduct (Pelden 2007).

Compassion is at the core of relieving suffering from self, others, and the world by evoking compassionate behavior and prosocial engagement (Goleman and Davidson 2017). In the *Jātaka* tales, the Buddha is depicted in metaphorical stories as a compassionate being by giving up his own body in various ways to save the lives of other beings as acts of selflessness (Ohnuma 1998). According to Yao (2006), this kind of *bodhisattva* compassion is deeper and broader than the Western psychological understanding of compassion because it identifies a deep cause of suffering (i.e., craving); is tied to the primordial notion; is unconditional and altruistic, requiring nothing in return; is rooted in natural and spontaneous upwelling (i.e., compassion without effort); is broad, entailing all sentient beings; and considers all sentient beings equally. *Theravāda* and early *Mahāyāna* Buddhism (specifically, the *Ugra*) advocated compassion and loving-kindness (Skt., *maitrī*) (Nattier 2003). These kinds of compassion share in common a more recent understanding in somatic psychology, and the construct of 'embodiment' as recognized in Western psychology (Marlock and Weiss 2015). Embodied prosocial affects recognize various kinds of empathy closely associated with compassion (Neff 2003): *Cognitive empathy* describes how the other person thinks and sympathetically views and understands the other's perspectives, while *emotional empathy* is focused to feel what the other is feeling in one's body, allowing deep relating at a visceral level to the suffering of another person. Yet *empathic concern* lies at the heart of genuine compassion, which evokes behavior to alleviate discomfort or suffering of others (Goleman and Davidson 2017; Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow 1990). Purely cognitive empathy provides factual understanding but has no sympathetic feelings toward others, while emotional empathy is the capacity to experience affectively the state of others without acting on it. Both rely on each other to support action, but empathic concern is a necessity to bring forth compassion, which then evokes prosocial actions (Goleman and Davidson 2017; Mikulincer and Shaver 2010). New empirical neurological and neurophysical evidence points to compassion as deeply embodied and embedded in the social and interpersonal contexts (Khoury 2019). Embodied mindfulness (Khoury et al. 2017)—with its embodied aptitude for mutuality, communality, and empathy—brings forth compassion, with important shifts from first-person to second- and third-person awareness (Churchill 2023), thus sharing a close conception with Buddhist *bodhisattva*'s compassion, as articulated in bodies and embodiment in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Ohnuma 2019). Fully embodied empathy, empathic concern, and compassion are critical for an ethics of human care (Drummond

et al. 2023), *Mahāyāna* Buddhists' conceptions of welfare, impartial compassion, and wish to liberate all beings (Goodman 2019), and integral–spiritual–ecological-informed ethics (Grunwald 2023b). Although embodied forms of compassion and other prosocial affects in Western psychology match Buddhist conceptions closely, they lack the foundational rooting in spiritual ultimates, such as primordial reality, emptiness, and Buddha Nature, which evoke unconditional rather than conditional compassion.

According to Pelden (2007), authentic genuine compassion without self-interest is at the heart of the path of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* with three qualities of freedom or primordial wisdom. Being free from (1) emotional veils (e.g., freedom from obscuration arising from craving and afflictive emotions), (2) cognitive veils (e.g., freedom from obscurations that are an impediment to knowledge), and (3) meditative absorption, including to be free from selfishness and an inferior attitude. In the age of decadence, the most important pith instruction for the *bodhisattva* is to avoid dwelling on the defects and faults of others according to the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Importantly, it is not enough to feel compassion for other sentient beings because one must take refuge in the wish that all beings attain Buddhahood—even enemies, liars, demagogues, and those who harm others—and be determined to act for the sake of sentient beings, liberating them from suffering (care ethics). One is powerless to bring others to freedom as long as one is not free oneself. Prosocial behavior refers to social actions that benefit other people or society as a whole, and more embodied forms of empathy and compassion are more likely to enhance social engagement (Colman 2015; Dovidio et al. 2012).

Chödrön (2007, 2018), a prominent Western teacher in the Shambhala tradition of Tibetan Buddhism aligned with the *Mahāyāna* view, asserted that contemporary social problems require *bodhisattva* warriors. Such contemporary problems require compassionate citizens that are locally and globally oriented to engage, for example, in food security, global climate change, gender equality, and alleviation of suffering from wars. Loy's (2019) *ecodharma* combines personal liberation of the *bodhisattva* and socioecological engagement in the most embodied way, giving rise to a contemporary *bodhisattva*, turning the *bodhisattva* vow into an *ecosattva* vow. The risk of *bodhisattva* traditions that are indifferent to eco-social justice and attached to individual liberation is to create a cosmological dualism, which posits that there is another spiritual world/realm out there that is somehow better or higher and less deserving than the worldly human realm.

In summary, the Buddhist *bodhisattva* conceptions are anchored in compassion linked to various ethics, including care, consequentialist, and non-consequentialist ethics with deontological elements. Empathic concern is at the heart of compassion, which, if fully embodied, propels the *bodhisattva* to act morally, liberating all sentient beings, relieving suffering, and maximizing human and planetary flourishing.

6.2. Non-Buddhist Ethics and Western Bodhisattva Conceptions

Ethical paths deeply engrained in Western philosophy and culture entail (1) virtue ethics ("being good") based on either character or relationships, (2) deontological ethics ("right action") based on duty and rights, and (3) consequentialism based on egoism ethics and utilitarianism (Traer and Stelmach 2007). According to Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2016) and Flanagan and Jupp (2001), virtue ethics has a long history in the West and is normative ethics, emphasizing virtues or moral character. Specifically, eudaimonist virtue ethics stress the virtue of eudaimonia (happiness, flourishing, or well-being) for humans, animals, and even plants, evoking an expansive worldview of "shared humanity". Deontological ethics, which emphasize duties and rules, are also deeply ingrained in Western culture dating back to Greek philosophy. Consequentialist ethics are more pluralistic than deontological theories. Consequentialist ethics may differ widely and exhibit ambiguities

based on what is considered as a “good” consequence (e.g., pleasure, happiness, individual satisfaction, or welfare of others; [Alexander and Moore 2020](#)). The motivation for moral action according to moral rules, permission, and codes within deontology that are socially constructed are based on the avoidance of social sanctions and penalties. Thus, within the deontological morality framework, an individual has no/lacks internal motivation, unlike Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, to act compassionately but follows externally imposed rules dutifully to avoid punishment.

The emergence of the naturalized *bodhisattva* upsurging of neurophysicalism has coincided culturally with modernism, which is characterized epistemologically by objectivism, politically and economically by liberal capitalism and competition striving for profit, and the ethics of individualism ([Hicks 2011](#)). Individualism and its social consequences have created a void in ethics. Thus, Western *modern bodhisattvas* are focused on individual fulfilment rather than compassion directed toward others ([Wellmer 2007](#)).

The naturalized *bodhisattva*, grounded in neurophysicalism, advocates for an understanding of the outer dimensions conceptualizing and rationalizing human functions (e.g., mapping neural correlates through brain imaging and measuring breath and heart rates while meditating) and worldly transactional affairs. This focus on the outer material dimensions, rather than the inner psychospiritual human dimensions, which is emphasized in Buddhism, objectifies naturalized *bodhisattvas* as commodities. Here, human individuals are viewed as biomaterial objects in a materialistic world devoid of mystical, spiritual, or religious beliefs. Thus, the naturalized *bodhisattva*’s philosophical view is most closely aligned with ethical egoism, featuring a narrow focus on self-interest, such as maximizing biophysical health and happiness for oneself. Here, McM mindfulness or self-help technologies (e.g., Muse brain-sensing headbands and mindfulness meditation apps) are utilized to reduce stress, enhance relaxation, and improve biophysical health. Cartesian dualism, splitting the world into “I” (naturalized *bodhisattva*) and “others” (other biophysical units), stands in sharp contrast to nondual Buddhist constructs of emptiness and no-self, which seek unification and belonging in communities (*saṅghas*). The othering morality associated with naturalized *bodhisattvas* creates the notions of social hierarchies, alienation, and exclusion based on gender, sex, religion, spirituality, age, race, ethnicity, and more. Egoism and the othering phenomenon reify cultural identities ([Dervin 2012](#); [Qu 2015](#)) that create hierarchies of “good” versus “bad” or “evil”, foster antisocial emotions, such as hate and anger, and blame culture. [Fernandes \(2003\)](#) critiqued identity-based claims for women’s rights or racial, gender, or social identities that create oppositional identity politics, limiting deep and lasting individual and social transformations. [Modood and Thompson \(2022\)](#) discussed the normative ethics of othering, which they explored through the alienation of specific social groups from a state-established religion.

The naturalized *bodhisattva* has persisted through postmodernism, with the tenets of social subjectivism, social constructivism, deconstruction, relativism, and ethically collective egalitarianism ([Hicks 2011](#)). In postmodernism, truth is acclaimed to be relative and determined by the individual alone, with overtones of anarchistic irreverence, amorphous personalized narratives, and cultural metanarratives ([Lyotard 2003](#)). Postmodern thought perceives objectivity as a myth and claims that there is no Truth, which stands in sharp contrast to Buddhists’ beliefs, especially the truth assertion of Buddha Nature. According to a radical postmodern view, all interpretations are equally valid, leaving space for empathy and social determinism ([Hicks 2011](#)). Thus, some *postmodern bodhisattvas* are moved to equalize all individuals and fight for racial, sexual, and gender equality, diversity, inclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged individuals. Despite their social engagement, postmodern *bodhisattvas* may also express a nihilistic shadow side that is focused on deconstruction, identities, and othering rather than empathetic care and compassion.

The integral *bodhisattva* is grounded in a participatory knowing that is not limited to the mental representation of a pregiven, independent object (i.e., Cartesian dualism) that undergirds othering. Participatory pluralism is non-perennial and entails a multiplicity of not only spiritual paths (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and New Age spirituality) but also spiritual liberations, including Buddhist liberations (Ferrer 2011). Ferrer (2002) asserted that participatory spiritual events are an enactment dynamically cocreated by the different elements in the event (e.g., opening of the mind, the body, or the heart; the creative force of life or reality) as lived phenomenological experiences. Cabot (2018) discerned various kinds of such lived participatory experiences: ordinary vital, sensuous, erotic experiences (shamanic ecologies of participation), heart-centered relational experiences (divinatory ecologies of participation and their absolute but ultimately arbitrary performative truth), and contemplative mind-centered experiences (mystic ecologies of participation and their ultimately relative truths). Participatory events can emerge in the locus of an individual, a relationship, or a social collective (Ferrer 2002). Thus, the participatory framework affirms personal development as well as social engagement. Participatory events bring forth transpersonal/spiritual experiences and provide multidimensional access to reality that involves the creative power of the mind, body, and heart (Lahood 2007). Such a participatory knowing of reality is considered as multidimensional fusing the intellectual knowing of the mind and thoughts (Look 2020), emotional and empathic knowing of the heart (Hart 1999; Jordan 1997), sensual and somatic knowing of the body (Caldwell 2014; Kaparo 2012; Yasuo 1987), visionary and intuitive knowing of the soul or spirit (Hollenback 1996; Puhakka 2000), as well as any other way of knowing available to human beings (Ferrer 2002, 2017).

According to Ferrer's (2011, 2017) participatory spirituality, there are three dimensions of spiritual cocreation: (1) *intrapersonal cocreation*, which consists of the collaborative participation of all the human attributes—body, vital energy, heart, mind, and consciousness—in the enactment of spiritual consciousness. This intrapersonal cocreation affirms the embodied, immanent dimension of the mystery, that is, the “spirit within” (the descendent spiritual path immanent, embodied spirituality); (2) *transpersonal cocreation*, which refers to the dynamic interaction between embodied human beings and the mystery in the enactment of spiritual insights, states, practices, and worlds. It affirms the enactive, inquiry-driven participatory spirituality as “spirit beyond,” emphasizing spiritual transcendence directed toward freeing oneself (the ascending spiritual path creative spiritualities beyond ego); and (3) *interpersonal cocreation*, which emerges from cooperative relationships among human beings through peer-to-peer relationships, the environment, possible subtle energies and entities, or the cosmos, emphasizing communion with “spirit in-between” (the extending spiritual path relational spiritualities). According to Ferrer (2017), if a person is intrapersonally, transpersonally, and interpersonally participating in spiritual cocreation, that person is affecting the world in prosocial ways. In essence, bringing forth human flourishing.

The three spiritual cocreation domains of intrapersonal, transpersonal, and interpersonal cocreation mirror the principles of equiprimacy (i.e., the equality of human attributes with no one intrinsically superior or more evolved than another), equiplurality (i.e., the potential of multiple spiritual enactments), and equipotentiality (i.e., human beings in totality cannot be ranked because some individual expressions may be superior while others may be inferior) respectively (Ferrer 2017). In totality, these moral principles are pluralistic, without bounds to the cocreation of participatory events. This view frees the integral *bodhisattva* to live life to the fullest. To avoid the postmodern madness of too many liberative choices and to assess if one path of spiritual cocreation is better than another, three tests were suggested that evaluate the outcomes of spiritual practice and morality (Ferrer 2017).

Intrapersonal cocreation is assessed using the dissociation test, which discerns between embodied and disembodied spiritualities. In essence, this test assesses how equally each human attribute (e.g., mind, body, and instinct) participates in the unfolding of the spiritual life path honoring heart-based spiritualities and positive psychospiritual affects (e.g., empathic concern, compassion, love, and openness).

Transpersonal cocreation affirms openness to the subtle dimensions of spirit beyond and is assessed using the egocentrism test, which assesses the freedom from self-centeredness achieved by each particular enactment. The less self-centered participation in life and spirituality and the more compassion and care one extends to others and all beings, the more freedom is experienced by the integral *bodhisattva*. Ethics of care ethics and utilitarian ethics are valued by participatory spirituality. Utilitarian ethics consider the best action as the one that produces the most goodness for the most people.

Interpersonal cocreation is assessed using the eco-sociopolitical test to discern between hierarchical (e.g., elitist exclusivism and sectarianism) and relational spiritualities (e.g., deep dialogue and spiritual humility). Interpersonal cocreation may include other human beings or nonhuman intelligences, such as archetypal forces or subtle beings of the unseen world. Cabot (2018) pointed out that the eco-sociopolitical test aims to assess equalities (e.g., gender, race, class equality), social justice, fundamental human rights, freedom (e.g., religious or political freedom). Overall, the underlying ethics of these tests is rooted in a mixture of consequentialism, care, and utilitarianism.

According to Ferrer (2002, 2017), participatory theory asserts the creative spiritual unfolding of the individual and the alive cosmos. One major assumption of participatory theory is that the cosmos is not pre-given but rather participatively and cocreatively brought forth out of a dynamic matrix of spiritual mystery. Thus, it shifts the personal view of an individual from a Cartesian split ego that experiences the sacred as “other” (subject-object) to a whole human being that spontaneously and naturally participates in the deeper dimensions of life. This expansive view from egocentric and ethnocentric to cosmos-centric dimensions evokes humility and compassion toward a “larger-than-self” dimension. In totality, the integral *bodhisattva* of participatory theory, represents a secularized version of Buddhist *bodhisattva* ethics. The participatory view honors all truths based on other theories and spiritual traditions, thus overcoming reductionistic tendencies in spirituality and religion that tend to limit, simplify, or distort the vast and rich possibilities for human spiritual flourishing.

6.3. Tensions Between Bodhisattva Morals and Contemporary Moral Relativism in the U.S

In the previous sections various *bodhisattva* ethics and morals were presented covering the spectrum from religious Eastern Buddhist and secular Western perspectives. To what extent these *bodhisattva* morals harmonize with contemporary moral relativism and Post-Truth culture in the U.S. is a matter of debate. Moral schisms within a society due to conflicting values or moral disagreements pose potent risks of personal internal conflicts (e.g., in an individual *bodhisattva* or person in general) or may lead to a societal collective breakdown of unity.

Both Buddhist ethics associated with *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* conceptions and ethics associated with the secularized integral *bodhisattva* advocate care morality. Such morality champions truth (rather than lies), equality and justice for all human beings irrespective of their level of suffering or prosperity, prosocial behavior with the key tenet compassion, welfare/well-being for all, and human and planetary/ecosystem flourishing. The *ecosattva* has been recognized as an ecological attuned *bodhisattva* caring for planet Earth (Grunwald 2023a; Loy 2019). Traditional *Theravāda bodhisattva* notions are more self-focused attuned to the *arhat* ideal that seeks personal liberations with less pronounced compassion

aligning with moral indifference and moral relativism. Both Buddhist ethics—*Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna*—share the belief in *karma* to reduce suffering, act virtuously, and build merit which is aligned with consequentialist ethics. In contrast, the secularized natural *bodhisattva* grounded in neurophysicalism is focused on personal meditation practice to foster individual relaxation, well-being, and health aligned with self-centered morality.

In the U.S., Post-Truth morals have been attributed to increased political and cultural polarization with pronounced ethical egoism and morality, declining trust in science and social capital, and growing socioeconomic inequality (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Post-Truth misinformation has been linked to a decline in care for other people through delegitimizing their perspectives and dehumanizing them (Hannon 2023), which contrast the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* attitude to work for the welfare and benefit of all sentient beings. Logan et al. (2021) identified toxic Post-Truth culture as the root cause of declining planetary health which recognizes the interdependent vitality of all natural and human-made ecosystems. Interdependence (codependent origination) is a key tenet in Buddhism that motivates *bodhisattva* actions of “do no harm” to humans, other beings, and the planet.

Contemporary cultural and political notions in the U.S. have found strong expressions of identities and othering with relativistic and social destructive undertones due to Trumpian populism and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement that is reshaping social discourse (Moscowitz 2018; Surowiec and Miles 2021). Such Post-Truth politics and culture have created a hyperreality of “nobody knows anything anymore” and excessive lies and conspiracy theories due to opportunistic truth-denials (Pond 2020). These Post-Truth notions may be comparable with Buddhist notions of “emptiness of emptiness” denying reality of any kind, even denying emptiness. Though Post-Truth hyperreality not only knows no legal and judicial constraints but also oversteps/sidesteps established human moral and ethical boundaries (relativistic ethics); thus, it is antithetical to *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* ethics and morals.

Post-Truth culture celebrates grandiose selfishness (“ethical egoism on steroids”), while benefits and care are only extended to those that belong to the person (or group) in power creating divisive culture structures of privilege, oppression, marginalization, and neglect. Thus, Post-Truth culture stands in opposition to participatory and Buddhist *bodhisattva* ethics that values truth assertions, facts, and despises lying. Post-Truth values also stand in contrast to the fundamental core Buddhist tenet of “do no harm” which intends to guide compassionate actions toward minimizing harm and promoting well-being for all beings including marginalized communities. Post-Truth populism adopts lying and shapeshifting claims as strategies which creates a social system in which opportunism, corruption, autocratic power, social and religious inequalities, and cultural discrimination blossom (Gerrard 2021). Here the person in power defines what kind of morals are applied (autocratic, opportunistic, ethical egoism) leading to moral chaos and moral relativism. Such morals are not grounded in compassion standing in sharp contrast to *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* ethics that value unconditional prosocial emotions, such as empathy, compassion, and loving-kindness for all beings irrespective of them being family, friends, or foes.

The moral dichotomy between *Mahāyāna* and integral *bodhisattva* on the one side and moral relativistic Post-Truth American culture on the other side has inner (psychospiritual) and outer (social and cultural) dimensions. Moral injuries, distress, and injustice imposed by moral relativism may lead to inner moral exhaustion, burnout and fatigue of the *bodhisattva* that diminishes compassionate action and stalls progress to realize liberative goals. The challenge for the *bodhisattva* is to discern between “rights” and “wrongs” that may lead to harm in a chaotic moral Post-Truth culture without falling prey to ‘idiots’ compassion’ causing long-lasting impacts on human and planetary flourishing. Idiots compassion is when a person enables someone’s harmful behavior (e.g., bullying or oppressive behavior)

or distancing behavior to avoid necessary conflict to spare someone else's feelings (e.g., to appear unkind or driven by fear of causing someone discomfort).

In contrast, fierce compassion of a *bodhisattva* manifests a deep commitment to *bodhisattva* ideals irrespective of outer moral insanity and cultural chaos. The paradox is that moral schisms are amplified in Post-Truth America which allows the *bodhisattva* to perceive them with heightened clarity leaving the *bodhisattva* with multiple choices either (1) mobilizing compassionate social actions inspired by deep love and compassion for all beings and the planet, (2) paralyzing compassionate actions out of fear being harmed (by an oppressor, bully, or men in power), or (3) fatiguing compassion detaching from worldly problems and harm due to overwhelm, stresses, moral injuries and injustices. The *bodhisattva*'s loving compassion is the antidote to moral dysfunction and relativism that is perceived as collective madness harming people and planet. The contemporary *bodhisattva* in the U.S. is challenged to unify inner and outer dimensions of psychospiritual inner truths (e.g., loving self, emptiness, Buddha Nature) and outer societal and ecological truths (e.g., compassionate actions, participatory community engagement), while at the same time honoring personal (e.g., individual health and well-being), and soteriological-social-ecological goals (e.g., liberation, human and planetary flourishing, living a meaningful life). From the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* perspective, the Post-Truth *bodhisattva* is not expected to “fix-up” a whole morally degrading system (e.g., U.S. cultural and political system) and turn the ignorance of morally bad actors into religious insights (e.g., Buddha Nature) which would be an unsurmountable task. Instead, the Post-Truth *bodhisattva* cultivates meditation and compassion practices to be in service to people and planet minimizing harm and maximizing human flourishing, cocreating thriving communities, and sustaining ecosystem health (care and consequentialist ethics). The *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* fully awakens (realizes Buddha Nature, again and again) in the moments of relating compassionately and lovingly to oneself, sentient beings, and social and moral injustices and ignorance. Being in the present moment the *bodhisattva* effortlessly discerns with clarity how to act compassionately as a moral agent.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the *bodhisattva* arcs across major understandings of the mystical, with elements stemming from absolutism or spiritual objectivism (e.g., ultimate reality, Skt., *dharmadhātu*), idealism (e.g., idealized *bodhisattvas*), metaphysics (e.g., mystical and cosmic *bodhisattvas*), pluralism (e.g., multiple liberation models), constructivism (e.g., constructed illusory self and no-self), naturalism (e.g., personified and naturalized *bodhisattvas*), and metamodernism (e.g., integral *bodhisattvas*). There is not one *bodhisattva* but there are many different kinds. Eastern and Western views of the *bodhisattva* differ profoundly, as exemplified by the *bodhisattvas* in the *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhists' view and non-Buddhist conceptions, such as the integral and naturalized *bodhisattvas*. The contextualization and different interpretations of *bodhisattvas* aiming to symbolize, personify, idealize, mystify, naturalize, and integrate what is “knowable” and a part of the spiritual realm testify to a pluralistic frame. The partial knowing within, through, and beyond the *bodhisattva* resembles the immanent, descending, and ascending (transcending) dimensions of spirituality and ways of knowing (Daniels 2005). The mystical kernel of the idealized *bodhisattva* in Buddhism is still alive in contemporary forms of the *bodhisattva*. This may be the case because the *bodhisattva*'s creative and paradoxical nature attempts to unify “knowing” and “not knowing”.

In *Theravāda* Buddhism, the *bodhisattva* ideal is grounded in the *arhat*, with great compassion, while in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the *bodhisattva* ideal is the amplification toward all-encompassing compassion and unconditional love of all sentient beings. The *Mahāyāna*

Buddhist's view of *bodhisattvas* flips Western philosophical notions grounded in Cartesian dualism and rationalism upside down, asserting Buddha Nature that discloses the pure, uncontrived, primordial nature that is and has always been present. Buddha Nature resembles epithets of no suffering, empathetic joy, all-encompassing great compassion for all beings, ultimate *bodhicitta*, wisdom as spiritual ultimate, spaciousness, and timelessness. The inner experience of Buddha Nature is the absence of delusion, ignorance, overwhelm, anger, aggression, pride, desire, and attachment—no suffering, pure happiness. *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* Buddhism assert that we are already buddhas, although we are too deluded to recognize it; more precisely, “we are within Buddha Nature”. Thus, persons are considered as “buddhas becoming buddhas”. Here, the liberative goal is the complete surrender into being a buddha and living as a buddha conventionally, with all-encompassing compassion for all beings. According to the *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* views, *bodhisattvas* are less deluded, intentionally cultivate compassion practices to let go of self-delusions, and are more aware than other sentient beings to recognize that they are buddhas. In the same vein, the secularized integral *bodhisattva* advocates for persons to become fuller in their personal expressions (mind, body, heart, and subtle vital energies). From the participatory view, mind–body–spiritual practices are pivotal for fully participating in a compassionate, loving, and caring manner to cocreate a sustainable planet Earth and human flourishing for all beings. Importantly, the participatory view advocates for dynamic unity (subject–object union) without reifying it into a never-changing (timeless, perennialized, personalized, and idealistic) Buddha, like Shakyamuni Buddha, as in some Buddhist traditions. In contrast, the naturalized *bodhisattva* holds a rational, materialistic view of oneself as a person devoid of mystical perceptions and subtle energies that may inspire deeper compassion and care.

Buddhist *bodhisattvas* intentionally cultivate practices and contemplate understanding to shed delusions about reality (e.g., the realization of emptiness of self and phenomena). This spiritual realization is within (realizing that one is a buddha), unconditional from suffering in the world (such as wars, terrors, dramas, social injustice, and inequalities). In the Buddhist's view, the *bodhisattva's* inner realization is what matters rather than the outward demonstration of fixing all worldly problems, which is seemingly impossible. What matters is the inner idealistic attitude of the *bodhisattva* (deep compassion), informing how to act in relationships in the present moment to generate good karma (i.e., act in the least harmful way for oneself, friends, strangers, enemies, humanity, and organisms to reduce suffering and share the Buddha dharma) to bring forth positive outcomes (i.e., fruitional goals, such as happiness, empathic joy, and wisdom). Selfless, unconditional, effortless, and compassionate actions characterize the Buddhist *bodhisattva* as an awakened being, endlessly striving to reduce harm and suffering—from feeding the poor, a smile to a stranger, or helping marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

In contrast, the Western naturalized *bodhisattva* is aligned with Cartesian dualism, neurophysicalism, materialism, and rationalism focused on outer dimensions (material objects) and bifurcated othering into “self” and “other”. Here, compassion and care for other beings is narrower and conditional due to an individualistic egocentric orientation focused on one's own (and close family's and friends') biophysical health and prosperity.

The integral *bodhisattva* embedded in participatory theory is a secularized version of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* asserting the realization of fullness of life through participatory enactments in spiritual events. According to participatory theory, the less egocentric and compassionate (creative spiritualities—transpersonal cocreation), the more embodied through integral mind–body practices and the Integral *Bodhisattva* vow (embodied spiritualities—intrapersonal cocreation), and the more expansive eco-sociopolitical conceptions to sustainability of planet Earth, human flourishing of social communities, and shared

humanity (relational spiritualities—interpersonal cocreation) the fuller the realization of the integral *bodhisattva* (mindfulness, heartfulness, and bodyfulness).

One critical distinction between Buddhist *bodhisattvas* and integral *bodhisattvas* is that the former reifies spiritual ultimates (such as Buddha Nature and ultimate *bodhicitta*), while participatory theory refutes the ontological assertions of primordial spiritual constructs recognized in perennial spiritualities and religions (e.g., perennial divinity). Integral *bodhisattvas* cocreate life and everything in the universe moment-to-moment in a dynamic fashion, embracing a pluralistic philosophy of spiritualities and religions. This view is similar to that of *Mahāmudrā* (tantric Buddhism), which asserts a dynamic unfolding unity between appearance and emptiness. Similarities between participatory theory and Mipam's (*Nyingma* Buddhist tradition) interpretation of "emptiness of emptiness" relaxes the rigid ontological positionality in regard to emptiness and allows multiple interpretations of reality.

In conclusion, the thesis that, in their idealized version, the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, rather than secular Western *bodhisattva* types, inspire human and planetary flourishing and aspire to liberate all sentient beings is accepted. Though surprisingly, the secularized integral *bodhisattva* rooted in the participatory spiritual model closely resembles the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* view. This conclusion is corroborated by the close resemblance in care and consequentialist ethics shared by both the integral and *Mahāyāna bodhisattvas* (Figure 2). However, one discerning element among these two *bodhisattva* models is that the *Mahāyāna bodhisattva* intentionally follows the *bodhisattva* Buddha path with distinct soteriological goals, while the integral *bodhisattva* is spiritually pathless and views the *Mahāyāna* and spiritual liberation only as one out of many possibilities. The secular naturalized *bodhisattva* clearly misappropriates the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist *bodhisattva* model's lack of spiritual goals and rejects any kind of metaphysical assertions. In addition, the naturalized *bodhisattva* falls short of developing unconditional compassion, which has been linked to care and consequentialist ethics (Figure 2).

In contemporary U.S. culture, the Post-Truth madness of moral relativism, transgressing the boundaries of civility and etiquette in terms of speech and actions, as well as postmodernism and modernism, blend with each other in a wild mix of morals and ethics: Buddhist *bodhisattva* ethics, virtue ethics, ethics of care, utilitarian, deontological, consequentialist, and relativistic ethics. In essence, ethics have become relative, and moral positions are constantly contested, especially by people in power. The ethical underpinnings of the Buddhist *bodhisattva* are particularly relevant in contemporary cultures with autocratic, polarizing, and materialistic overtones that undervalue compassion, which is intricately associated with *bodhisattva* ideals and awakened beings striving for human flourishing, compassionate actions, and wisdom. The ancient Buddhist *bodhisattva* and ethics offer an idealized vision aligned with metamodern thoughts, countering contemporary Post-Truth cultural expressions and "Wild-West" relativistic ethics bringing harm and suffering to many. In the U.S. and other Western cultures, the secularized integral *bodhisattva*, focused on psychospiritual development and the cocreation of spiritual events rather than Buddhist *bodhisattva* nomenclature, holds the promise of cocreating compassionate actions and bringing forth human flourishing without having to enculturate traditional Buddhist religious views and practices. Through the deepest level of transpersonal awareness, the realizations of great and all-encompassing compassion, care ethics, and consequentialist (karmic) ethics that inspire human and planetary flourishing for all sentient beings are asserted by the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist *bodhisattva*.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The library resources of the University of Florida were used for the scholarly investigation presented in this paper.

Acknowledgments: I acknowledge the review of an earlier version of the paper and insightful comments by Jorge N. Ferrer, Douglas S. Duckworth, and Kendra Diaz-Ford. Sanskrit and Pali translation to English were reviewed and edited by Douglas S. Duckworth.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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