Empty Selves: A Comparative Analysis of Mahayana Buddhism, Jean-Paul Sartre’s Existentialism, and Depth Psychology

by

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Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Philosophy

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
Acknowledgments

I never meant to major in Philosophy, much less write an honors thesis in the department. I owe my completion of both in large part to the Professors I have had at Wesleyan. I first developed my status as Sartre superfan while in President Roth’s class “The Modern and the Post-Modern”. Then, in Elise Springer’s Ethics course, I realized Philosophy was not simply an old white man’s club, but a provocative, personal, and necessary tool to understand the world and my place in it. I studied Buddhism in a Burmese Monastery in Bodh Gaya, India during the fall of my junior year. While there, I practiced meditation, undertook the bodhisattva vows (kind of like a Buddhist baptism), and decided that ‘non-self’ (anatman) was the concept I wanted to spend my senior year writing about. I cannot say I have come away from this project with any stronger a grasp on the concept of anatman, but it has been a great pleasure to analyze it in such comparative detail.

Thank you to Professor Horst for being a patient, supportive, and kind advisor. You graciously worked with me on topics well outside your philosophical expertise, and did so with profound intelligence and pragmatism. Thank you to Elise Springer for teaching me something significant—be it philosophical or otherwise—at every class meeting and appointment we have shared. Thank you to Joe Rouse for your academic guidance. Thank you to Steve Angle for the generosity and respect with which you lead our Chinese Buddhist Philosophy seminar.

Thank you to my housemates and hallmates, past and present. I had the great fortune to make a whole bunch of lifelong friends on my very first day at Wesleyan, and I am grateful to know each of you. Thank you to Iz, for understanding. Thank you to Kate and Emma, for all the reasons why.

Thank you to Ryan Adams and Miles Davis. Not a word of this thesis was written without your melodies playing in my ears.

And mostly, always, thank you to my mama and step-dad.
The Buddha

Jean-Paul Sartre

Sigmund Freud
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Abstract

My project entails a comparative, cross-cultural exploration of Mahayana Buddhism, Sartre’s Existentialism, and Depth Psychology. In analyzing these three traditions, I necessarily had to rely in large part on prior scholarship. The following material is part summary, part investigation and critique, and part my own suggestions about useful ways to further this fertile cross-cultural philosophical dialogue. I discuss several ways in which this comparative scholarship has already revealed new insights. I also highlight a few key examples of ways this comparative scholarship has attempted to reconcile Buddhist concepts with Western ontological views (Sartre’s in particular), but ends up falsely representing each tradition. I then explore how certain Western Buddhists have transmuted Buddhist terminology onto Western pursuits of individual happiness, and how this process has impacted cross-cultural dialogue. I centralize the similar theoretical approaches to the unconscious taken by Freud and Jung and Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. I use this similarity to discuss the wildly divergent therapeutic strategies stemming from this shared view of the unconscious each tradition suggests.

I conclude this thesis with a comparative study on compassion. The twin concepts of non-self and compassion underlie the entire Mahayana Buddhism project. I first establish the close similarity between the Buddhist ontological view of the self and the Sartrean ontological view of the self. Then, I examine whether the Buddhist moral concept of compassion has any resonant Sartrean moral parallels.
Finally, I contextualize my project within prior scholarship in this field. I point out important comparative issues I have not taken up, and suggest topics that warrant further analysis. I suggest ways in which these three traditions (Mahayana Buddhism, Sartrean Existentialism, and Depth Psychology) can be of service to each other, and more importantly, to us, sentient beings of the 21st century, if we take instructions from them together in an interrelated bundle. These are strange times we are living in, full of gadgets, extreme productivity and business for the sake of business, denser and more rapid communication, but less and less physical human contact. We have nothing to lose from a synthetic understanding of the insights of each of these three frameworks; we do, however, have much to gain.

**How Did This Project Begin?**

I started my research last summer with a deep interest in studying the Buddha’s views on human suffering, mental training, and compassion. I developed a strong foundation in Buddhist philosophy while studying abroad in a Burmese Monastery in Bodh Gaya, India (the site of the Buddha’s Enlightenment). While there, we (a group of thirty-five college students) practiced meditation and studied three distinct Buddhist traditions: Theravada (early Buddhism), Zen (a Mahayanist school), and Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhism). Each Buddhist lineage has a slightly different interpretation of the Buddhist concepts of non-self, emptiness, and universal compassion. I was fascinated by these three concepts in particular, and my four month-long study abroad process left me wondering how all of these philosophically rich Buddhist ideas fit in with Western philosophical traditions. I spent the semester I
returned from India trying to make sense of my new Buddhist knowledge on Western, academic soil here at Wesleyan.

Like most seniors, my original thesis research was far too broad and overly ambitious. Instead of foolishly tackling the entire Western philosophical tradition, I narrowed my focus to just two Western traditions, Sartre’s Existentialism and Freud and Jung’s Depth Psychology. I then chose the Mahayana Buddhism school to focus on within the entire Buddhist project. A substantial amount of comparative work has been done between Zen Buddhism and Western philosophical traditions. Rather than echo the scholarship already done there, I chose to focus on Mahayana Buddhism (Zen is a more specific lineage within Mahayana Buddhism) and the bodhisattva path in particular, a relatively uncharted comparative arena. In choosing these three paradigms, I was initially interested in how each approached the themes of: (non)self, desire, and happiness. In researching prior comparative scholarship, I found significant research comparing Sartre’s version of non-self to the Buddha’s non-self doctrine, as well as research comparing the relationship between Freud’s unconscious and the Mahayana Buddhism account of the unconscious (alayavijnana). However, I was confused about many of the underlying assumptions these comparative essays made, and was troubled by the seemingly hasty, forced attempts to merge aspects of Western and Eastern paradigms in superficially attractive but philosophically non-satisfying ways. Feeling discontent with this research, I found a pocket within this preexisting scholarship to begin my own work.

Instead of adding another drop in the bucket of preexisting scholarship comparing Sartre and Mahayana Buddhism myself, I critique the assumptions and
methodologies utilized by these prior scholars. I also discuss how Eastern and Western cultures differently approach the concept of happiness, and I problematize the way the term has, in many cases, been incorrectly laid onto Buddhist practices by Westerners in recent decades. Throughout this project, I have found great pleasure in being able to use what I have learned as a Philosophy major at Wesleyan (focusing almost exclusively on early modern Western Philosophy) and what I learned abroad in India (Buddhist Philosophy) concurrently. This project is, therefore, the praxis of my preexisting philosophical interests (selfhood, desire, happiness), my philosophical focuses at Wesleyan, and my philosophical studies abroad.

To date, scholar David Loy is the only major Buddhist writer to discuss Buddhism, Existentialism, and Psychology together in any substantial, academic way. His book *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism* informed and helped situate much of my initial investigative work. Whereas his work focuses more on the Zen Buddhist lineage, I have, again, chosen to focus predominately on the Mahayana lineage, and at times, the more specific lineage of Yogacara Buddhism. I argue that Yogacarin Buddhist philosophy and Sartrean ontology share some important foundational claims, though the two are not necessarily as similar as many prior scholars have asserted. Additionally, whereas my work centralizes the similarities between specific Depth Psychology practices and tools (unearthing one’s unconscious, mindfulness) and Existential and Buddhist philosophical standpoints, David Loy is more interested in the field of Psychology at large and its overarching theoretical methods.
Nevertheless, his insight about the general connections between these three fields was a major motivating factor for my own work, and I want to acknowledge his impact.

Methodology

To begin my discussion, I first provide the reader with a general overview of major Buddhist concepts and key themes. Chapter one explains how the ways Buddhists understand the terms ‘self’, ‘emptiness’, and ‘compassion’ are wholly different than dominant Western understandings of these terms. I will outline how these Buddhist concepts are inextricably linked to larger Buddhist cosmogonic understandings, including, most notably, rebirth and karma. I will focus my discussion on Mahayana Buddhist views, rather than on Buddhist thought in general, to usefully prepare the reader for my later specific comparative analyses of Mahayana philosophical thought.

In chapter two I offer the reader a brief overview of Existentialism at large and of Sartre’s views in particular, before jumping into my formal comparative analysis. In chapter three I engage with Derek Heyman’s comparative account of Buddhist and Sartrean ontological claims about the ‘self’. I dissect both the helpful and the problematic ways he has compared the two traditions. In chapter four, I follow a similar structure in recounting the comparative work of Steven Batchelor and Sheridan Hough. Batchelor tackles Buddhism from an Existential vantage point, provocatively arguing that Buddhist philosophy need not include the doctrines of karma and rebirth in its methodology. In doing so, he claims there is a strong similarity between the Buddha’s project and that of the Existentialists Martin
Heidegger, Sartre, and Soren Kierkegaard. I refute Batchelor’s claim, arguing that although he does point out some insightful similarities between Buddhism and Existentialism, his claim that Buddhism can do without karma and rebirth is unsubstantiated and not, ultimately, philosophically helpful to his project. Hough compares Sartre’s novel *Nausea* to the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. I present a close analysis of her work, critique her argumentation, and use her argument as a springboard for my own discussion of the Buddhist counterweight to Sartre’s ‘nauseous’ feeling.

In each analysis, I use these three authors (Heyman, Batchelor, and Hough) as exemplar case studies for the ways in which prior comparative scholarship between Existentialism and Buddhism has been conducted. I end my section on Existentialism offering the reader my own suggestions about the helpful work already established in these comparative analyses, as well as ways in which this research stands to improve.

In chapter five I transition to a discussion of the convergence of Buddhism and Depth Psychology. I am especially concerned with the contemporary Western tendency to pick and choose Buddhist concepts to popularize and use for commercial profit (yoga, meditation classes, mindfulness retreats, Buddhist self-help books), most of which reconfigure these Buddhist concepts in ways disingenuous to the original religious project’s intentions. This is not to say that *all* Western Buddhists wrongly approach and practice the religion. Rather, the general Western trend is to try to align Buddhist practice with Western modes of understanding, rather than to keep all of its Eastern social and cultural origins in tact. Specifically, Western Buddhists tend to place undue emphasis on individual happiness, and tend to disregard the fundamental
Buddhist concepts of karma and rebirth. The Mahayana path involves practitioners following the life of a bodhisattva, one who is concerned not with his/her own personal happiness, but with reducing the suffering of all sentient beings. A pursuit of individual happiness does not factor into the bodhisattva’s intent. However, I am not convinced this is wholly problematic. Rather, I suggest only that the tendency to use Buddhist practices in pursuit of a Western understanding of personal happiness is becoming more widespread, and I want to draw attention to this phenomenon. I will engage the reader in several other accounts of modern convergences of these two traditions, and will suggest ways in which the two can stand to be more respectful of cultural differences while still continuing to be in engaged in critical comparative dialogue.

In chapter six I offer a comparative analysis of the Buddhist concept of compassion and Sartrean ethics. I analyze whether the Buddhist sense of compassion ‘spontaneously arising’ upon one’s realization of non-self has any resonant parallels in either Sartre’s Existentialism or Depth Psychology. Finally, chapter seven provides a summary of the arguments made within this thesis. It also reviews what preexisting comparative scholarship has already revealed, and highlights areas where further research would be helpful for continuing this comparative dialogue.
Chapter 1: A Buddhism Primer

The Buddha declared that to have heard this teaching is to have heard all teachings, to have put it into practice is to have done all practices, and to have reaped the fruits of that practice is to have reaped all fruits: Nothing whatsoever should be clung to as 'I' or 'mine.'

-Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, "A Single Handful"

N.B. I have provided an index of Buddhist terminology at the end of this thesis (pp. 161-163). It may be helpful here.

A statement of purpose

I use this opening chapter to introduce the reader to Buddhist terminology and its overarching philosophical views. It would be foolish of me to take on the entire Buddhist canon in my cross-cultural comparative analyses, and equally foolish to attempt to present a satisfying summary of each of the Buddha’s philosophical views in my opening chapter. As such, I have chosen to focus my thesis on the Mahayana Buddhist lineage. This chapter’s overview of Mahayanist philosophical concepts will reveal that many of their core beliefs hold true across all Buddhist lineages.

My discussions of karma and Dependent Origination are particularly focused on Yogacarin (a branch within the Mahayana Buddhist school) understandings of these concepts. Because my later comparative chapters focus heavily on the Yogacara school, I thought it would be most helpful to provide their specific interpretations of these important concepts. However, I admit that some of the claims I will make about karma in comparison to Sartre’s ontology in chapters three and six hold true only under the Yogacarin interpretation of karma. It is beyond the scope of my research to provide a full sense of the various Buddhist interpretations of karma,
though I think this would be a very useful point of exploration for future comparative research between Sartre’s and the Buddha’s ethical systems.

Buddhism as Philosophy

Mark Siderits wrote an entire book defending Buddhism as a philosophy, and it may be helpful to sketch out a few of his key points to help situate the reader to my project’s ‘Buddhism as philosophy’ lens.

Buddhism is a religion in the sense that it is a set of teachings addressing soteriological concerns. But being a Buddhist does not entail simply accepting all of the Buddha’s claims at face value. Instead, liberation (synonymous with nirvana and Enlightenment) is attained through an individual’s rational investigation into the nature of the world and his/her own mind. Each Buddhist practitioner is expected to examine the Buddha’s teachings and then determine for him/herself whether these claims are true. Siderits outlines the practice as such: the teachings of Buddhism are based on objective facts about the nature of reality and our place in it. These facts are thought of as things that human reason can apprehend without reliance on superhuman revelation.1 The Buddha was, at first, simply an ordinary man who sought a solution to his mental suffering. He discovered this solution for himself through a path he called ‘The Middle Way’, and then taught this path others based on his own experiences. Integral to understanding Buddhism as a philosophy is remembering that the ‘point’ of Buddhist practice is to attain Enlightenment.

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One might wonder how to even study Buddhism as a philosophy? It primarily involves studying the Buddha’s sutras and teachings. Many of his teachings were given orally, and have been passed down for generations. Buddhist practitioners receive oral transmissions from current enlightened beings who are, it is thought, reincarnations of prior enlightened beings. Like any religion, Buddhism has several seemingly non-sensical rules that ordained monks and nuns must follow. However, Buddhism is, according to philosopher Owen Flanagan, “first and foremost a complex philosophy about the nature of reality, the self and morality.”² The Buddha presented many of his teachings more like scientific facts, rather than spiritual words of a higher power. He aimed to reveal the truth, through teachings his followers the path to end suffering.

**Buddhist Lineages**

Buddhism is generally divided into three distinct phases: Theravadin (early Buddhism), Mahayana (‘The Greater Vehicle’) and Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhism). My thesis focuses on the Mahayana school. The Mahayana Buddhism philosophical phase was a time of criticism of earlier Buddhist doctrines (Abhidharma) as well as revisions to these prior views. In this way, the original Mahayana Buddhists can be thought of as reformists, insofar as they provided an alternative account of what Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology should look like.³ Within the Mahayana revisionist phase of Buddhist philosophical development, a number of different smaller schools developed, each reflecting slightly different approaches and

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interpretations to the Buddha’s teachings. Though my Buddhism overview focuses on these Mahayana claims at large, later on in my text I will narrow in more specifically to the Yogacara lineage, a school best known for its arguments in favor of a sort of Buddhist idealism.

**Mahayana Buddhism**

Mahayanists differentiate themselves from other Buddhist lineages in terms of two key ideas: the bodhisattva ideal and the doctrine of emptiness. Many Mahayanists argue that the concept of the bodhisattva ideal proves Mahayana Buddhism to be morally superior to earlier Theravadin lineages, which do not recognize the bodhisattva ideal. A bodhisattva is a being who has attained Enlightenment but chooses to stay in the samsaric realm (rather than in Nirvana) to help other sentient beings also attain Enlightenment. Differently, the arhat is a being who has also attained Enlightenment, but who has sought it only for him/herself. Whereas the bodhisattva practices the Buddhist path knowing he/she will remain in samsara after liberation to help all other sentient beings also liberate themselves, the arhat never makes this promise. Thus many Mahayanists claim that the bodhisattva’s compassion reflects true selflessness, and a superiority absent from the ‘selfish’ arhat path followed by early Buddhists (Hinayana).  

The differences between these two types of enlightened beings are not as drastic as they may seem. Aspiring bodhisattvas have to devote all of their energy to attaining their own Enlightenment before they can help others. Thus until liberation

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4 I will offer the original Sanskrit terms in parentheticals throughout this thesis.
is attained, the path of the bodhisattva and that of the arhat are exactly the same. Both types of beings have to experientially discover the Buddha’s insights of non-self and impermanence for themselves through rigorous meditation and study. But once this is completed, bodhisattvas undergo a series of preparatory compassion practices to be of service to other beings seeking Enlightenment. The bodhisattva path is by no means limited to a single lifetime. By deciding to undertake this path, the bodhisattva works to attain Enlightenment (in however many lifetimes it takes) and then remains trapped in the cycle of rebirth indefinitely to help all beings attain Enlightenment.

As we can see, then, if one does not believe in karma and rebirth, the Mahayana notion of the bodhisattva path seems like nonsense, and the difference between the arhat and the bodhisattva collapses. However, very few Buddhist scholars propose understandings of Buddhist that reject karma and rebirth, and the difference between the arhat and the bodhisattva is still maintained in most every account of Buddhist philosophy.

Mahayana Buddhism’s other distinguishing claim is the idea of emptiness. It is a step beyond the non-self doctrine, arguing in favor of not only the emptiness of the self, but of all conditioned things. All Buddhist lineages support the non-self doctrine, but only Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists support the concept of complete emptiness. All Buddhists take it to be true that there is no essential essence to a person, that there is no self. The Buddha argued that the entities we call ‘persons’ are just a bundle of five impermanent, constantly arising and passing aggregates (skandhas). There is no permanent ‘self’ within a person. Instead, there are only the five impermanent aggregates which, combined, make up the illusion of a
permanent self. This depiction of the self maps onto Sartre’s understanding of the ego fairly well. However, the Mahayana Buddhists not only accept the non-self doctrine, but they also claim that things besides persons lack essences. The Buddhist word for things is ‘dhammas’. Some Buddhist schools also refer to dhammas as ‘conditioned moments’. Mahayanists argue that the bundle of aggregates (five skhandas) that make up the conceptual fiction of a ‘self’ are themselves full of impermanent dhammas, the karmically conditioned material that binds beings to samsara.

Therefore, Mahayanists claim that the earlier Buddhist lineages (those who adhere to Abhidharma interpretations of the Buddha’s teachings) do not understand the ultimate truth. They claim that such prior teachings are conventionally true, but not entirely true insofar as they do not recognize that all things (dhammas) lack essences. This use of the term ‘conventional’ does not merely imply the kind of things that are made true by the fact that we have conventions about them. Rather, conventional truth is a Buddhist concept differentiated from ultimate truth in the Two Truths Doctrine. The Two Truths Doctrine states that conventional, or relative/common-sense truths describe our daily experiences in the concrete, material world, whereas ultimate truths describe the ultimate reality of emptiness, a world void of concrete or inherent characteristics. The ultimate reality is a realm only knowable by enlightened beings.

Therefore, the Mahayana Buddhists claim that earlier Hinayana teachings (the Lesser Vehicle) reveal only the conventional truth, which means they (the early teachings) have failed to get at the ultimate nature of reality. Mahayanists criticize
earlier lineages for not realizing that the ‘self’ is not the only illusory, unreal
substance. In fact, Mahayanists argue, the ultimate truth is that all things are empty.

Many scholars argue that the Mahayanist doctrine of emptiness leads directly
to metaphysical nihilism. However, the particular Mahayana Buddhist school that my
thesis is most interested in, Yogacara, refutes this critique and attempts to reinterpret
the doctrine of emptiness in such a way that it does not lead to nihilism. The two
major Buddhist schools within Mahayana Buddhism who offer complex
philosophical arguments about emptiness are Yogacara and Madhyamaka. I provide
Siderits’ summary of the Yogacarin view here:

On the Yogacara reinterpretation, to say all things are empty is to say that all things
lack the natures that are attributed to them through our use of concepts. They hold,
that is, that whenever we cognize something by identifying it as falling under some
concept, we are in some sense falsifying it. Yogacara identifies two reasons (and
develops arguments for each) why all conceptualization should involve falsification
of what is ultimately real. The first is that when we conceptualize, we impost a
subject-object dichotomy on reality: we think in terms of an object ‘out there’ and a
cognizing subject ‘in here’. This dichotomizing structure falsifies reality because
there is no external world. The second reason is that, according to Yogacara,
ultimately real things are by nature unique and so ineffable. To apply a concept to
something is to say it belongs together with other things that also fall under that
concept. To say something is red is to say it resembles certain other things in respect
of its being red. But if everything is unique, this can never be true.5

I will discuss the Yogacarin view of emptiness in comparison to Sartre’s
dualism in chapter three.

The Four Noble Truths

Before attaining Enlightenment, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was just an
ordinary guy. He sought to end his own suffering. He initially followed a life of

5 Siderits (2007), p. 144
extreme asceticism, wherein he was starving, weak, ill. He struggled to maintain his 
meditation practice while alone in abandoned caves in Northern India. Upon meeting 
villagers in a town near his cave, he was offered rice and in this moment he realized 
his extreme asceticism was not the way to liberation. In accepting this rice, he 
discovered the ‘Middle Way’, a path between the two extremes of asceticism and 
sensual pleasure. He then meditated upon this Middle Way under the Bodhi tree in 
Northern India, and fully liberated his mind from suffering. Having achieved 
liberation, he then sets out to teach those around him about his path so that they to 
could achieve liberation. All of his complex philosophical teachings are extensions 
of his most fundamental teaching of the Four Noble Truths. These truths are:

1. There is suffering
2. There is the origination of suffering: suffering comes into existence in 
   dependence on causes (12 links of Dependent Origination)
3. There is the cessation of suffering: all future suffering can be prevented
4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

The first truth pretty much speaks for itself. The Buddha argued that this 
universal human truth needed to be stated, and stated plainly, because most ordinary 
people are in denial about the universality of suffering. By suffering, the Buddha did 
not simply mean only the ordinary pains we feel when we are injured or sick. 
Instead, he outlined three distinct types of suffering: suffering due to pain, suffering 
due to impermanence, and suffering due to conditions. The first type of suffering is 
the ‘ordinary’ sense of pain: being cut/burnt, having a headache, loosing a prized 
possesion, etc. In this type of suffering there is often the initial pain itself and then
an accompanying sense of worry or mental pain, as in, ‘Ow my tooth hurts! I am uncomfortable! When will this stop?’

The second type of suffering includes all negative experiences humans derive from a failure to recognize that all things are important. This type of suffering involves both painful and pleasurable experiences. The Buddha claimed that there is suffering in both senses—the suffering involved in avoiding pain and the suffering involved in grasping and clinging to pleasure. Both types of feelings are impermanent, and our human tendencies to try to keep things as they are—clinging to pleasure and avoiding pain—result in suffering.

The last of type of suffering refers to an existential type of suffering. This is the frustration, alienation, and despair that result from the realization of our own human mortality. The Buddha argued that all humans want their lives to go well, and part of this requires that our lives have some sort of meaning, value, and/or purpose. Existential suffering arises when one acknowledges his/her own mortality, making it “difficult to sustain the sense that events can have significance for (one’s) life.” This third type of suffering resembles Sartre’s views on human existence, which I will discuss in chapter four.

The second noble truth is a condensation of the twelve links of dependent origination. Dependent Origination is a circular chain of every factor of existence in samsara. The Buddha argued that there are twelve factors or links. Ignorance is the first link on the chain, and death is the last. I provide a graphic and fuller description of this chain in a few pages.

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7 Siderits (2007), p. 19
The third truth follows directly from the second. It states that ignorance is a remediable condition, and that it is possible to put an end to the cyclical loop of suffering. Lastly, the fourth truth outlines a set of eight practices designed to cure one’s suffering. These practices in sum are called the Eightfold Path. They are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exertion, right self-possession, and right concentration. When a Buddhist practitioner begins the path, he/she adopts these eight practices and applies them to his/her life.

The other major part of the Buddhist path is meditation practice, which teaches sentient beings to control their minds. This control is used to “examine various mental processes and counteract those processes that perpetuate ignorance and suffering.”\(^8\) The highly phenomenological component of Buddhist philosophy and its soteriological aims are integral to the practice. One cannot attain Enlightenment solely through rigorous study of the Buddha’s teachings. Beings have to meditate individually to understand these teachings and how relate the teachings to their own particular lives and mental experiences. There is not a one size fits all strategy to liberation. Each Buddhist practitioner must work with his/her own unique set of karmic conditioning and cognitive factors to begin to liberate him/herself from suffering.

**Non-Self (Anatman)**

The concept of non-self (anatman) is central to all of the Buddha’s philosophical claims. It is in conflict with most Western views about the self. In

\(^8\) Siderits (2007), p. 25
order to understand the non-self claim in full, we must first parse out the distinction between the terms ‘self’ and ‘person’. Mark Siderits calls the most widely accepted Buddhist understanding of non-self ‘Buddhist Reductionism’. He understands ‘self’ as the one part of a being that is the essence, and ‘person’ as the psycho-physical complex as a whole. Buddhist Reductionism, then, implies:

1. There is no self.

2. The person is a conceptual fiction, something that is only conventionally and not ultimately real.  

Now let us look at how the non-self doctrine works in tandem with other Buddhist views. In Buddhism, the three central marks of existence are: 1. Non-self (anatman), 2. Impermanence (anicca) 3. Suffering (dukkha). These three are closely interconnected. Because sentient beings fail to realize that there is no permanent or essential self, they suffer. Impermanence describes the momentariness of all phenomena. All conditioned things are impermanent. This is not a particularly novel idea. ‘This too shall pass’, one could argue, expresses the same sentiment. But, the Buddha’s insight about impermanence did not simply stop at the level of realizing this truth. Rather, one’s understanding of impermanence eventually leads to liberation. Impermanence, a constant state of flux, is the true nature of existence. The Buddha argued that all conditioned things are impermanent. Recall the Buddhist term for these ‘conditioned things’ is ‘dhammas’. Buddhists define dhammas as phenomena or constituent factors of the material world. Roughly speaking, they are the impermanent, constantly arising and passing ‘things’ in the universe. These

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‘things’ are the building blocks that create one’s karmic conditioning, constitutive of both one’s skillful and unskillful actions. Through deep meditation and mindfulness practices, Buddhist practitioners begin to see the moment to moment arising and passing of all phenomena. Everything is constantly in flux, even the entity humans mistakenly think of as a fixed, permanent ‘self’. But through understanding impermanence, we can begin to loosen our grip on notions of a fixed self by realizing there is nothing to hold onto. The third mark of existence, suffering (dukkha), recalls the first of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths.

Importantly, Buddhism stresses not just a philosophical understanding of these truths, but also encourages an experiential understanding of these truths through individual meditation practice. The Buddha argued that only through seeing through our own unique delusions for ourselves, and really understanding the ultimate nature of our causal conditioning, can true Enlightenment take place. Every being has a unique set of mental conditioning, based on his/her past karmic actions. Through meditation, we each discover how our own minds work, and we gradually work with our minds to understand the Buddha’s teachings as applied to our own unique sets of life conditions. Meditation is the main experiential tool, and the Buddha’s teachings are the main source of study. Study and meditation practice are thus fully enmeshed in one another.

The Doctrine of Anatman (No-Self), at its most basic level, states that there is no enduring self that accounts for identity over time. It denies that there is anything like a soul, an essence, or any enduring substance forming a permanent ‘self’. All major Buddhist lineages argue that ‘persons’, fixed physical entities, do not exist. Rather,
sentient beings are just a bunch of impermanent mental and physical elements that, in aggregation, constitute what seems like a permanent whole. What humans mistakenly take to be an enduring self is in fact a bundle of the five skandhas (aggregates). The Buddha argued that there is no part of the ‘self’ that is not accounted for in these five skandhas.

These five skandhas are: rupa (body), vedana (feelings of pleasure, pain, or indifference), samjna (perception), samskara (volition—mental activity, desires, emotions), and vijnana (consciousness—the awareness of physical and mental states). Mark Siderits describes the Buddhist skandhas through a chariot analogy. He explains, “just as a chariot does not consist in any of its particular parts, but is only a name that we ascribe to the whole complex of parts, so too for the person and the self: neither consists in any of its particular parts; both are only names that we ascribe to the complex of parts taken as a whole.”

The Buddha’s strategy for disproving a permanent self was to analyze each skandha in turn and to show that nothing included in that particular skhanda could count as a self. In order for his strategy to work, he needed to show that the five skandhas give an exhaustive analysis of every part of the person. Mark Siderits terms this the ‘exhaustiveness claim’, the argument that every factor of an illusory ‘self’ is included in one or more of the five skandhas. The most common of Buddha’s arguments for non-self is the argument from impermanence, which

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10 Siderits (2007), p. 50
implicitly uses the exhaustiveness claim. It is as follows:\(^{12}\):

1. Rupa is impermanent
2. Vedana is impermanent
3. Samjna is impermanent
4. Samskara is impermanent
5. Vijnana is impermanent
6. If there were a self it would be impermanent

IP (There is no more to the person than the five skandhas)

C Therefore, there is no self.

Thus the Buddha argues that he has successfully disproven the existence of a permanent self. He states that using the term ‘person’ is simply a useful heuristic. The person is only conventionally real, but not ultimately real. Using the term ‘person’ is necessary for beings to communicate through language, but is not a substantially significant term.

**Karma and Rebirth**

Karma denotes the cause and effect relationships between one’s present actions and one’s previous and future actions. Karmic actions are made up of dharmas (impermanent phenomenon), constantly arising and passing in each moment. Karmic actions are generally classified as *kusala* (beneficial) or *akusala* (harmful). The karma accrued by a person, like the self, is not a fixed, permanent

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\(^{12}\) Siderits (2007), p. 39
substance. Rather, one’s actions in each and every moment change one’s karmic conditioning constantly. The laws of karma basically concern receiving pleasant results for acting out of morally good motives, and receiving painful results for acting with evil intentions. There is no ultimate moral police force decreeing what is and is not good. Instead, karma is understood as a “set of impersonal causal laws that simply describe how the world happens to work”. In this way, the Buddha thought of the laws of karma like the law of gravity—no one passes this law, and no one enforces it. For Buddhist practitioners, the laws of karma are plain causal laws with no exceptions. Importantly, one’s actions of body, speech, and mind all affect one’s karma. So, even one’s thoughts are thought of as intentional acts, and negative self-dialogue produces harmful (akusala) karma.

One’s karma spans many lifetimes. Rebirth comes part and parcel with accepting the laws of karma. How a sentient being acts in this life affects his/her future rebirths, just as the way he/she acted previously is responsible for the type of being he/she has currently been reborn as. Sentient beings stay locked in the cycle of rebirths and karmic actions until they attain Enlightenment. These notions of karma and rebirth are perhaps the most antithetical to prevailing Western common sense world-views of any of the Buddha’s teachings. But to Buddhists as well as many other religious and non-religious persons throughout India and various parts of Asia, rebirth and karma are basic, foundational concepts. Throughout my thesis I argue that prior cross-cultural comparisons between Buddhism and Depth Psychology and Existentialism have often failed to

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13 Siderits (2007), p. 9
take into consideration the ways in which karma and rebirth drastically
differentiate Buddhism from these Western philosophical traditions. I will
discuss karma at length in chapter four.

Let us now put the Buddhist concepts of non-self and karma together. The
Buddha thought of existence as a causal stream of arising and passing moments,
each uniquely colored with karmic conditioning. The term ‘person’ is used to
denote that which accrues or is the receptacle of the chains of karmic conditioning
in each moment. It is the substance to which specific karmic actions adhere.
However, just like the constantly changing nature of karmic conditioning, the
aggregation of elements that comprise the ‘person’ are also constantly changing.
The person is none other than a bundle of the five skandhas, which are themselves
impermanent.

It has been a general trend in recent Buddhist scholarship to conflate the non-
self doctrine with attaining Enlightenment. The insight of non-self helps lead one
to complete liberation. However, liberation, on the Buddhist account, is not
simply the insight of non-self. Instead, Enlightenment is attained through the
cessation of all of one’s mental obscurations. This involves an emptying of one’s
unwholesome karmic conditioning through engaging in wholesome actions. This
often requires several rebirths. On the Mahayana Buddhist account, by accruing
wholesome karmic conditioning, sentient beings can gradually remove
obscurations on their individual strands of karmic conditioning. This allows for
not merely an understanding of non-self, but a full awakening to the emptiness of
all phenomena. For Mahayana Buddhists, this full, ultimately true insight about
the emptiness of all phenomena leads complete liberation.

There are interesting comparisons between the Buddhist Reductionist view of persons and recent views of self in cognitive science, such as the narrative view of the self (the view that we see ourselves as the authors of self-constituting narratives). Further, Derek Parfit’s seminal text *On Reason and Persons* provides what is perhaps the most compelling Western defense of reductionism. I will discuss a few overlapping strands of ‘self’ arguments between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions in my comparison of Sartre’s account of the self and the Buddhist non-self doctrine in chapter three.

12 Links of Dependent Origination (Pratitya Samutpada)

Now that I have outlined the central tenants of non-self, I will explore what the Buddhists mean by the samsaric cycle of existence. This is what the second of the Four Noble Truths (There is an origin of suffering) refers to. The 12 links (nidanas) of dependent origination (partitya-samutpada) are a framework to explain several key aspects of Buddhist thought. The chain can be thought of as a formula or description of the mental conditioning binding sentient beings to karma-accruing samsaric rebirths. Each Buddhist school developed their own interpretation of the dependent origination doctrine, placing emphasis on different aspects of the circular chart. Implicit within the chain is the belief desire and craving/clinging/attachment are fundamentally negative, and that these feelings attract unwanted karma to a person’s causal conditioning. Buddhists view desire as a negative entity, something that must

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14 Siderits (2007), p. 299
be overcome and de-conditioned. This is in contrast to many Western traditions that encourage the cultivation of one’s desires.

The 12 links of dependent origination are most often visually represented as a circle, wherein each of the twelve links is causally connected to all the others, and each is a part of a complex process of karmic conditioning. The first link on the chain, avidya, is roughly translated ‘ignorance’. Philosopher Dan Lusthaus calls it “a basic and ubiquitous nescience, the fundamental ‘non-knowing’ due to which beings are bound in samsara…(it is) taken to be indicative of the root problem of the human condition". The idea here is that because ignorance exists, there arises samskara (embodied conditioning), the second link in the chain, which gives rise to the third link, and so on and so forth throughout all twelve links.

Sentient beings stay locked in the chain of dependent origination until these chains are gradually ‘unhooked’, from death (link twelve) all the way back to ignorance (link 1), at which point Enlightenment is realized. These twelve links are interrelated and exist simultaneously, as part of one cohesive cycle of living in the samsaric realm.

The twelve links are as follows: 1. Ignorance, 2. Mental Formation, 3. Consciousness, 4. Mind/Matter (the five skandhas), 5. Six Senses, 6. Contact, 7. Feeling, 8. Craving, 9. Clinging, 10. Becoming, 11. Birth, 12. Aging and Death. When the five skandhas (link 4) give rise to the six sense organs—seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, hearing, and mental faculties (link 5), these organs have contact (link 6) with the material world, and this contact is the source of our suffering.

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Contact causes sentient beings to distinguish an object as pleasant, painful, or neutral. These sensations give rise to cravings, which form attachments to that which is pleasurable and aversion towards that which is painful. Desire is thought of both as this grasping towards that which is pleasurable, and the aversion towards that which is painful. In either case, sentient beings locked in samsara fail to realize the impermanence of all moments and things, and hope to prolong pleasurable experiences, despite inherent momentariness of all phenomena. Additionally, through this mistaken view, negative karma continues to accrue so one ‘becomes’ (link 9), a fully formed being with his/her own unique, impermanent stream of karmic conditioning based on his/her desires and unwholesome actions.
The chart above illustrates the cyclical nature of Dependent Origination, and the interconnectedness of the twelve links. Death (link 12) leads to a rebirth on the chain starting at ignorance (link 1), and this cycle of rebirths repeats itself until a being attains liberation from samsara. The clockwise arrows on the diagram illustrate the life cycle of a being stuck in samsara throughout multiple rebirths (after death, one is reborn again into ignorance), whereas a counterclockwise movement on the wheel is the way towards liberation. Buddhist practices aim at gradually unlocking each of these twelve links in a counterclockwise fashion. Eventually, one gains insight into the extent of his/her ignorance (link 1) and is thereby freed from bondage of the chain altogether. By gaining insight into one’s causal conditioning and all sentient beings’ fundamental ignorance, one can awaken into a state free from karmic bondage (Nirvana).

Yogacara

I have already outlined the basic views of the Mahayana Buddhists, but I would also like to provide the reader with a brief background in the specific lineage Yogacara. The Yogacara school is often thought of as Buddhist idealism, or ‘consciousness only’ Buddhism. Recall that whereas the earlier Buddhist schools (Hinayana) espoused the doctrine of non-self but did not go so far as the doctrine of emptiness, the Mahayana schools did support claims both about non-self and the emptiness of all phenomena. The general argument for emptiness is that all dharmas (conditioned arisings, which form the basis of karmic conditioning) are void of inherent suchness. The earlier Buddhist schools took these dharmas to be substantial
things in themselves. The Theravadin schools rejected the idea that a permanent ‘self’ exists but supported the idea that these dharmas ultimately exist. Yogacarins, however, reject the essential nature of even these minute substantial dharmas.

The Yogacara school is one of the two major branches of Mahayana Buddhism (the other is Madhyamaka), and they provide their own specific defense supporting the doctrine of emptiness. Yogacara literally means ‘the practice of yoga’, though this is perhaps misleading. The Yogacarins maintain a type of idealism, holding that nothing exists other than mental things. Yogacarin leader Vasubandhu presented the strongest argument for the school’s ‘impressions-only’ view in his text *Vimsatika*. He explained, “This (world) is nothing but impressions, since it manifests itself as an unreal object, just like the case of those with cataracts seeing unreal hairs in the moon and the like.”

By this he means that when people with cataracts look at the moon and have the experience of seeing the moon as covered with hairs, their sensory experience is just like that of someone with normal vision. However, there are no hairs on the moon, so it cannot be true that that is what they are seeing. These people with cataracts are seeing something, though, and they are aware of this mental image. Vasubandhu calls these mental images impressions. He states that these impressions manifest themselves as external objects when in fact there is actually nothing outside of mind. The impression of hairs on the moon present themselves to the person with cataracts as if they were external objects, causing such person to earnestly, but mistakenly, believe there are hairs on the moon.

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16 Siderits (2007), p. 149
This example applies to all similar sensory cases, not just to persons with cataracts. Sensory experiences all seem to be presenting something that is ‘really real’ in the external world when in fact nothing exists there. Therefore, the contents of sensory experience are only impressions—mental images that are not representations of external objects. These impressions themselves, it is worth noting, are also empty on the Yogacarin account. Ultimately, they are not representations at all. Rather, the illusion arises from mistaking impressions for representations.

From this foundation, the Yogacarins then interpret the distinctive Mahayana teaching of emptiness (all dharmas are empty) as the claim that they all lack intrinsic natures. Humans wrongly superimpose a nature on these dharmas.\(^\text{17}\) The Yogacarins claim that this tendency to superimpose intrinsic natures on dharmas leads to the false duality of ‘grasped and grasper’, a dichotomy between the external world and self. Vasubandhu and the Yogacarins believed that the way to dissolve this clinging to the unreal external world is to fully overcome one’s belief in the illusory self. That is, to gain insight into the non-self doctrine. Vasubandhu argues that once humans see why physical objects cannot exist, they will lose all temptation to think there is a true ‘self’ within. Thus seeing that all dharmas are really just impressions will free beings from the false constructions of object and subject and the false conception of ‘I’.\(^\text{18}\)

Vasubandhu is not claiming that no dharmas whatever exist. This would cause a quick lapse into nihilism. Instead, he is arguing that all dharmas are empty of any intrinsic nature. Vasubandhu thereby gives the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness an idealist reinterpretation.

\(^{17}\) Siderits (2007), p. 175
\(^{18}\) Siderits (207), p. 175
Now let us move on to an overview of another philosophical tradition, Existentialism. I provide the reader with a brief primer on Existentialism and how Sartre’s writings in particular fit within the tradition, before moving on to a critical comparison of Existentialism and Buddhism.
Chapter 2: An Existentialism Primer

*Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. It is up to you to give [life] a meaning.*

- Jean-Paul Sartre

*We are our choices.*

- Jean-Paul Sartre

*Life begins on the other side of despair.*

- Jean-Paul Sartre

Introduction

Steven Batchelor, among others, claims there is a close similarity between Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and Existential philosophy, particularly the writings of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. This is hardly a new idea. However, his provocative text, *Alone With Others*, makes connections between the Buddhist concept of non-self and Sartre’s account of the self (ego) with unprecedented specificity. His comparisons have laid a foundation for further work in this comparative arena.

In his acutely personal book, Batchelor discusses several connections between his own Buddhist practice and Existentialist arguments. He approaches the comparison not from an academic or theoretical perspective, but rather from the perspective of a serious Buddhist practitioner. Batchelor writes to a primarily Buddhist, or at least Buddhist-literate audience. He is not an Existential scholar. He
is a Buddhist practitioner and teacher, with insightful connections between two philosophically distinct approaches to existence.

Though I find Batchelor’s text compelling and highly instructive, it is also somewhat incomplete. While some scholars have continued the work he started, most of these published works centralize the connections between Zen Buddhism and Sartre’s ontology (Laycock 2001 and Bosart 1986, for instance). Very few scholars have explored the connection between Sartre’s philosophy and that of the specific Mahayana Buddhist lineage Yogacara. This is the task I want to take up here.

In this chapter, I first introduce the reader to the overarching themes and ideas of Existential philosophy. Then in the subsequent two chapters, I will delve a bit more deeply into Sartre’s work in particular, centralizing his arguments about dualism, ego, and authenticity in comparison to Yogacarin arguments about these topics. I focus on dualism, ego, and authenticity in an effort to roughly line my assessment up with that of Batchelor in scope and density of material, so that I can fairly draw upon his lines of reasoning. But first, let us review the major tenets of Existentialism.

**Existentialism**

It is difficult to explain this philosophical tradition briefly. Because Existentialism is not “a product of antecedent intellectual determinations, but a free transmutation of living experience,”¹⁹ it does not have one simple definition. Nevertheless, we can discuss its overarching viewpoints, and examine its place within

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the Western philosophical tradition. The field of Existentialism is a “recoil from rationalism…Existentialists (do not) deny the role of reason, they merely insist that its limits be acknowledged.” Further, Existentialism is a complex movement combining philosophical, literary, political, psychoanalytical, and religious influences. The movement holds Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche as its predecessors, and holds Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, and Simone de Beauvoir as its most prominent figureheads.

Max Charlesworth explains that the writings of Sartre and Camus in particular are linked with the spirit of the times in that they

Expressed in philosophy and literature what post-war European people felt in their bones—the fact that the traditional and familiar world of moral and social values had collapsed, that life was ‘absurd’, that God was not in his heaven and that all was not well with the world.21

These Existential figures, informed by all of the collapsing, changing paradigms around them, began to write as a way to try to make sense of their places in the world. With a rather bleak worldly outlook, post-war European men asked themselves “why is life worth living?” Existential writers attempt to answer these questions, and searched for solutions to the seemingly overwhelming sense of anguish floating among their fellow men. In doing so, several key themes emerged. Most Existentialist thinkers agree on the following points: 1. The idea that there is no justification for our existence, 2. That there is no fixed human nature or essential constitutive factor of human lives, and 3. That our human existence is alienated. We humans are, Existentialists concur, alienated from ourselves, from others, and from the world. We rarely, if ever, feel at home within ourselves/our bodies, with our

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21 Charlesworth, p. 2
emotions, with our relationships with others, or with the external world. The million-dollar question for these Existential philosophers was: What do we do about it? That is, how ought humans to deal with the alienated condition of worldly existence?

Each Existentialist thinker characterizes the acknowledgment of our human condition in slightly different terms, none of which were particularly positive. Kierkegaard, for example, emphasizes the extreme anxiety an understanding of our condition produces. Sartre writes about his despairing feeling of nausea. The upshot, if there is one, for Sartre, is that we humans can choose to construct our own individual meanings for our lives, since there is no predetermined human essence preceding one’s existence. We are able to create ourselves through the uniquely human freedom of choice, and to continuously discover and create new reasons for our lives.

Sartre

Sartre is perhaps most famous for arguing that man’s existence precedes his essence. By this he means that human beings have no essential selves or souls that make us who we are. We exist first, and then we get to create a sort of meaning or essence for ourselves. Sartre states, “We simply are, without any such constraints making us exist in any particular fashion, and it is only later that we come to accord our existence any essence.”22

Sartre also suggests that this essence-less existence ‘condemns us to freedom’. He is known for suggesting that humans uniquely possess a ‘radical’ degree of freedom, a freedom so overwhelming that he figures there should be some significant

apprehension about this freedom. He argues that this apprehension most often manifests itself as a strong feeling of anguish, or nausea. Whereas Kierkegaard and Heidegger often described this feeling as fear, Sartre centralizes the feeling of anguish. Sartre explains, “Fear is fear of beings in the world, whereas anguish is anguish before myself.”

Throughout this thesis I will argue that this Sartrean anguish closely resembles sentiments expressed by the Buddha upon his acknowledgment of the universal suffering of sentient beings. Both the Buddha and Sartre express similar sorts of deep-seated dissatisfactions about the human condition, though they offer drastically different accounts of how to respond to this condition.

Hayden Carruth succinctly and forcefully summarizes the Existential view in a way that will directly lead into my comparison of it to Mahayana Buddhist philosophy:

When the Existentialist looks inside himself, what does he find? Nothing. Looking back beyond birth or forward beyond death, he sees the void; looking into his own center, thrusting aside all knowledge, all memory, all sensation, he sees the chasm of the ego, formless and inconceivable, like the nucleus of an electron. And he is led to ask, as philosophers throughout history have asked: why is there anything instead of nothing, why the world, the universe, rather than a void? By concentrating all attention on this nothing within himself and underlying the objective surface of reality, he gradually transforms nothing into the concept of Nothingness, one of the truly great accomplishments of human sensibility. Nothingness as a force, a ground, a reality — in a certain sense the reality. From this comes man's despair, but also, if he has courage, his existential integrity. From this comes, too, the Existentialist's opposition to humanism. Not that he is inhumane; quite the contrary, his entire preoccupation is with the sanity and efficacy of the individual person.24

As Carruth explains, the Existentialists also agreed with the Buddha on the nature of the self. Both philosophical traditions argue that there is no intrinsic,

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24 Sartre (1964), p. 2
permanent essential human ‘self’. For most Existentialists (including Sartre) an understanding of this nothingness, the non-essential nature of oneself, results in despair, anguish, etc. It is a truth almost to overwhelming to bear, but one, Sartre argues, we must accept, rather than flee from.

A big difference between the Buddhist view and the Existentialist view is that the Existentialists are coming from a human-centric paradigm of understanding, in which man’s despair is entirely bound up in a human realm. The Buddha’s karmic system, on the other hand, discusses how all sentient beings (human and non-human) are karmically situated in the world, generating positive or negative karma based on their actions. As discussed in chapter one, in order to reach Enlightenment, sentient beings must rid themselves of the karmic conditioning that keeps them locked into samsara on the chain of dependent origination. This process generally takes several lifetimes. It is quite likely that a human being in this life, for example, was an animal in a previous karmic life. A current human form, then, is proof of one’s previous wholesome karmic actions. Human form is considered the highest and most favorable rebirth possible within the samsaric realm on the Buddhist account. Each of us humans might have been insects or dogs or bees in one of our past karmic lives. Thus the Buddhist account of existence does not limit itself to an anthropocentric focus in the way that Existentialism does.

For the Buddha, every karmic experience is full of suffering. Until one releases him/herself from the chains of samsara, suffering is omni-present. Freedom comes only through the wisdom gained by attaining Enlightenment. For Sartre, suffering is deeply rooted in human consciousness. Through insight into this truth,
there is a way out of human suffering, though it is not quite as dramatic a
transformation as Buddhist Enlightenment is. However, Sartre’s view still expresses
a transformative insight into the nature of things that he describes as a ‘radical
reorientation’. For Sartre, ‘life begins on the other side of despair’.

In my following discussion of Sartre’s views, I discuss Sartre the philosopher,
not Sartre the novelist, playwright, literary critic, psychoanalyst, political analyst,
and/or any of the other hats he wore to creatively express his views. He was a prolific
writer who expressed himself in a number of different artistic modes. While all of his
work is instructive and relevant, I want to keep the scope of my comparative analysis
within reasonable terms. As such, I am focusing primarily on Sartre’s Being and
Nothingness, Existentialism is a Humanism, and his novel Nausea.

Nausea

Nausea is a great example of Sartre’s general written approach. The novel
involves a human embodiment of the discovery, realization, and aftermath of
Existential anguish and feelings of nausea. Sartre’s main character, Roquentin, is
coming to terms with the no-thingness of his existence, and is quickly reduced to
nothing except his nauseated consciousness. He discovers the same truth Sartre has
expressed in many of his other Existential essays: that one’s existence precedes
his/her essence. Upon realizing his bare, purposeless existence, Roquentin is
thoroughly nauseated. He is filled with deep meaninglessness and directionless about
his human predicament of purposelessness. Sartre guides his readers through
Roquentin’s painful attempts to find a way out of the nauseating insight of essence-
less existence. As such, Roquentin’s feelings act as a sort of mouthpiece for Sartre’s own process of understanding. Roquentin also becomes a character Sartre’s reader can identify with as he/she undergoes a similarly transformative, nauseating process of personal insight into the true nature of human existence for him/herself.

**Sartre’s Ontological Dualism**

Sartre makes a fundamental ontological distinction between two ways of existing. A clear grasp on his two ontological regions will be essential for comparing Sartre’s ontology to the Buddha’s non-dualism. Sartre describes the first type of existence as non-conscious existence, or Being-in-itself (*en-soi*). This type of existence is carried out by non-human things such as: rocks, stones, tables, brains, and non-sentient organisms. In this mode of existence, essence precedes existence. As a being-in-itself, a thing’s purpose is fully defined before it comes into existence. For example, a table’s use and reason for existing is known before it is fully constructed. There are no surprises upon its completion. For the table, there is no sense of freedom or an ability to craft meaning out of itself. It is a purely positional type of consciousness.

The second type of existence, being-for-itself (*pour-soi*) is a type of conscious existence inhabited solely by human beings. Derek Heyman describes this type of consciousness as a “complex self, a personal ego, a creature of reflection, and the non-positional self.”25 In this type of consciousness, human consciousness, existence precedes essence. Sartre clearly states that man first exists, he encounters himself in

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the world, and then he defines himself afterwards. One’s reason or purpose for existing is not predetermined before one’s existence. Sartre maintains that humans can create their own meanings and own unique reasons for being. For Sartre, our human emotions are our primary mode of apprehending the world. He argues that lived experience (le vecu) is the only valid criterion of truth. Sartre wants human beings to continuously ask questions, to investigate their reasons for being and to apply a high degree of phenomenological awareness to every choices they make. Sartre suggests that humans most always ask themselves: “What does this mean to me, this individual human existent?”

Charlesworth summarizes Sartre’s central concern in *Being and Nothingness* as that of exploring the mode of existence of the conscious subject (being-for-itself) who is capable of sensing, perceiving, emoting, thinking, judging, remembering, imagining, choosing, and deciding. Charlesworth states

> What is essential to this kind of existence is that it is always in a process of being realized and of being renewed. In a sense there is no such thing as the self, if by that is meant some permanent and already constituted identity that lies behind our actions. My ego or self only exists through my actions and I have to be continually re-making and re-affirming myself…conscious subjects (unlike objects like a chair or a table) are always in a state of aspiring to be something other than they are, they are what they are not yet. Indeed, it is this peculiar kind of ‘nothingness’—this state of not-being-yet and this openness to further possibilities—which is the essential feature of consciousness.

This is an important component of Sartre’s description of being-for-itself. His understanding of this type of consciousness rejects any sort of permanent, constitutive self. Instead, a sort of human ‘self’ is created solely through one’s ever-changing choices. Thus, this self is constantly evolving in accord with one’s choices. Sartre

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26 Charlesworth, p. 9
27 Charlesworth, p. 97
suggests that this selfless (non-fixed) existence is the primary characteristic of human consciousness. This should look starkly similar to the Buddhist concept of non-self outlined in chapter one. It is from this common foundational basis of the non-selfness of human existence that comparative scholarship between Buddhist claims and Sartrean claims generally proceeds.

However, as I discussed, Mahayana Buddhists expand the Buddha’s concept of non-self to a complete emptiness of all conditioned phenomena—including both ‘selves’ and all material ‘things’ (dharms). Mahayana Buddhists believe that all conditioned phenomena are empty of essential natures. Sartre, however, was fully immersed in how the emptiness of the self related to an individual’s life. He was bound up in a human-centric mode of understanding, and did not expand his ontology beyond that involving the human being. Derek Heyman argues that for Sartre’s ontology to make sense, it requires a conception of emptiness akin to the Mahayana Buddhist notion of emptiness. Though Sartre never expanded his view of the self beyond selflessness at a human level, Heyman explores whether Mahayana Buddhism’s notion of emptiness is coherent with Sartrean dualism. I will now take up Heyman’s project, wherein he attempts to underlie Mahayana Buddhist emptiness on Sartrean ontology.
Chapter 3: Duality in Sartre’s Ontology and Non-Duality in Mahayana Buddhism

*Form does not differ from Emptiness,*  
*And Emptiness does not differ from Form.*  
*Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form.*  
- The Heart Sutra

*Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being - like a worm.*  
-Jean-Paul Sartre

Scholar Derek Heyman has boldly attempted to reconcile Sartre’s duality and Mahayana Buddhism’s non-duality. In “Dual and non-dual ontology in Sartre and Mahayana Buddhism”, he claims that though not explicitly stated, there is in fact a non-dual ground underlying Sartre’s ontology, akin to the Mahayana Buddhist concept of emptiness. Recall from chapter one that Mahayana Buddhism describe two types of truths—the provisional truth and the ultimate truth. Provisional truths are things that can be understood by non-enlightened beings. These truths are not incorrect, but they do not fully get at the true nature of things. For example, Mahayanists describe the insight of non-self as provisionally true, whereas the insight of the emptiness of all dharmas is ultimately true. Non-self is a truthful and useful insight, but it is only provisionally true because it does not reveal the entire extent of emptiness contained within Mahayanist teachings. Mahayanists claim that the ultimate truth of the emptiness of all conditioned things is inconceivable in the conventional world (samsara). This ultimately true nature of things can only be understood by enlightened beings, and requires careful study and Buddhist practice (generally spread over the course of several rebirths) to fully realize.
Heyman himself describes the distinction between provisional and ultimate truths this way:

The idea is that human beings live much of their lives within a pattern of dualistic constructs based on linguistic and other conventions. The truth of this type of experience is referred to as the truth of worldly convention (provisional truth). This truth is necessary to linguistic communication, including the expression of Buddhist teachings. Yet it is recognized within Mahayana Buddhism that such truth ultimately blocks off a clear experience of the non-dualistic truth of ultimate meaning. The truth of ultimate meaning is considered ineffable, but can be pointed to from within the limits of (provisional truth). Thus, there are two perspectives one may take on the nature of reality: the worldly and conventional, which is characterized by duality, and the ultimately meaningful, which is non-dual.28

Heyman argues that although Sartre posits the provisional Buddhist truth of non-self but does not make the leap to the ultimate Mahayana Buddhist truth of emptiness, Sartre nevertheless implies it. To make this claim, Heyman first shows that Sartre and Mahayana Buddhism have comparable theories of consciousness. Then, he argues that rejecting Sartre’s ontological priority of being in-itself in favor of the Buddhist concept of emptiness is consistent with Sartre’s ontology, even if not explicit in Sartre’s writings. For Heyman, this consistency renders the Buddhist notion of emptiness an ‘acceptable solution’ to Sartre’s ontological problem of dualism.

In doing so, Heyman creates a pseudo-dialogue between Sartre and Mahayana Buddhists, and suggests a specific way in which Buddhist philosophy might fit in with, or at least not contradict, Sartre’s ontology. This is a highly specific philosophical tactic, and I am not quite sure whether, even if Heyman is right, this argument is helpful. Nevertheless, it is a provocative claim, and one, if true or even

28 Heyman, p. 439
partly true, would unite Sartre’s ontology and Buddhist philosophy in unprecedented
closeness. Let us take a close look at the structure and content of his argument.

**Heyman’s Argument**

Heyman is one of the first philosophers to engage with Sartre and Buddhist from a specifically Yogacara Buddhism (a school within Mahayana) tradition.

Numerous scholars have written about the exchange between Sartre and Zen Buddhism, but few have ventured into the Yogacarin school. Though both Yogacara and Zen are lineages under the larger category called Mahayana Buddhism, Yogacara differs from Zen in its emphasis on consciousness and the relationship between shifts in consciousness and attaining Enlightenment. For Yogacarins, working with one’s consciousness is the way to gain insight into the non-duality of all causal conditionings. Yogacarin philosophy posits eight different types of consciousness. Most relevant to this comparison is Yogacara’s eighth consciousness, the alayavijnana (unconscious). The alayavijnana can be thought of as the underlying storehouse consciousness, which serves as a repository for one’s karmic seeds. Once a being has exhausted his/her karmic conditioning through mediation practice and study (breaking the samsaric chains of dependent origination), this storehouse consciousness is emptied, signaling the attainment of Enlightenment. Heyman claims this Yogacarin storehouse consciousness is compatible with Sartre’s account of consciousness.

A general outline of Heyman’s argument is as follows:
1. Sartre and Yogacara Buddhism have compatible theories of consciousness.

2. There is a non-dual ground akin to the Buddhist concept of emptiness underlying Sartre’s ontology.

3. Given this non-dual ground, it would be acceptable on Sartre’s account to reject the ontological priority of being in-itself in favor of Buddhist understandings of interdependent origination and emptiness.

4. Sartre’s ontology is thus provisionally true, though it also contains implicit reference to the ultimate truth of emptiness.

5. Therefore, a full understanding of emptiness reveals that Yogacara Buddhism and Sartre’s ontology agree about non-duality.

Heyman is not suggesting that, philosophically speaking, Sartre and Buddhism are exact twins. Instead, he attempts to arrive at a kind of synthesis of the two through “provisionalizing Sartre’s dualistic ontology in Mahayanist fashion.”

He starts with the non-controversial points of intersection and divergence between the two views. He rightly points out that Sartre does, definitively, reject the Ego (self) as the center of consciousness in both The Transcendence of the Ego and in Being and Nothingness. Unlike the Buddhists, Sartre describes the self as a “creature of reflection”. Recall that Mahayana Buddhists reject the notion of a self in favor of a view of the self as an impermanent collection of the five skandhas (aggregates): form, sensation, perception, volitions, and consciousness. In conjunction, these five

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29 Heyman, p. 432
skandhas make up the entirety of one’s experience. Recall from the opening chapter that each of these skandhas is impermanent, constantly arising and passing in each given moment. The ‘self’ is thus illusory and impermanent, as is each of its five aggregates. A crucial difference in this comparison between Mahayana Buddhist non-dualism and Sartrean duality is the fact that for Mahayanists, consciousness is impermanent.

Other Buddhist schools are similarly focused on consciousness, but they divide it into only six kinds, corresponding to the six sensory domains of: visual, audial, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental realms. The Yogacarin’s add two more kinds of consciousness: the storehouse consciousness (alayavijnana), and manas (which perform the mental functions of combining/separating and reflection). As I mentioned, the alayavijnana metaphorically ‘stores up’ the seeds of one’s karmic experience. It is often referred to as the ‘root-consciousness’ or the underlying ground of consciousness because it, though impermanent, is responsible for the illusion of temporal continuity of experience. The alayavijnana serves as a repository for one’s karmic conditioning, thereby linking all of one’s past and present karmic actions in a way that resembles, but does not equal, a permanent substance we might be tempted to term ‘self’.

Heyman next describes Sartre’s attempt to posit ‘God’ as the synthesis of his two ontological regions—being in-itself and for-itself. Sartre argues that such a synthesis is impossible because consciousness cannot be identical with itself. Therefore, it cannot be the case that God is a being that is identical with itself, and is also a being that is consciousness. Heyman further explains that it is hard to reconcile
this ‘impossible synthesis’ because Sartre’s dualism reveals only “the in-itself and the for-itself with their fundamentally different modes of being.” So for Sartre, to consider the totality formed by these two types of being is to consider an ideal being. But, he could not find a way to synthesize this ideal being. How does Sartre resolve this predicament? Sartre’s own solution is to conclude that ideal integration/synthesis does not exist, that is an impossibility (which is neither true nor a concern for Mahayana Buddhists). Sartre “judges it better to consider the pure in-itself, which can be considered apart from the for-itself without abstraction, as the ontologically prior existent. For Sartre, it is the in-itself which has ‘decompressed’ or annihilated itself to bring about the for-itself.” And his ontology leaves this dualism here, unresolved.

Heyman contrasts Sartre’s ontological dualism with the Mahayanist non-dual account of emptiness, which explores the “merely phenomenal (non-ultimate) nature of the subject-object division, both sides of which originate interdependently.” The familiar line ‘Form is emptiness, Emptiness is form’ in the Mahayana text The Heart Sutra implies that, for Mahayana Buddhists, neither being nor non-being is ontologically prior or independent. Both types of consciousness are empty and non-empty. At the conventional level, everything is form and has substantial essence. But at an ultimate level, everything is emptiness. In The Heart Sutra, the Mahayana Buddhists rely on this understanding of the Two Truths doctrine to posit the fact that form and emptiness are interdependent and both, ultimately, impermanent and synonymous insofar as everything boils down to emptiness.

30 Heyman, p. 437
31 Heyman, p. 435
32 Heyman, p. 437
For Mahayanists, the ultimate non-dual reality underlying conventional duality goes beyond Sartre’s dualistic concepts of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’. This non-dual reality is beyond a conceptual level of understanding. It also seems that Sartre’s concerns about reconciling the duality between in-itself and for-itself are not direct concerns for Mahayana Buddhism. What Heyman is suggesting, however, is that the Mahayanist ontological account of non-duality is coherent alongside Sartre’s ontology. Heyman suggests that Mahayanist non-duality would reconcile Sartre’s impossible synthesis, were Sartre to explicitly extend his dualism and explore a notion of emptiness akin to the Buddhist concept of emptiness. Heyman suggests such a move would be logically coherent with Sartre’s overarching ontological views.

**Consequences of Heyman’s Claims**

Heyman claims that in order to solve Sartre’s ‘impossible synthesis’, the ontological priority of the in-itself over the for-itself must be rejected. In doing so, he suggests the Mahayana Buddhist non-dual system as a way of resolving this problem. Heyman claims that rejecting Sartre’s ‘impossible synthesis’ not only makes Sartre’s ontology consistent with Mahayana Buddhist claims, but it also solves an internal philosophical problem in *Being and Nothingness* which Sartre himself calls a ‘profound contradiction’.33 Now we can clearly see Heyman’s motivations. He is not merely attempting to unite Mahayana Buddhism and Sartre’s ontology in compatible ways. More radically, he is also trying to use a particular aspect of the Mahayanist

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33 Heyman, p. 438
account of consciousness to solve Sartre’s ‘impossible synthesis’. Sartre describes this problem as follows:

If the in-itself, it its total fullness of being and utter identity, were prior to the for-itself, why should it give birth to the for-itself...everything takes place as if the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of for-itself. This is indicated by the facts that: 1. The for-itself is the only way the in-itself could found itself, presence to self being a necessary facet of the self-cause, and 2. Consciousness (for-itself) is in fact a project of founding itself, that is, of attaining to the dignity of the in-itself/for-itself or in-itself as self-cause. Yet it is absurd that the in-itself would form the project of founding itself, because ‘it is through the for-itself that the possibility of a foundation comes to the world. This means that before the advent of consciousness, the in-itself would have to be already consciousness, which is a contradiction.34

Sartre decides to leave his predicament up to “metaphysics to form the hypotheses which will allow us to conceive of this process.”35 Heyman, however, is not similarly content to leave this problem to metaphysics. Heyman’s suggestion offers a Buddhist solution—of both a Mahayana Buddhist concept (emptiness) and argumentation using Buddhist terminology—to this Sartrean problem by substituting the Buddhist concept of non-dual reality for Sartre’s concept of in-itself. Heyman wants to argue that this substitution can be reasonably applied to Sartre’s views without abandoning Sartre’s ontological insights. If Heyman is right, Mahayanist dualism is, as it were, both Sartre’s ontological equivalent and its solution.

Emptiness

As I have mentioned, Mahayanists use the concept of emptiness to express the ultimately non-dual nature of reality. Emptiness is the non-dual ground that Heyman claims is a compatible understanding to Sartre’s ontology. He tries to place this concept of emptiness ontologically prior to Sartre’s being in-itself and being for-

34 Heyman, p. 438
35 Heyman, p. 438
itself. Heyman is not claiming that Sartre explicitly suggests this underlying non-dual empty ground exists within his own being in-itself/being for-itself framework. Rather, Heyman claims that this non-dual ground can be applied to the Sartrean ontology in a compatible and satisfying way. Heyman explains although Sartre’s phenomenology "Takes the important step of removing the Ego from the center of consciousness, (he) does not dig deep enough to recognize the full consequences of this step. Nevertheless, the discovery that the ground beneath the dualistic fence extends to the boundless non-duality (Buddhist emptiness, ultimate truth) does not preclude that it still supports the fence on its surface (provisional truth)."36

The success of Heyman’s claims relies on his reader’s interpretation of the relationship between Yogacara Buddhism and Sartre’s respective understandings of consciousness. Heyman states:

The Sartrean non-thetic self-consciousness contains an implicit awareness of the separation of consciousness from its object, which corresponds to his ontological duality. Similarly, Buddhist philosophy contains a functional equivalent of the non-thetic self-consciousness. But for Yogacarins, this is a provisional description of consciousness…the senses bring about a dualistic experience of reality, but this experience may be radically altered through meditation practice. When this practice reaches consummation…(it leaves) only the underlying non-dual reality of the storehouse consciousness (alayavijnana). Ordinary, dualistic consciousness, as it has been described by Sartre, and provisionally described by Yogacarins is radically altered when the non-dual ontology is realized in experience."37

Here Heyman claims that Sartre overcomes the subject-object duality through a rejection of the self as a subject, which is almost, but not quite, a realization akin to the Mahayanist notion of emptiness. He claims that the Mahayana Buddhists overcame the remnants of a Sartrean ‘being in-itself” left over after they rejected the self, by emphasizing the “selfless nature, at the ultimate level, of phenomena as well

36 Heyman, p. 440
37 Heyman, p. 441
as of consciousness.”\textsuperscript{38} Heyman thus claims that Sartre’s dualistic ‘being in-itself’ as an independent reality can be similarly overcome by moving to the underlying non-duality of Mahayanist emptiness. By this Heyman implies that were Sartre to simply move his ontological dualism onto a level comparable to the Buddhist notion of the ultimate truth of emptiness, he (Sartre) would rid his ontology of its contradictions.

Heyman claims that this move is both in line with Sartre’s explicit ontological arguments and is an acceptable solution to Sartre’s ‘impossible synthesis’, because the Mahayanist account of consciousness is strikingly similar to Sartre’s own account of consciousness. Heyman concludes “the change in consciousness discussed in this paper is not the affirmation of the for-itself as ‘the nothingness by which the world exists’, but the intuitive realization of the interdependent nature of both in-itself and for-itself.”\textsuperscript{39}

Heyman is thus asserting that the Yogacarin account of non-dual emptiness is an intuitive expansion of Sartre’s claims. And while Sartre himself did not take this position, Heyman argues that Sartre’s philosophy “belongs to the present generation of philosophers to reinterpret in a way that is found to be compelling for philosophical reasons.”\textsuperscript{40} He concludes that his suggestion of an implicit Sartrean non-dual ground is compelling because it overcomes the ‘profound contradiction’ which Sartre has left to metaphysics in its task of ‘unifying the givens’ of his ontology.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Heyman, p. 441  
\textsuperscript{39} Heyman, p. 441  
\textsuperscript{40} Heyman, p. 442  
\textsuperscript{41} Heyman, p. 442
My Response to Heyman

Heyman certainly presents a detailed and compelling case for a way in which the Mahayana Buddhist insight of emptiness can be used to extend and, possibly, reconcile Sartre’s ontological dualism. Heyman may be exaggerating the academic urgency to resolve the ‘profound contradiction’ embedded in Sartre’s ontology here, though. I am not convinced that anyone, Sartre included, would be in a rush to use Buddhist terminology to reconcile Sartre’s ‘problematic’ dualism. Nevertheless, Heyman’s work is a very useful example of a way in which specific comparative claims between these two traditions have already been made.

Heyman’s general philosophical argumentation here is to first establish a similar view of consciousness and non-self between Mahayana Buddhism and Sartre, and then to offer a new way to view Sartre’s ontology from a Buddhist lens, which may resolve an unsettled aspect of Sartre’s work. There are many ways that comparisons between these two traditions can not only illuminate one another, but also can render heightened levels of understanding for readers of this comparative work. I, for one, certainly learned much more about Sartre’s ontology through analyzing this comparative argument than I learned by reading Sartre’s work in isolation. We only stand to gain from comparative attempts like this.

However, a big danger with Heyman’s method is that he borders on setting up Mahayana Buddhist philosophy as a sort of ‘cure’ for Sartre’s ontological dualism. It is not always clear whether he is attempting to make a case for uniting Sartre and Buddhism in unprecedented ways, or whether he is trying to displace Sartre’s true intent with semi-compatible Mahayanist notions. Neither pursuit is necessarily
wrong, but if his intent is the latter, I am not sure this type of scholarship is immediately helpful. If nothing else, though, Heyman has offered his readers profound insight into each tradition’s ontological standpoint in his accessible and highly detailed analysis. Now that I have analyzed Heyman’s comparative ontological claims between Mahayana Buddhism’s non-dualism and Sartre’s dualism, I will move on to comparatively engaging a different set of similarities between the two traditions, using the works of Batchelor and Hough.
Chapter 4: Comparative Feelings—Sartre’s Nausea and the Buddhist Counterweight

*I exist, that is all, and I find it nauseating.*

-Jean-Paul Sartre

*How much suffering and fear, and*
*How many harmful things are in existence?*
*If all arises from clinging to the "I",
What should I do with this great demon?*

-Santideva

In this chapter, I continue my comparative analysis of aspects of Sartrean and Mahayana Buddhist ontology. I have already established the similarity between each tradition’s accounts of the self. Steven Batchelor and Sheridan Hough extend this connection by focusing on the similarities between the Buddha’s reaction to the insight of non-self and Sartre’s account of the nauseous state felt upon insight into essence-less human existence. In my analysis of this connection, I ask how, and in what way(s) Sartre’s nausea maps onto the Buddha’s reactions to universal suffering and the insight of non-self? Let us first analyze Batchelor’s text, and then fill in remaining discussion with Hough’s related analysis.

**Batchelor’s Existential Buddhism**

Batchelor takes an existential look at one of Buddhism’s biggest concerns: dissatisfaction with this worldly existence (samsara), and how to solve it. He argues that the nausea/dissatisfaction/anxiety one projects onto his/her life is a similar sort of
feeling for both the Buddhists and the Existentialists. It is important that although Batchelor is arguing there is a similar a sort of feeling expressed by each tradition, he is not arguing that there is necessarily a similar sort of response to or therapy for this predicament. He is simply commenting on the similarly overwhelmed sort of reaction both the Buddha and Sartre express upon insight into their respective understandings of the human predicament. This leaves room for Batchelor to explore the consequent attitudes each tradition adopts after these initial overwhelmed/nauseated gut reactions.

Batchelor describes how Buddhist renunciation practices (practices undertaken by serious monastics) such as meditation, mindfulness, studying texts, following the monastic vows, etc., involve a ‘radical change of one’s entire personality’. He asks how these transformative Buddhist practices motivated by one’s pursuit of attaining Enlightenment compare to the practices Existentialists suggest their readers adhere to upon insight into the true nature of human existence? To answer this question, he first builds a foundation of similarities between the two traditions.

Batchelor argues that from both Buddhist and Existential lenses, the most urgent problem in our current society is the preoccupation with *having* rather than *being*. He explains, “Having always presupposes a sharply defined dualism between subject and object. The subject seeks his or her wellbeing and sense of meaning and purpose in the preservation and acquisition of objects from which he/she is necessarily isolated.”42 As a result, Batchelor contends, this preoccupation with

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having can never offer a sense of fulfillment, because there is nothing one can have that one cannot fear to lose. This then becomes a breeding ground for all sorts of manifestations of ontological insecurity: anxiety, alienation, loneliness, emptiness, and meaninglessness, each stemming from living as “an isolated subject amidst a multitude of lifeless objects.”

Batchelor worries that when humans are not aware of these states of suffering, or if they flee from these mental states by choosing not to actively work with them, this ontological insecurity only become deeper. By not acknowledging the extent of our innately human ontological insecurity, Batchelor argues that the “chasm of our own emptiness” becomes increasingly unbearable as we crave to possess and dominate the world of having more and more.

For Batchelor,

However hard we try, we will never succeed in filling an inner emptiness from the outside; it can only be filled from within. A lack of being remains unaffected by a plentitude of having…However hard we try to convince ourselves that all is well and that there is really nothing to worry about, we cannot prevent the underlying tensions of our existence from occasionally erupting to the surface and shattering complacency.

In these moments when the ‘underlying tensions of our existence’ erupt, as it were, humans experience generalized anxiety about their existence and not, necessarily, anxiety focused on any particular entity. This anxiety can feel all pervasive and inescapable. In almost every case, this anxiety is initially so painful and so overwhelming that most humans try to avoid it, rather than facing the profound, ultimately freeing omni-present truth it reveals. This truth is that there is no essential meaning to human lives, and nothing that we have or desire to have can

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43 Batchelor (1983), p. 48
44 Batchelor (1983), p. 28
45 Batchelor (1983), p. 63
change this truth. Existing in the desirous realm of having is an escape from, but not a rejection of, this essence-less truth about human existence. Batchelor claims that both Buddhists and Existentialists struggle to directly face the emptiness of our human existence and the accompanying sense of anxiety. Unlike most people, Batchelor claims, followers of these two traditions work with their minds and their associated anxious feelings, rather than escaping into futile flight from this fundamental truth. Batchelor explains,

Such ontological anxiety can be highly disturbing because in its grip we realize that our whole lives have been spent in restless pursuit of distant shadows and phantoms while that which is the closest to us, our very existence, has been ignored. We come face to face with the disconcerting fact that our absorption in the realm of particular things is a senseless and hopeless flight from something we can never escape. However much we try to brush aside anxiety, dismiss it as irrational or neurotic, and forget its content by returning to the more pressing concerns of the world, death will never go away.46

How does Batchelor suggest humans deal with this anxiety and begin to shift their modes of behavior from the realm of having to a deeper, non-material realm of being? He describes a path of gradual non-involvement in the material world, towards an increased preoccupation in one’s existence itself. He claims that both the Buddha and Sartre would characterize this process similarly. He argues broadly that in both the Buddha’s experiential insights and Sartre’s ontological realizations, after the weighty feelings of anxiety are experienced, “those things which previously were experienced with full satisfaction will now seem shallow, hollow, and somehow meaningless.”47 Batchelor argues that both the Buddha and Sartre would suggest humans ought to sit with these feelings, to let them settle and to recognize the human tendency to flee from the immensity of their impact. As these anxious feelings

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46 Batchelor (1983), p. 63
47 Batchelor (1983), p. 63
continue, sentient beings come to understand with greater and greater clarity that absorption in the world of things provides no refuge. Humans must, Batchelor contends, realize how habitual the human tendency to flee from the ‘responsibility of our existence’ is, as well as the tendency to place undue hope in material objects and situations of the world. These habits fail to provide humans with a secure refuge, and inevitably, the existential anxiety stemming from insight into the essence-less of existence asserts itself again, no matter how hard one tries to flee from this truth. Once a being has had this insight, there is no real, satisfactory ability to ‘go back’ to an ignorant, desirous existence in the having realm.

Eventually, Batchelor argues, humans stop insisting that material goods and the desiring realm of having will bring any sort of satisfaction. Upon this realization, he states, there are two ways to proceed: 1. Either to dismiss existence in general and man’s existence in particular as essentially futile and absurd, or 2. To place one’s hope in the actualization of a greater purpose or meaning that is not immediately evident within the realm of empirical data.

Batchelor suggests that both the Buddha and Sartre believed that this second alternative is our only authentic human option. Each tradition handles the details of ‘placing one’s hope in the actualization of a greater purpose’ differently, but they similarly recommend this option with a sense of urgency. Distinctly, the Buddhist response involves a direct line of communication and practice with the Buddha himself. The Buddha serves as proof of the effectiveness of his path, and his teachings serve as an intimate guide for his followers. He proves that it is possible for sentient beings to be liberated from the samsaric world of having. His disciples,
following his lead, are able to take his teachings and apply them to their own lives. The pursuit of liberation generally takes multiple rebirths, but as the Buddha’s own example illustrates, it is possible to liberate oneself in a single lifetime. The correct Buddhist path entails following the Buddha’s example by radically reorienting one’s life in accord with the Buddha’s ethical and ontological views. Batchelor explains, “The essence of Buddhist faith resides in an ontological commitment that is prior to all articulate formulations…it is a hopeful redirecting of one’s life towards (the Buddha’s) mode of being.”

For Buddhists, the Buddha’s path to Enlightenment, grounded in personal meditation practice, study, and contemplation, is the solution to the existential anguish. Taking refuge in the Buddha and his teachings (committing to the Buddhist path) is centered on a radical shift away from concerns about particular material entities and towards concerns about fulfilling the “possibilities of the totality of one’s being” through attaining liberation. And again, this is the shift Batchelor describes from dwelling in the dimension of having to dwelling in the dimension of being.

Anxiety

Following the release of Alone With Others, Batchelor continued his comparative investigation of the transition from the realm of having to the realm of being in an article titled Flight: An Existential Conception of Buddhism. I will use this article to elaborate on just what exactly existential anxiety looks like. Batchelor describes anxiety as the fundamental way in which humans sense themselves to exist.

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48 Batchelor (1983), p. 68
49 Batchelor (1983), p. 68
Equally fundamental, he argues, is the human urge towards what he calls ‘existential flight’, an attempt to escape this overwhelming anxiety. Batchelor describes both this initial innate human anxiety and its consequent flight as “deeply-rooted characteristics of our being”. This is an extension of *Alone With Others*’ argument that humans tend to desperately seek meaning through material conditions (the having realm), to no avail.

In *Flight*, Batchelor argues that humans are generally unconscious of their anxiety, so this tendency towards ‘existential flight’ is not always deliberate. For him, humans are predisposed to run from their anxiety, whether actively aware of this fleeing or not. Often, Batchelor suspects it to be the case that this fleeing becomes the norm through which most humans see the world. Constantly in a state of escaping, they do not even realize they are running from existential anxiety. This inclination to flee, Batchelor argues, is present in both the Buddha and Sartre’s understandings of human existence.

He connects this anxious feeling to the concept of non-self. Batchelor explains that anxiety only occurs because humans believe they exist as self-sufficient, distinct, lasting entities. Buddhists discuss craving, clinging, and desire as negative, suffering-filled consequences of a belief in a self. Sartre similarly discusses how the freedom of choice cannot be realized until one understands the essential meaninglessness of human nature. In Sartre’s ontology, an understanding of human selflessness brings the freedom to choose how one wants to live and to choose whom one wants to be.

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In either case (the Buddha’s or Sartre’s) Batchelor suggests that wisdom must be continuously cultivated to not let the habitual counter-forces of ignorance, flight and absorption with things (the realm of having) prevail. He argues that even upon recognizing the insight of non-self, the human tendency to flee from, what Batchelor calls “the overwhelming immensity of existence that plunges uncontrollably towards death,” still remains. Humans must be weary of this, and continue to gain awareness into the selflessness of natural human conditions. Batchelor somewhat pessimistically states

For the simple reason that one can never succeed in escaping from one’s own existence, existential flight is condemned from the outset to failure and frustration. No matter how firmly we have convinced ourselves that the ultimate values in life are embodied in personal success, the acquisition of wealth, respect and knowledge, the shadow of our own death can suddenly interrupt and declare our beliefs bankrupt. As long as our actions are impelled by flight from the immensity of birth and death, we will be faced with those uneasy moments where all that we have done seems to amount to nothing, where all our exertions and toil seem to have succeeded in bringing us nowhere. It is as if we are running forever in circles and always finding ourselves back where we started: in an anxious confrontation with our own finite existence.  

Solutions

Is there a solution here? How does Batchelor suggest humans avoid giving into the tendency towards ‘existential flight’? It is not the case that one, upon insight into selfless human existence, ought to abide in a nauseous mental state indefinitely. The Buddha’s project and Sartre’s project offer two different outlooks for coming to terms with the overwhelming immensity of existence, as well as two different sorts of ‘solutions’ or ‘therapies’ to this human predicament. Mahayana Buddhism, as I have explained, offers its followers a detailed, disciplined moral path paralleling the steps

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51 Batchelor (1984), p. 8
52 Batchelor (1984), p. 8
the Buddha himself took to attain his own liberation. Sartre’s Existentialism suggests its readers engage in a ‘radical reorientation’ to worldly conditions, and undergo a phenomenological investigation into the non-essential nature of human existence. For Sartre, this phenomenological self-study and reflection gives one the recognition that the only way to create any type of satisfaction and meaning in one’s life is through the freedom of choice.

William Barrett dichotomizes the two traditions succinctly:

In Buddhism the recognition of the nothingness of ourselves is intended to lead into a striving for holiness and compassion—the recognition that in the end there is nothing that sustains us should lead us to love one another, as survivors on a life raft, at the very moment they grasp that the ocean is shoreless and that no rescue ship is coming, can only have compassion on one another. For Sartre, on the other hand, the nothingness of the Self is the basis for the will to action: the bubble is empty and will collapse, and so what is left us but the energy and passion to spin that bubble out? Man’s existence is absurd in the midst of a cosmos that knows him not; the only meaning he can give himself is through the free project that he launches out of his own nothingness. Sartre turns from nothingness not to compassion or holiness, but to human freedom as realized in revolutionary activity.53

In chapter six I will elaborate further on the differing ways each tradition responds to the non-self insight. The Buddhists explain that a profound compassion arises upon the realization of our empty selves, whereas Sartre transforms this emptiness into radical human freedom. Let us keep this divergent reaction in mind as I now look at Sheridan Hough’s comparative work.

**Sheridan Hough on Nausea**

Like Batchelor, Hough also compares the existential anxiety expressed by Buddhists and Existentialists. She broadly asks: Would Sartre have suffered nausea if

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he had fully understood the Buddhist non-self doctrine? She investigates this question through focus on Sartre’s nauseated central character Roquentin, in his novel *Nausea*. She asks why Roquentin responds to his ontological intuition that the self lacks substantial nature with nausea, rather than celebrate this insight and embrace his ‘non-self’? She argues that Sartre’s depiction of Roquentin’s nausea offers an unsatisfactory solution to his predicament and misunderstands the aggregate nature of the self, which Mahayana Buddhists correctly understand. As I showed in my analysis of Heyman’s text in chapter three, it is fruitful to examine the type of comparative work he and Hough are doing because these works often reveal latent motivations within each comparative tradition, and/or reveal new, synthetic modes of understanding through the comparison. Though I made initial remarks about *Nausea* in my introduction, I will quickly refamiliarize the reader with the novel.

A Summary

*Nausea* is the didactic story of Antoine Roquentin, a French writer who is horrified by his own existence. In raw, unedited, diary form, Roquentin ruthlessly catalogues his every feeling, existential and minute, about his world and the people around him. He has lost all understanding of himself and now the world appears to him utterly unstable. He is confused, anxious, and overwhelmed. His thoughts evolve into an all-pervasive feeling of nausea. Sartre (speaking through Roquentin) describes this nausea as a condition caused by his ontological intuition that the self lacks a substantial nature. Sartre imaginatively details Roquentin's struggles to accept this insight, and in doing so, Sartre is using Roquentin as a mouthpiece to expound
his own Existential beliefs. The novel furthers themes Sartre explored in his earlier, non-literary project, *Transcendence of the Ego*.

As Roquentin gains deeper insight into the selflessness of his being, he begins to extend this illusory sense of sense out into objects as well. Roquentin searches for meaning in the external world. He struggles to express an idea similar to the Mahayanist view of the self as an aggregation of unreal substances (dharmas) as he realizes the non-essential nature of objects. He writes in his journal:

This thing I am sitting on, leaning my hand on, is called a seat. They made it purposely for people to sit on, they took leather, springs and cloth, they went to work with the idea of making a seat and when they finished, that was what they had made. They carried it here, into this car and the car is now rolling and jolting with its rattling windows…I murmur: ‘It is a seat’…but the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing.54

Hough refers to *Nausea* as “nothing more than an extended meditation on what happens when the protective structural cover of the ego (self) is disturbed.”55

Having described the novel to her reader, Hough continues to argue that the ontological resemblances between Sartre’s philosophy and the Mahayana Buddhist non-self doctrine are expressed in a ‘uniquely full-throated way’ in Sartre’s *Nausea*.

**Hough’s Methodology**

At the outset of her piece, Hough states, “I will be looking at two very similar ontological pictures, and attending to the respective differences in the conclusions that each draws about the human situation.”56 Hough’s overarching question throughout her piece remains: Why is this selfless insight is the occasion for

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54 Sartre (1964), p. 124
55 Hough, p. 105
56 Hough, p. 100
‘nausea’? She compares the way Roquentin embraces the insight of non-self to the Buddha’s response to his own similar realization. In doing so, Hough aims to show that Roquentin misunderstands his ailment insofar as he does not realize the full extent (using Buddhist terms) of the self as an impermanent bundle of skandhas (aggregates), or the truth of the emptiness of all conditioned phenomena. Hough argues that while Roquentin correctly (at least on the Buddhist account) realizes his own being is not fixed or essential, he does not make the leap to the complete essence-less of not just persons, but all things (dharmas). She uses the difference in Sartre’s depiction of the nature of consciousness (as dual) and Mahayana Buddhism’s non-dual consciousness. Further, she repeatedly highlights that for Roquentin, the only thing that will satisfy him is to find meaning in a real essential fixed external referent. Roquentin’s nausea stems from his inability to find such comfort.

Like Heyman, Hough attempts to merge Buddhism and Existentialism by applying a heavily Buddhist lens and Buddhist terminology onto an Existential framework, through a particular aspect of Sartre’s ontology. They both structure their argumentations on the premise that there is a similarity in some capacity between Sartre’s philosophy and the Buddha’s teachings, especially about ontology. From here, Hough goes on to assume that, given this similarity, it is worthwhile to pursue a comparative analysis by mapping Buddhist terminology into Roquentin’s existential predicament. This overall strategy assumes that Roquentin’s situation is similar to the Buddha’s, who underwent his own process of realization aimed at liberation. This strategy also assumes that Roquentin’s condition is similar enough to the Buddha’s condition that it is thus coherent to impose Buddhist terminology and insight onto
Roquentin’s predicament in order to illuminate Roquentin’s situation in a new way. I am suspect about this latter assumption, and I analyze Hough’s text with a cautionary stance.

**The Ultimate Upshot**

Hough’s piece reveals that though there is an ontological similarity between Mahayanist and Sartrean views, their respective therapeutic solutions are vastly different. For neither of these two philosophical traditions is it all about ontology. I thus expand Hough’s argument and contend that this renders the two traditions, in many ways, irreconcilable. However, this does not mean there is not an upshot to close analysis and comparison of the two traditions. In fact, both Mahayana Buddhism and Sartre’s philosophy emphasize that ordinary understanding of the human condition involves illusion. This is no small insight on either account. Both traditions respective diagnoses about the mistaken notion of a real, permanent self are ways about talking about the same phenomenon. If nothing else, this strong ontological similarity ought to persuade my reader that this illusion of an essential self is a real and interesting phenomenon that we ought to care about.

Viewed in this light, we can interpret Hough’s comparative claims not only as arguments about a shared ontological intuition between these two traditions, but also as a way to move the cross-cultural conversation forward and relate these shared ideas about the self to contemporary arguments about the self. Thus this comparative scholarship is not only significant for its own sake, but is also helps reactivate an
interest in and awareness of arguments about human nature worth looking further into.

The Non-Essential Self

For Sartre, the non-essential self is, rather than permanent and predisposed, a pure open self-awareness, which can be understood as the subject of experience. Sartre holds a degree of self-hood much stronger than the Mahayana Buddhists do, the latter of which reject the essence not only of the self but of all material things (complete emptiness). As I expressed in chapter three, Sartre’s duality is not the same as Buddhist non-dualism. For Sartre, there are things that ultimately exist. Though the ‘self’ is not one of them, he does not suppose that everything is essentially empty. Instead, he argues that the material parts (comparable to the Buddhist term ‘dharmas’) that make up this illusory self are ultimately real. As I discussed in chapter two, Sartre’s describes the non-human mode of being, being-in-itself, as predetermined. A table, for example, enters the world with a pre-determined essence, unlike the human (being-for-itself), who gets to decide what type of essence to attribute to his/her life.

Sartre maintains that “human consciousness lacks an essence or fixed characteristics or features, and it is therefore radically free to choose what it is, and what it does.”57 Sartre’s ‘radical freedom’ of consciousness reveals an important difference between Sartre’s ontology and the Buddhist response to material conditions. Sartre argues our radical human freedom becomes a crushing presence on

57 Hough, p. 103
all of us. Insight into this new sense of freedom is initially a decidedly unstable

ground for humans (as we see in Roquentin’s case), and produces a state of nausea.

Hough describes

The more (Roquentin) delves into experience for meaning, the more he scrutinizes
himself, his face, the persons and the things around him, the more he reveals the

composite, aggregated character of all things. (He discovers that) the ‘deep meaning’
is emptiness: nothing in the world has a fixed, established, or settled nature. Our

utterances and attributions, our descriptions and claims are thus, as Roquentin puts it,
slippery, loose, viscous, and (for Roquentin) nauseatingly unstable.58

For Sartre, humans naturally feel compelled to search for and attribute some

sort of meaning to their lives. However, there is no underlying foundation for such

meaning to draw from; no such essential meaning inherently exists. But because it is

the nature of our human consciousness to try to cover up its own essence-less, we

often project meanings where no meanings exist. This is not the worst thing, both

Hough and Sartre realize. Roquentin, upon realizing the absence of any essential

meaning, decides to create his own meaning. Roquentin creates this meaning in

choosing to write a novel. For Roquentin

(Writing down his experience in a fixed, permanent sort of nature) will give him a
kind of respite from the roiling nausea of impermanence…Roquentin’s (previous)
longing for something fixed and secure misunderstands the bright, empty nature of
his own being: the nexus of choice and action that has brought him to this space is
itself a contentful, meaningful arena of activity, and one that he needs to attend to59

Roquentin writes in his journal that “Nausea has not left me and I don’t

believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an

illness or a passing fit: it is I.”60 In abiding in his nauseous state, he now understands
the selflessness and meaningless inherent in his human condition. He recognizes his

nausea and he accepts this feeling as a part of him. This differs from the Buddhist

58 Hough, p. 107
59 Hough, p. 108
60 Sartre (1964), p. 126
stance, which similarly identifies the nauseous state of being, but then understands it to be an impermanent emotional state that is neither a permanent condition nor synonymous with the self.

**Radical Freedom**

Because the Sartrean depiction of non-self is that of pure, open awareness (limitless), he is able to argue that humans have a uniquely radical freedom, wherein, at any given moment, a person may be or do anything he/she chooses to. Sartre confirms, “All persons are thus radically free to shape and shift who and what they are, from moment to moment.”

Although Sartre’s ‘limitless’ self bears resemblance to the Buddhist impermanent aggregation of a selfless consciousness, Sartre’s notion of choice does not factor into the Buddhist depiction. Hough explains

There is certainly no accompanying notion (on the Buddhist account) that everything is open to choice-driven change. The doctrine of dependent arising, which argues for an absolute connection between cause, its conditions, and effect—denies that ‘anything goes’ in this radical Sartrean sense. In fact, by the lights of dependent arising, a pre-determined set of options is all that is ever available to a person, one that is dependent on the karmic seeds of deeds past, and of countless other choices already made, and ones that are always already in motion. The ‘non-self’ of the Buddhist picture may lack fixed metaphysical contours, but it certainly does not lack a precise, highly refined karmic content, one that must be dealt with and owned up to (or denied) from moment to moment.

This is Hough’s strongest comparative claim. Here she correctly identifies a detail many of her peer comparative scholars fail to make explicit enough. That is, she highlights pervasiveness with which the doctrine of karma underlies all of the Buddha’s ontological claims. The inescapability of Buddhist ontology being bound up with karmic law changes the way Mahayanist ontology can be compared to the

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61 Hough, p. 109
62 Hough, p. 109
non-karmic metaphysical arguments Sartre makes. On the Buddhist account, there is a clear causal (karmic) connection between all samsaric phenomena. In comparison, Sartre’s radical freedom notion of ‘anything goes’ becomes a nonsensical claim for Buddhists. For the Buddha, things arise and pass in specific cause and effect relationships, based on the laws of impermanence and interdependence governing existence. On the other hand, Sartre’s ontological system is open, pliable, radically free. The Mahayanist ontological system is in many senses predetermined, based on one’s past karmic actions. Though Buddhist practitioners posses the power to accrue more positive karma by presently acting in wholesome ways, they cannot escape the current consequences of their past karmic actions. For Sartre, the past does not hound beings in such a restrictive way; he affords humans the chance to recreate themselves in each moment, to completely abandon the past, and to change life-directions spontaneously.

**Karma and Rebirth**

Though Hough informatively illustrates how important the laws of karma are to a complete understanding of Buddhist ontology, she could have taken this insight a step further. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to quantify how much of a differentiating factor the Buddhist doctrine of karma is in these types of comparative analyses. Nevertheless, I do posit that this difference is sizable and significant, and it ought to be addressed more explicitly in future comparative scholarship.

Batchelor, for example, argues that the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth are not central to the Buddha’s core teachings. He argues that one can be a
Buddhist without needing to buy into the cycle of karma and rebirth. This is not, by any means, a popular claim within any Buddhist tradition. However, I worry that because he has become a moderately well known figurehead within Western Buddhist culture, scholars will begin to follow suit and similarly not centralize the concepts of karma and rebirth within Buddhist ontological claims.

Further analysis needs to be done to first determine, were scholars to universally centralize karma and rebirth within the Buddhist system, the ways in which these concepts substantially alter comparative claims between Buddhism and Sartrean ontology. After this analysis is finished, scholars can then begin to strip karma and rebirth away from the Buddhist system to ask if and how this alters the prior comparative claims made. Batchelor wants to jump straight into this latter analytic step. I worry that this is a potentially risky philosophical move, which might leave gaps of valuable scholarship untouched within this comparative field.

**Conclusion**

To review, Batchelor and Hough have each commented on the similarities between Buddhist and Sartrean emotional states (nausea, anxiety) upon realizing the selfless nature of human existence. I have explored the ways in which this characterization does and does not hold up upon close analysis. For Sartre, radical freedom may seem like a burden, but the uniquely human power to choose is all humans have. Humans can construct independent and subjective meanings for their lives through the freedom of choice. Sartre suggests we ought to embrace this freedom, rather than flee from it into ‘existential anxiety’. Sartre denies the
usefulness of pursuits of self-growth directed at finding ‘meaning’. He argues that there is no answer in seeking of who or what one is. Instead, what is needed is not self-discovery, but decision. For Buddhists, differently,

Until I truly become nothing, whereupon I realize how I can become anything, I am not free. There is no such freedom for those who still experience themselves as a lack, and who therefore cannot help trying to objectify themselves in order to ground themselves.53

But for Sartre, human consciousness is always a lack because our nothingness and essential meaninglessness cannot stop the innate human craving for stability and comfort in objective things in the realm of having. Though both Sartre and the Buddha insert a degree of lack into material existence, Sartre’s is unresolvable because it’s bound up in his ontology, whereas the Buddhist sense of lack is conditioned, which opens it up to the possibility of being deconditioned through deconstructing a false sense of self. This deconditioning, on the Buddha’s account, will ultimately lead to Enlightenment. Sartre’s ontology makes no such soteriological claim.

Ch. 5: Buddhism and Depth Psychology

Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.

-C.G. Jung

Properly speaking, the unconscious is the real psychic; its inner nature is just as unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is just as imperfectly reported to us through the data of consciousness as is the external world through the indications of our sensory organs.

-Sigmund Freud

I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.

-C.G. Jung

Introduction

There are strong and useful similarities between Buddhist practice and the methods of Depth Psychology. I use the term depth psychology to encompass the psychological traditions of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. In my discussion of this field, I focus primarily on the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, and on how this connection differs from the Buddhist account of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious (alayavijnana). Each tradition endorses a sort of individual mental transformation. Further, each tradition

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64 I use the term ‘depth psychology’ to broadly encompass the psychological traditions of Freud and Jung, as well as more contemporary psychotherapeutic techniques. However, at times the scholars I reference use the terms ‘psychotherapy’ or ‘psychoanalysis’, and I maintain the integrity of their pieces by using the same term in discussion of their pieces.
takes as its foundation things like conscious mental episodes, and then postulates deeper things to explain them. In Freud’s case, the something deeper is the unconscious. For the Buddha, it is the five skandhas, which in aggregation make up the illusory notion of a substantial ‘self’.

At the same time, there are manifold important differences between the two traditions, both in structure and in practice. For Freud in particular, early events in one’s life generally determine his/her adult neuroses. He writes about repressed unconscious emotions needing to be uncovered and dealt with by his patients in order for them to move forward from the past. The Buddha never prioritized one’s early childhood in a similar way. He did, however, argue that we create unnecessary suffering for ourselves by reliving the past or projecting into the future, rather than grounding ourselves always in the present moment.

There are also substantial differences here in motivation. Buddhist practitioners are motivated by a pursuit of Enlightenment. Patients undergoing psychotherapeutic treatment are generally motivated by a pursuit of their own happiness, or of resolving past traumas in order to feel more content in the present moment. However, though motivated by different intentions, each tradition offers its followers/patients many similar therapeutic tools.

**My Methodology**

In this chapter, I first analyze prior comparative scholarship between these two traditions. I explore the connections between Buddhism and Depth Psychology. I focus on the Yogacara Buddhist school (a specific type of Mahayana Buddhism), as
I have throughout much of this thesis, because it discusses consciousness in ways that strongly resemble Depth Psychology’s account of consciousness. Additionally, this allows me to lean substantially on prior scholarship conducted by Dan Lusthaus in his book *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch’eng Wei-shih Lun*. In my comparison, I focus on the themes of happiness, mindfulness, the ‘self’, and therapeutic tools. I make close connections between the Buddhist concept of the unconscious (alayavijnana) and Freud and Jung’s account of the unconscious. This incipient comparative work, much of which has been done by scholar Tao Jiang, if persuasive, highlights a connection between Jung’s account of mental processes and the Buddha’s account of mental processes in a way that connects the two traditions in unprecedented closeness.

I intentionally discuss the work of writers who have a metaphorical foot in both Eastern and Western traditions. They include: Gay Watson, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Mark Epstein, Harvey Aronson, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and John Welwood, among others. Each of these writers uses his own experiences of living and participating in Eastern and Western cultures as a way to enhance his comparative claims. They each have embodied the traditions of both cultures, and are, I thus argue, our most valuable resources in this comparative scholarship, due to the very phenomenological nature of each tradition.

Then, I will discuss how Lusthaus’ claim holds up against these other contemporary authors’ discussions of the overlap between Yogacara Buddhism and psychologism. Lusthaus intentionally uses the term psychologism, which he defines as the claim that ‘psychological factors are the ultimate explanatory tools for
understanding anything’. In my discussion of Lusthaus’ work, I will similarly use the term ‘psychologism’. However, in the rest of this chapter, I use the term Depth Psychology, rather than psychologism. I also provide my own analysis of the problematic ways in which cross-cultural dialogue is mistakenly approaching the pursuit of happiness. The term means wildly different things to one invested in psychotherapeutic self-improvement practices and to an ascetic Buddhist who has renounced all material possessions and relationships, and I want to reveal this common misappropriation. Within this discussion, I broaden the scope of my Buddhist lens to not only the Yogacara school, but to all Buddhist schools of thought used in this cross-cultural comparative dialogue about happiness.

Finally, I assess my findings and ultimately wonder if psychology and Buddhism are similar enough projects to be of benefit and/or complement to each other? Can a Buddhist understanding of cognition be understood in its specific context by the modern psychologically interested Westerner? I argue that there is a definite health and healing aspect to each paradigm, and I will pursue this similarity.

I end with discussion of David Loy’s book *Lack and Transcendence*, which discusses several lines of overlap between Buddhist practice, Existential crises, and Freudian Psychology, in an effort to begin to connect each of the overarching strands of my argument. Let us first talk about Buddhism in the West.

**Western Buddhism Today**

With the recent explosive popularity of mindfulness, yoga, meditation, and other Eastern-based practices in Western culture, there have been countless
comparisons between Buddhism and modern psychology and psychotherapy lately. This is not a new comparison. Alan Watts, for example, laid out comprehensive analysis the two traditions in his 1961 title *Psychotherapy East and West*. These days, some of the original connections Watts’ work explored are becoming more and more tenuous. This is, in large degree, due to our current Western preoccupation with the pursuit of happiness, and more specifically, the pursuit of one’s own individual happiness. This is not a critical Buddhist aim or concern. Buddhist practices help practitioners reduce suffering. This can consequently lead one to a happier disposition, though happiness itself is not the primary Buddhist aim. Many Westerners have, nevertheless, begun to use Buddhist practices as means for their own personal pursuits of the Western ideal of ‘happiness’. This is often done without regard to cultural contexts, distinct Buddhist lineages, or Buddhism’s specific soteriological aim (Enlightenment). However, this is not at all to say that there are no legitimate Western Buddhist practitioners, or that all current cross-cultural dialogue between East and West is lost in translation. It is useful to examine ways in which the overlap between these two traditions has and has not been made in respectful, beneficial ways.

As we observed in my discussion of Mahayana Buddhism and Sartre’s Existentialism, there have been several helpful and intriguing connections made between Western phenomenological discourses and Buddhist practices at large. In general examination of Buddhism and Psychology, such dialogue has already reaped enormous benefits, especially prompting research and new discoveries in neuroscience. For example, neuroscientists have begun hooking up long-time
meditators to brain scans charting their respective amygdala activation levels through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). This practice has yielded terrific and informative neuroscience research.

Cross-Cultural Discourse

Harvey Aronson offers a helpful simile:

When we North Americans take up the practice of traditional Buddhist meditation…(we) may think it is like going to the store and picking up some more things (in this case a set of techniques) to nourish us and make us feel better. The traditional understanding of Buddhist religious life, on the other hand, would see its practices much more like the central area of a spider web thoroughly and inextricably linked to supporting threads of history, culture and language.65

Aronson has a background in both Buddhism and Western Psychology. He argues that successful translation of Buddhist culture into the West does not need to take on the burden of adopting the traditional language and culture of the practice. But, he urges, it is still very important to understand, or at least appreciate as much as possible about the linguistic, cultural, and historical threads underlying traditional Buddhist practices to have a fuller and more robust appreciation of its purpose. This deeper, contextualized understanding, he argues, allows Westerners to understand the extent of Buddhism “as a path of liberation, rather than a set of practices reducible solely to a fulfillment of our Western perceived psychological needs.”66 I do not think we, Western Buddhists, are there yet. As the each tradition evolves independently, we (members of both Eastern and Western cultures) ought to evolve alongside these changes. As we continue to foster cross-cultural dialogue, we ought

66 Unno, p. 71
also to attempt to understand and respect the ways this dialogue is growing, including the linguistic, cultural, and historical threads underlying the comparisons made.

Psychologist Jeremy Safran has also written extensively about the interaction between Buddhism and psychotherapy. He states:

Both Buddhism and psychotherapy are cultural institutions that originally developed as expressions of the values and the complex tensions and contradictions within their cultures of origins. Both are systems of healing that have evolved over time as culture has evolved, as the configurations of the self have evolved, and as new cultures have assimilated them. And both have transformed the cultures in which they have evolved.\textsuperscript{67}

Scholar Mark Unno furthers Safran’s sentiment, stating,

Cross-cultural interaction occurs not only between the two disciplines of Buddhist and psychotherapeutic practices (involving various schools and approaches within each) but also across geographical and ethnic boundaries.\textsuperscript{68}

It is clear, then, that Depth Psychology is not simply a Western-only practice or pursuit. In fact, today Japan and the United States are the two largest psychotherapeutic cultures in the world. Remarkably, Japan and the United States also have the largest numbers of ordained Buddhist priests, monks, nuns, and academic researchers of Buddhism. The point is that both Buddhism and Depth Psychology have extended well beyond the geographical limits of their respective origins.

Much of Safran’s comparative work illustrates how religious traditions and practices, including both Buddhism and Depth Psychology, are never static or fixed. Additionally, he explores how there are many versions of the Buddhist path and several theoretical and practical courses of action within Depth Psychology. Thus, he argues, 1. Neither Buddhism nor Depth Psychology can be reduced to an essential


\textsuperscript{68} Unno, p. 1
narrative, and 2. Points of resonance between various schools of Buddhism and Depth Psychology can be found if one is only open to them. Safran suggests that by remaining open and flexible, comparative scholars can better see their own assumptions and can also see possibilities for building bridges and synthesizing. This, I would argue, is the ideal model for continuing comparative scholarship between Buddhism and Depth Psychology.

It is not simply about crafting charitable readings of each tradition, anymore. Contemporary comparative scholars have the added task of contextualizing their own comparisons within other comparative works coming out, mindful of the interrelations between all the different schools contained within both Buddhism and Depth Psychology. Connections made ought to go beyond basic similarities and differences. This work has already been done. Now, Safran argues, this comparative work is not merely a search for superficial similarities, ‘a colonization of Buddhism by Western psychology’, or vice versa. Rather, “it is about a mutual and genuine confrontation with the complexity and otherness in each of these two traditions that can ultimately lead to an enrichment of both.”

Now that I have illuminated the predominant comparative conversations contained within Buddhism and Depth Psychology scholarship today, let us turn to an analysis of Lusthaus’ comparative project.

**Dan Lusthaus’ Argument**

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69 Unno, p. 6
70 Unno, p. 60
Lusthaus draws parallels between the mutual emphasis on mental contents in Yogacara Buddhist philosophy and psychologism. Lusthaus defines ‘psychologism’ as the reductionist claim that psychological factors are the ultimate explanatory tools for understanding anything. Psychologism resides solely within the cognitive world of mind and things, a world comparable to the Buddhist ‘samsaric’ (non-enlightened) realm. Psychologism takes a positive stance on mental factors. Psychologism purports that we need to understand psychological factors first if we want understand anything about human behavior. It relies on a study of mental activity to reveal insight about human life.

Yogacara Buddhism also centralizes mental content. However, quite differently, Yogacarins argue that Enlightenment is the absence of mental factors. In order to release oneself from the bonds of samsara, he/she must discard the negative karmic mental content stored within one’s storehouse consciousness (alayavijnana). Though there is a similarity of a focus on mental content between Yogacara Buddhism and psychologism, the two traditions seem to be taking very different approaches to the material. Therefore, Lusthaus’ overarching claim is that Yogacara Buddhism is not a psychologism since it seeks to overcome psychological closure, rather than enhance it.

Lusthaus supports his argument that Yogacara Buddhism is not a psychologism by suggesting that the point of Buddhist analysis is not the reification of a mental structure or theory of mind, but its erasure. By this he means that Yogacara Buddhist practices are aimed at eliminating karma-continuing thought.

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71 Lusthaus, p. 178
patterns, in order to rid oneself of mental chatter and conditioning altogether. Whereas psychologism defines itself as grounded within and limited by psychological factors, Yogacara Buddhism imagines itself transcending this mental framework altogether. Enlightenment is the absence of a focus on this mental conditioning.

This Yogacarain aim of the termination of mental factors is in sharp contrast to the aims of Depth Psychology, wherein psychological factors (either conscious or unconscious) are, I argue, its end game. For Depth Psychology, there is a sense of seeking to dig deeply into a patient’s emotional problems to try to resolve them. The field works within and through one’s mental structures, helping patients better understand their minds and develop ways to resolve past pains and address future problems. Unconscious mental content is brought to the fore in Freudian analysis, and this type of mental content is given particular significance in bringing a patient’s mental state back to balance. Depth psychology relies on the mental factors of the conscious and unconscious mind, and seeks to unveil this mental content, not dissolve it.

On the other hand, Yogacara meditation practices might be more akin to de-grounding one’s mental content and emotions—to uproot and eradicate them—rather than exploring and/or validating these feelings. Yogacara’s project is not to use cognition as a tool to help a sentient being understand his/her mind, but to get rid of this very cognition itself. For Yogacara practitioners, even cognizing about cognizing is problematic. Instead, the practice aims to get rid of cognition altogether, such that one does not even think about its absence. Enlightened beings do not dwell in cognitive modes of behavior because, on the Yogacarain account, this type of thought
produces suffering. Thus, cognition is not the end road for Yogacara, but rather an aspect of the samsaric realm sentient beings must work to overcome. Psychological tools are very useful conventional methods to work with one’s mind on the Yogacarin account, but they are never the ultimate explanatory tools for anything. Whereas for psychologism, these psychological tools are the ultimate explanatory tools.

Recent comparative scholars have also begun to analyze the similarities and differences between Jung’s unconscious and Yogacarin’s alayavijnana. Because both traditions centralize mental factors, and unconscious mental factors in particular, the hope in engaging in this comparative work is that it will help illuminate aspects of each tradition’s claims. I will now analyze this connection.

**The Alayavijnana and the Unconscious**

In *Contexts and Dialogue*, Jao Jiang explores connections between the Yogacara Buddhist concept of alayavijnana and the Depth Psychology concept of the unconscious. Both traditions, he argues, are in a process of rapid change. As the two have become more integrated and as cross-cultural dialogue in general has intensified in amount and depth, both Buddhism and Depth Psychology are changing shape. Jiang argues that neither paradigm is nearly finished changing, either. For him, this process of change and growth is not problematic, as long as we are aware of its force. In his book, Jiang explores how a comparative look at Freud and Jung’s Depth Psychology and Yogacara Buddhism can shed light on each tradition’s formulation of the unconscious mind.
Jiang defines the alayavijnana as a “subliminal reservoir of memories, habits, tendencies, and future possibilities.”\(^\text{72}\) The alayavijnana is the underlying receptacle consciousness for all one’s other mental factors and the associated karmic seeds. Jiang further explains that alayavijnana has three aspects: 1. It is that which stores up, 2. It is that which is stored, and 3. It is that which is attached. The alayavijnana, sometimes called the storehouse consciousness, is a repository of karmic seeds, seeds that are perfumed with both the wholesome and unwholesome karmic content of one’s past actions. This storehouse consciousness fully explains everything within the structure of consciousness “without having to appeal to anything outside of that structure.”\(^\text{73}\)

It is the explanatory structure for all mental conditioning contained within each person’s karmic action. In this way, the alayavijnana is the ultimate explanatory tool for Yogacara in the same way that psychologism describes psychological factors as being the ultimate explanatory factors. But, as we learned from Lusthaus, consciousness is not the entire ontological story for Yogacarins. Instead, the Yogacarin soteriological motivation of Enlightenment goes beyond this cognitive realm. Thus for Yogacarins, to say that the alayavijnana explains everything within the structure of consciousness is not the same as saying it explains everything (which psychologism claims about cognition). Rather, the alayavijnana explains everything understandable in ordinary, samsaric life (at the conventional but not ultimate level of understanding). Enlightened living, however, transcends this cognitive realm of this storehouse consciousness.


\(^{73}\) Jiang, p. 64
Jiang ultimately argues that the Yogacarin positing of a storehouse consciousness, the alayavijnana, is motivated by two aims: 1. To overcome tensions about karma and non-self, and 2. To allow Enlightenment to be an attainable goal for practitioners. The clear emerging difference between the Yogacarin project and Depth Psychology here is that the conceptualization of the alayavijnana is motivated by an enlightened aim absent in psychotherapeutic practices. But further differences also exist. Jiang suggests that to some extent, Yogacarin’s felt they needed to conceive of this storehouse consciousness to avoid contradictions in their preexisting conceptions of karma and non-self. Conceiving of the alayavijnana was, perhaps, a way to fit all of the pieces of the Yogacarin philosophical account together in a coherent, unified way. This possibility will yield an interesting comparative contrast to Freud’s positing of the unconscious. Before I take this critical comparative approach, let us first briefly review Freud and Jung’s respective psychotherapeutic approaches.

**Freud**

In this discussion, I will assume a basic level of familiarity with Freud from my reader. Though I would like to provide a broad overview of his work, this task would stray too far from my project’s aims. Thus, I will focus solely on his work related to the unconscious mind.

In *Interpretation*, Freud outlines three basic human mental structures: the unconscious, preconscious, and the conscious. He explains that the unconscious has no access to consciousness except thru the preconscious. He describes the
unconscious as timeless, and states that it (the unconscious) is not interested in pleasing the external world, but rather in pleasing itself. The unconscious pays very little regard to reality (unlike consciousness), and instead focuses on the pleasure principle. By this he argues that humans naturally tend to avoid suffering and seek pleasure. This, perhaps, is not so different from the human impulse Batchelor terms ‘existential flight’, or the natural tendency to flee from one’s crisis of meaninglessness and consequent feelings of nausea.

Freud maintains that a broad spectrum of human behavior can only be explained in terms of the hidden mental processes of the unconscious mind. His psychoanalytic approach seeks to find explanations for his patients’ neuroses by searching for latent causes of distressed mental states. In this psychoanalytic approach, Freud acted as a sort of interlocutor between his patients’ conscious minds and their unconscious minds. Through his therapy, he helped patients uncover impulses held deep within their unconscious minds. For him, psychoanalysis is the only means to bring these unconscious mental processes to the forefront of one’s consciousness.

In clear tension with the Buddhist sense of eradicating one’s ego (sense of self) through meditation, Freud’s psychoanalysis encourages a strengthening of one’s sense of self. Freud states of his patients:

They complain about their sickness, at the same time exploiting it to the limit. As a matter of fact, if an attempt is made to cure them of their ailment, they will protect this most cherished possession of theirs with the self-same fervor with which a lioness defends her offspring.  

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This conception of the conflicted self does not belong to Freud alone. In fact, it extends into many psychological arenas. Scholar John Welwood explains that Western psychotherapy has generally recognized that the end to the tormenting split between persona and shadow, I and it, individual and neurotic symptoms, lies in the direction of “befriending, integrating, and taking back those parts of oneself that have been made ‘alien’ and ‘other’.” Similar to Freud’s expressed sentiment above, Welwood describes the lengthy, difficult process of psychotherapy, as

The neurotic clings to his symptoms and to his restricted world on the one hand, while on the other hand he despairs about them and seeks some kind of salvation...symptoms provide a grim pleasure, in that they allow the I to affirm itself as separate from the much-despised It. The individual as persona, as isolated I, will defend his suffering as thought it were his most prized possessions.

This reveals a noteworthy comparison to Buddhist mindfulness and meditation practice. At a superficial level, both Freud’s project and that of the Buddha take interest in people coming to terms with themselves, cultivating a sense of self-acceptance, and learning how to integrate one’s whole being in a balanced way. Both traditions support and foster people’s abilities to befriend the ugly parts of themselves, and to come to terms with aspects of themselves and reality that are not particularly pleasing. Both processes are awareness-raising endeavors. But, the Buddhists use this ‘befriending’ of oneself to encourage the insight of non-self. This ‘befriending’ is an effort to realize that all parts of a person—the good, bad, and the ugly—are all impermanent. In coming to terms with reality just as it is in this very moment, the Buddhist practitioner engages in mindful realization about the impermanence of all phenomena. To the Buddha, beings are constantly changing.

76 Welwood, p. 100
Once we can stop either clinging to or resisting aspects of ourselves that we are embarrassed about, we can free ourselves the limits this clinging and desiring (Batchelor’s ‘having’ realm) places on our lives. Whereas Freud encourages this ‘befriending’ process in order to build up one’s ego, to solidify it into a strong, healthy sense of self, the Buddhists want to befriend the present moment and then release it. Moreover, the Buddhist mindfulness path leads practitioners to accept the impermanence of each present moment and to explore the interdependence of all conditioned arisings. Now let us incorporate Jung’s account of the unconscious into the conversation.

Jung

According to Jung, a human being is a combination of sexual and spiritual drives, and an ideal person is one who embraces the ‘self’ through the individuation process. Jung’s individuation process is the transformative process of integrating one’s consciousness with his/her unconscious. This task is the primary purpose of Jung’s psychoanalysis. Integrating the conscious with the unconscious involves curing one’s psychological traumas through psychoanalysis, which seeks to uncover and reveal suppressed memories. In doing so, Jung argues that his patients develop heightened knowledge of themselves, which can heal or resolve their problems. Eventually, the individuation process results in self-realization, after which Jung’s patients feel a sense of harmonious calm.

Like Freud, Jung assumes that the personal unconscious is a crucial part of the human mind, and that it must be brought to the forefront of one’s mind through
psychoanalysis. However, in other respects Jung describes the unconscious differently than Freud does. Recall that Freud suggests the ego is the link between consciousness and the unconscious. But for Jung, psychic contents are considered conscious if they are perceived by the ego, and they are unconscious if they are not perceived by the ego. The ego, he explains, is a highly composite factor, “made up of images recorded from the sense-functions that transmit stimuli both from within and from without, and furthermore of an immense accumulation of images of past processes.”

Unlike Freud, Jung divides his version of the unconscious into two types: the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is comparable to Freud’s account of each person’s latent impulses and traumas stored deeply within one’s mind, accessible only through psychoanalysis. Jung’s collective unconscious, on the other hand, is constituted by what Jung calls inherited archetypes. Archetypes are ancient images, limitless in number, which are representational figures useful to refer to in psychoanalysis. Major archetypal events include: birth, death, separation from one’s parents, marriage, etc. Jung discussed five main archetypes: 1. The self, 2. The shadow, 3. The anima, 4. The animus, and 5. The persona. He argued that humans must come to peace with the archetypes that lay within themselves in order to live a full life; contentment is achieved through being in harmony with these archetypal symbols.

These archetypes, or primordial images, are only ever encountered in the collective unconscious. Jung claims they become the links between personal and the

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collective states of mind. This is Jung’s biggest point of divergence from Freud.

Jung further describes the collective unconscious this way:

The other part of the unconscious (besides the personal) is what I call the impersonal or collective unconscious. As the name indicates, its contents are not personal but collective; that is, they do not belong to one individual alone but to the whole of mankind.\(^{78}\)

Jung’s psychoanalysis is also different in motivation and in practice from Freud’s psychoanalysis. For Jung, there was a deep sense of mythology to the unconscious. In discussing archetypes, he would ask his patients: By what myth do you live? Jung described the language of mythology as ‘associative’ and ‘integrative’, rather than dissociative or analytical, thereby giving it a clearer resonance with the Buddhist reality of the mutual interdependence between things and events. Jung’s collective unconscious (made up of these archetypes) is, he argues, a more accurate depiction of one’s mental state than one’s conscious mind is.

We can now make the connection between Jung’s archetypes and the Buddhist doctrine of non-self even more explicit. Jung argues that studying the concept of archetypes nevertheless allows A person to more easily go beyond his individual and separate neuroses. For he is no longer exclusively identified with just his separate-self sense and hence is no longer exclusively tied to his purely personal problems. In a sense he can start to let go of his fears and anxieties, depressions and obsessions, and begin to view them with the same clarity and impartiality with which one might view clouds floating through the sky or waters rushing in a stream…he can comprehensively look at his individual emotional and ideational complexes. But the fact that he can comprehensively look at them means that he has ceased using them as something with which to look at, and thus distort, reality. Further, the fact that he can look at them means that he is no longer exclusively identified with them. His identity begins to touch that within which is beyond.\(^{79}\)


\(^{79}\) Welwood (1979), p. 19
Finally, Jung’s psychological method is built on the “self’s capacity and urge to realize itself through its own efforts to seek individuation.”\(^8\) At play in both Freud and Jung, but absent in Yogacara Buddhism, then, is a clear, positively-charged emphasis on the self. Whereas Jung’s discussion of the archetypes contained within the collective unconscious shares certain similarities with the Buddhist concept of non-self, his overall depiction (encapsulating consciousness and the unconscious mind) of the ‘self’ bares little resemblance to the Buddhist depiction of the self. For Jung, individuation is a process of self-discovery, and, eventually, complete self-realization. It is a way to understand oneself, and to gain clarity and internal harmony. Similarly, Freud’s psychoanalytic approach hopes to build up his patients’ sense of self into a confidence not previously present in them before undergoing psychoanalysis. Both Freud and Jung’s psychoanalytical approaches thus attempt to cultivate a stronger ego. In clear contrast, all Buddhist lineages defend the non-self doctrine, maintaining that the ‘self’ is ultimately an illusion without any substantive reality.

**Comparative Unconsciousness**

Now let us discuss each tradition’s probable motivations underlying its positing of an unconscious (alayavijnana). Jiang argues that if we are to understand and compare the alayavijnana to Jung and Freud’s respective articulations of the unconscious, we need to first understand each within its own context and then recontextualize them within a dialogical setting. I will take up this task here.

\(^8\) Jiang, p. 103
Recall that for Yogacara Buddhism, the unconscious is motivated by the aim of Enlightenment. It is through the gradual elimination of one’s defiled karmic seeds stored within the alayavijnana that one can escape from samsara. Beings who have attained Enlightenment can see clearly and with ‘unimpeded penetration’ into reality with direct access to the alayavijnana, whereas unenlightened beings cannot.\(^8^1\) This heightened awareness and direct relationship with one’s unconscious (alayavijnana) is accomplished through meditation practice and study, wherein Buddhist practitioners gains insight into the emptiness of all things and remove all dualistic thinking from their cognitive processes.

Freud discusses the unconscious in a very different context. His psychoanalysis deals in large part with finding cures for his depressed neurotic patients. Jung also works with depressed patients, but initially treated patients with cases of schizophrenia in particular.\(^8^2\) Freud’s therapeutic strategy emphasized changing both internal and external factors that caused his patients suffering. Recall, on the other hand, that Buddhist meditation leads practitioners to accept exactly what arises in each present moment. There is no suggestion of changing environmental factors. Instead, everything Buddhists need for contentment is already contained within themselves, and it becomes simply a matter of uncovering this truth and experientially understanding it through meditative practice.

As a further distinction, Freud’s psychoanalysis patients rely on his as their analyst and his formal therapeutic structure to gain access their unconscious. Such access is indirect and intellectual, not experiential, like it is in Buddhism. We can

\(^8^1\) Jiang, p. 101
\(^8^2\) Jiang, p. 127
assume that Freud and Jung, for their own professional success, in some senses had to argue that the unconscious is not accessible directly, to allow their own theories/analyses to come in and magically interpret patients’ unconscious mental states. This ensured the men employment, success, and indispensability. Gay Watson observes “all contemporary psychotherapies concur in the importance of the presence of the therapist and see (this) relationship with the client as central to the healing process.” Again in clear contrast, this therapist intervener is not present in Buddhist therapies (meditation). Though Buddhist practitioners have a model of the path in the Buddha himself, ultimately the practice is a phenomenological, self-led process.

An additional difference between the Buddhist unconscious and the Depth Psychology account of the unconscious is that the alayavijnana is not only directly accessible, but it is also always present. In an interview with Joyce McDougall, His Holiness The Dalai Lama explains that the alayavijnana is “ever-present, and it is manifest in the sense that it is the basis or core of the identity of the person. In contrast…you can have access to (the psychoanalytic unconscious) only through dreams, hypnosis and the like. The unconscious is concealed, and what becomes manifest isn’t the unconscious itself, but rather the latent imprints, or propensities, that are stored in the unconscious.” In this way, the alayavijnana sounds more like the Western conception of consciousness than unconsciousness, in the sense of it being one’s core identity and directly accessible. However, the alayavijnana does not

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seem to map on very well to either Depth Psychology’s unconscious or conscious mental states.

Scholar William Waldron also compares the two accounts of the unconscious. He argues that both of these concepts—the alayavijnana and the unconscious—address questions concerning

The continuity and influence of underlying mental processes, such as memory and dispositions, that had become problematic within their own philosophical milieus...(both traditions) tended to equate consciousness with immediate awareness, a narrow conception of consciousness that made it difficult to explain many ordinary mental processes, such as memory and language, as well as extraordinary ones such as hypnotic and meditative trances.85

Because of these discontinuities within each account of the unconscious, conceptions of continuous yet unconscious mental processes arose in each case as “obvious responses to, as well as natural corollaries with, conceptions of consciousness as necessarily accompanied by immediate awareness.”86

Waldron argues that the concepts of alayavijnana and Depth Psychology’s unconscious mental processes were necessary, practical conceptions created to resolve incompatibilities within each tradition’s philosophy. Both terms describe the entity “continuously underlying and influencing conscious mental processes, which in turn influence (the unconscious)—making all ordinary experience a product of an ongoing and inseparable interaction between conscious and unconscious processes.” In this sense, then, for both traditions consciousness needed an antithesis, a counterweight to round out the mental picture. For neither tradition is a superficial consciousness the ultimate explanatory construct. Both require a deeper

85 Unno, p. 89
86 Unno, p. 89
understanding of one’s mental life in order to explain human mental states, and thus roughly similar unconscious accounts were inserted into each tradition.

His Holiness The Dalai Lama offers further insight into the conception of the unconscious. He argues the reason Yogacara Buddhists (he, of course, is a Tibetan Buddhist not a Yogacarin himself) feel the need to posit such a consciousness was “out of desperation…they believed that phenomena must exist substantially…they needed some mental thing which would carry on after death.” This implies that Yogacarins posited this additional consciousness out of rational necessity, rather than through empirical investigation or insight. It also reveals how intimately tied up the Yogacara concept of alayavijnana is with the project’s soteriological aims. Like Freud and Jung’s probable positing of the unconscious to allow their lucrative mediation in patient’s recovery (through revealing patients’ unconscious mental states to themselves), perhaps the alayavijnana was a similarly necessary posit for Yogacarins to rational fit their preexisting claims together.

In this section I have offered an overview of the major arguments connecting the Yogacarin concept of alayavijnana to the psychoanalytic unconscious, and of the broader implications arising from this comparison. Now, I will extend this cross-cultural comparison, focusing on how each tradition deals (or does not deal) with the concept of ‘happiness’. The above discussion of Freud and Jung will be of continued use here.

The Problem of Cures

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87 Watson, p. 273
The biggest point of departure between Depth Psychology and Buddhist practice is in motivation. Whereas psychotherapists aim to cure, or at least reduce, its patients’ suffering and pain, Buddhist practice instead aims at an awareness of suffering. The Buddha suggested that suffering may be one of the “clearest pointers to the basic character of one’s existence.” Striving to get rid of one’s suffering only creates more suffering, on the Buddhist account. Suffering is relieved only through liberation, which comes about through wholesome karmic action and rigorous meditation practice and study.

Western psychotherapy is directed towards problem-solving and setting goals for treatment and then achieving them. Forward motion is the key. Success is traceable through patients’ changed behaviors, feelings, interactions, etc. Awareness of a problem is not enough. Cure, or at the very least, relief, is the operative word.

On the other hand, Buddhist practice does not look forward. It is not aimed at a particular goal. It is true that practitioners begin the path through an underlying motivation to attain Enlightenment. However, focusing on this Enlightenment end is completely antithetical to the practice’s project. The point of Buddhist practice is to experientially investigate one’s own mental processes and to grow aware of the thought patterns contained within one’s mind. The practice is not aimed at ‘getting better’ or at reaching a certain goal. The Buddha, in no uncertain terms, argues that suffering is inevitable. Until one frees him/herself from the chains of samsara, he/she is stuck in a world full of suffering. There is no escape, on the Buddhist account. On the other hand, psychotherapeutic practices suggest tools and methods for patients to

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Welwood, p. 181
effectively and contentedly live in this world, leading fulfilled lives. Depth Psychology promises its patients a better future. Buddhism makes no such promise.

In order to attain liberation on the Buddhist account, one must fully face and embrace one’s pain, accepting it and directly working with it. Pain cannot simply be eliminated. Suffering must be addressed head on, with awareness and an acceptance of its omni-presence. And recall, liberation often takes several lifetimes. Unlike psychoanalysis, the Buddha is not guaranteeing his followers short-term relief. Rather, the practice offers complete transformation and liberation, attained through wisdom accrued over a much longer time scale than Depth Psychology operates within.

Still, similarities between Depth Psychology and Buddhist practice do exist. Each is committed to revealing one’s neurotic tendencies. Each attempts to orient its followers/patients to a more authentic relationship with oneself. Buddhist practice offers a simple awareness of the inner workings of one’s mind, and an acceptance of this pain without fear or hope of its lessening. Noticing these thoughts and realizing that they are not ‘self”, but are just impermanent, non-essential thoughts, is all the Buddha proscribes.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher, discusses the differences between meditation and psychotherapy:

In the popular therapeutic style, the individual’s attitude is one of trying to recover from something. He looks for a technique to help him get rid of, or overcome, his complaint. The meditative attitude accepts, in some sense, that you are what you are. Your neurotic aspects have to be looked at rather than thrown away…when you meditate properly, the notion of cure doesn’t come into the picture. If it does, then meditation becomes psychotherapy.89

89 Welwood, p. 192
Harvey Aronson also has much to say here. He explains that Buddhism exposes one’s emotional baggage, brings it to the fore and does not try to disentangle it. The practice is simply to observe the emotions arising and passing in every moment. It is not a cure. The cure, as it were, comes when we give up the hope of there being a cure. Instead, the Buddhist aim is to be mindful, since “the practice of Buddhist meditation does not explore the contents of personal history, but rather evaluates the very nature or essence of personal experience.” 90 In this way, we can see the way Depth Psychology firmly situates itself in the conventional, cognitive realm, whereas Buddhism situates itself in a realm beyond cognition, the ultimate (Enlightened) realm.

Does this then mean that Buddhism and Depth Psychology approach mental states and cognition from two unavoidably divergent ends? No. At least I don’t think so. Until a Buddhist gets out of the cognitive realm (by attaining Enlightenment) he/she is still firmly located in the cognitive realm, just like Depth Psychology patients. It is not until one attains Enlightenment that this particular divergence between Buddhism and Depth Psychology becomes relevant. Clearly, Enlightenment is the last step in the Buddhist practice. So, in most every point of comparison, Buddhism and Depth Psychology are operating at the same conventional level. However, as I have discussed, the explicit Buddhist motivation to attain Enlightenment is a significant divergence from Depth Psychology’s motivations.

Mindfulness

90Aronson, Harvey B. *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground: Reconciling Eastern Ideals and Western Psychology*. Boston: Shambhala, 2004, p. 66
Both Depth Psychology and Buddhist practice have the capacity to produce in their patients/practitioners a ‘radical shift in consciousness’. This strengthens the previously made argument about each tradition’s focus on conscious mental states. Each has proven to effectively shift its followers’ perspectives on themselves and their lives. This radical shift, John Welwood argues, “seems to be required for a renewal of our (Western) culture (and must be) helped along by a more widespread involvement by psychologists and laypeople (involved in such) self-knowledge disciplines.” He suggests that if contemporary depth psychology truly wants to provide patients with ‘complete self-knowledge’ and to give patients a strength and depth to their lives, the discipline stands to learn from Buddhism’s larger structure and vision.

Welwood particularly encourages depth psychologists to explore incorporating Buddhist mindfulness training into psychotherapeutic models. This mindfulness training encourages individuals to see directly into the inner workings of their minds at every given moment. It grounds practitioners in the present moment through a focus on the breath, on one’s task at hand, or on concentrating on a particular object or mantra. Mindfulness stresses the importance of staying present, and not drifting back into past memories or worrying about a future that has yet to come. The present is where Buddhist practitioners must train their minds to remain. This is, of course, not a uniquely Buddhist idea. But, it is an idea central to all Buddhist philosophy (impermanence) and practice.

91 Welwood, p. 195
Another important practical therapeutic difference between the two traditions is in time-space scale. Zen Buddhism teacher Shinzen Young argues that Buddhist mindfulness practices implement psychotherapy’s ideas at both a much finer time-space scale and at a much more intense level, such that mindfulness practice has a quantitative difference which is so great that it leads to a qualitative type difference.\(^92\) He further claims that in practicing mindfulness, one lets go of arising thoughts second by second (at a micro time-scale), whereas psychotherapy gradually enables patients to let go of childhood traumas (at a macro time-scale). Young describes mindfulness as Buddhism’s central practice, which includes mindfulness not only in formal sitting meditation practice, but also in all of one’s daily activities. Buddhist mindfulness draws awareness to one’s experience at a higher level of detail, on a moment by moment basis.

Though it grounds itself completely in the present moment, Buddhist mindfulness practice does not entirely discredit attention to one’s past traumas. Instead, Buddhist mindfulness encourages practitioners to work through past traumas by continually redirecting one’s attention to the present moment, rather ceaselessly dwelling in past traumas. It is not a practice aimed at any solution or resolution other than attention in the present moment. Depth Psychology practices, however, aim towards a resolution of one’s past traumas by unraveling unconscious past experiences in order to then fully engage with the present moment.

In psychotherapy, there is a sense of dredging up one’s past experiences, both conscious and unconscious, and pushing the mental states associated with these past experiences to the surface. This process can be emotionally challenging and requires support to navigate.

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experiences to the fore to actively deal with. Psychotherapy often works with one or two pivotal moments in one’s past, rather than the entire set of experiences at a time. On the other hand, in Buddhist mindfulness practices, it is more of a ‘trickle down’ effect, rather than a dredging up of past experiences. By ‘trickle down’, Young claims that in attention to the present moment, breath by breath, the unconscious rewires itself. Mindfulness ‘trickles down’ one’s mental state and resolves latent past traumas without an explicit attention to these experiences. In Buddhist mindfulness practice, there is no need to dig up painful past experiences. These traumas will work out and rewire themselves in resolved, satisfying ways by an attention on the present moment.

Steven Laycock describes the difference this way:

While Western phenomenology commits itself to describing the contents of experience, assuming that this will tell us something about the nature of consciousness, Buddhism deconstructs the mind, showing us the futility in trying to grasp its nature through philosophical reflection since there is nothing there to know.93

Therefore, although there are parallels between Buddhist mindfulness practice and Depth Psychology, mindfulness occurs at a much finer time-space scale and at a greater intensity. Still, Young is certainly not alone in his suggestion that the two practices complement each other. In fact, he argues that they work in tandem. He recommends that that we ought to know both the gross anatomy (Depth Psychology) and the cellular histology (mindfulness) of ourselves. Whereas large structures of personality and behavior are the realms of psychotherapy, mindfulness is the transcendence of these structures and offers detailed insight at a cellular level. The

two paradigms are, he concludes, two vehicles that give different scale pictures of the same phenomenon.

**Happiness**

In current Western culture, we are obsessed with and motivated by the ceaseless pursuit of our own individual happiness. Westerners are rarely content. Our culture encourages constant self-improvement, self-growth, and fosters the belief that we ought to currently strive to be and do more. Western culture spend millions of dollars on self-help books, beauty products, gym memberships, therapy sessions, and countless other things to try to help ourselves ‘feel better’. We want to feel content in all aspects of our lives: our relationships, our jobs, and our creative pursuits. This is all rooted in a strong sense of self and in the idea that ‘I’ ought to become more satisfied and focus on my own happiness.

How does this compare, if at all, to the Buddhist notion of happiness? In this comparison, we must be careful not to transmute Western terms/ideals onto Buddhist philosophy. The Western notion of ‘happiness’ is not the same as the sort of ‘happiness’ the Buddha encouraged. The latter type of happiness is more akin to ‘serenity’ or ‘inner peace’, whereas I understand the Western notion of happiness as more grounded in material satisfaction, relationships, and/or financially stability. The Buddhist stance on happiness is more analogous to wellbeing. His Holiness the Dalai Lama suggests that such a Buddhist wellbeing calls for nothing less than “a radical revolution away from our habitual preoccupation with self.”

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94 Watson, p. 6
pursuits encourage a preoccupation with the self, not a turn away from it. This
divergence seems pretty clear.

Nevertheless, many Western happiness-based pursuits have disregarded the
Buddhist non-self dictum and tried to apply various Buddhist methods as therapeutic
tools in Western psychological practices. Mindfulness and meditation practices in
particular have become very popular in the West. These practices have been
translated into Western culture, in many cases, as ways for Westerners to be more
productive at work, more engaged and alert at home, and even more creative. In
Western contexts, these Buddhist tools are almost entirely used to increase
contentment/happiness in one’s current life. Their original intention, though, is
towards an Enlightenment aim. In fact, the laws of karma, impermanence, and
rebirth, each central to Buddhism, are virtually absent from Western applications of
these Buddhist practices.

This is not at all to accuse Western Buddhism of getting it all wrong. Of
course, there are innumerable Western Buddhists who earnestly and respectfully
practice Buddhism with its original intentions intact. But, the group of Westerners I
am particularly focused on is those who pick and choose which Buddhist practices to
adopt, and incorrectly use them at that, to pursue their own personal quests for
happiness.

Forty years ago, Alan Watts offered the following helpful characterization of
the two traditions:

The main resemblance between these Eastern ways of life and Western
psychotherapy is in the concern of both with bringing about changes of
consciousness, changes in our ways of feeling our own existence and our relation to
human society and the natural world. The psychotherapist has, for the most part,
been interested in changing the consciousness of peculiarly disturbed individuals.
The discipline of Buddhism (is), however, concerned with changing the consciousness of normal, socially adjusted people.\footnote{Watts, Alan. \textit{Psychotherapy, East and West}. New York: Vintage, 1975, p. 8}

Well-known Buddhist Ram Dass further distinguishes the two traditions’ attitudes towards happiness. He explains

The psychological world is primarily interested in worldly adjustment, happiness, and pleasure. Psychology treats unhappiness as a negative state and happiness as a positive state, while Buddha started out with the proposition that it’s all suffering.\footnote{Epstein, Mark. \textit{Psychotherapy without the Self: A Buddhist Perspective}. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007, p. 98}

Let us press on this line of logic. Not only is happiness considered suffering for Buddhists, but it is also not something to aim towards. The psychotherapeutic division of happiness as good and unhappiness as something to avoid does not accurately translate to Buddhist theory. Moreover, the notions of ‘sanity’, ‘normalcy’, and ‘adjustment’, among other Western cultural/societal norms, do not exist in Buddhist teachings the way they strongly factor into Western psychological theory.

Comparative scholar Mark Epstein argues that the two models—Buddhist non-self versus Depth Psychology’s focus on self—are currently in competition in our Western culture, wherein the “desire for self-certainty rubs up against the need to let go.”\footnote{Epstein, p. 6} However, Epstein argues that not all psychotherapeutic models centralize the self. He argues that both Depth Psychology and Buddhist practice have the potential to undo the human tendency to “give the relational self an absolute status that it does not posses.”\footnote{Epstein, p. 2} It remains to be seen whether this non-self direction is one that Depth Psychology might want to explore further.

Either way, it is clear that both Buddhism and Depth Psychology aim to help. Each offers various cognitive methods for people to work with their mental suffering.
Both projects are practical and purposeful, with myriad methods and tools directed at healing one’s suffering through cognitive (conscious and unconscious) means. Maybe, despite all the differences between the two traditions I have heretofore explored, Young is right. Maybe these two projects not only share definite similarities, but they can also be of great aid to each other, as an integrated form of therapy.

**Motivating Factors**

It might be useful to ask what kinds of people turn to Buddhist practice, and if they are in any ways similar to the kinds of people attracted to Sartre’s Existentialism and/or to Western Depth Psychology? Additionally, I will now explore how a rich awareness of the underlying motivating factors of each tradition can add to the on-going dialogue among these fields.

Alan Watts argues that Buddhist practices aimed at liberation and Depth Psychology have two major underlying interests in common: 1. The transformation of consciousness, and 2. The release of the individual from forms of conditioning imposed upon him/her by social institutions. It might also be helpful to think about the role each tradition’s leader in discussion of their motivating factors. I imagine that the ways the historical Buddha’s life and his teachings directly factor into how his followers engage with his philosophy are very different from the relationship between Freud (or Jung) and his patients, and are even more different from the distanced, seemingly impersonal relationship between Sartre and his readers/followers. The Buddha is not just a role model for his followers, he is the
role model. His own investigation into the contents of his mind and his ability to attain liberation through his meditation practices serve as proof for Buddhist practitioners that such an achievement is possible. The mythology surrounding the historical Buddha is as foundational to the religion’s project as its philosophy is because without an example of the path, early followers of the Buddha’s practices would have no idea where their practices were ultimately leading. Buddhism is a very individual, phenomenological practice and Buddhist practitioners are united through a mutual following of the Buddha’s path. This is only possible for any of them because the Buddha proved that such path and the attainment of liberation is possible.

What about Freud and his patients? Clearly, this relationship does not work in the same way. Freud himself was never held up to the same standards by his patients that the Buddha was/is by his followers. In order for Freud’s psychotherapeutic practices to be deemed successful, he did not need to be an exemplar student of his own ideas. It is only important that his practices work on his patients. He was more like a doctor to his therapy patients, whereas the Buddha was more like a successful patient of his own medicine. The Buddha embodied his practices in ways that Freud did not have to.

Sartre’s Existentialism has been widely read and he has developed a cult following, especially from Western college-students reading his material for the first time. Like Freud (but unlike the Buddha), Sartre’s role in the process of his followers learning from his teachings was not that of an exemplar. I would argue that to followers of Sartre’s Existentialism, he is more of a godly, rock star figure, than a
human embodiment of what he preaches. Sartre’s message was that of an awareness of the nauseatingly radical human freedom, and suggestions on how one ought to proceed given this freedom. He did not need to walk his path perfectly and uphold his teachings for his followers to respect him. Though Sartre’s ethics do outline ways in which humans can make the best of this nauseating freedom (through authenticity, which I will explore at length in chapter six), he neither insists that in every case we must correctly choose the right course of action, nor does he describe himself as always making the right ethical choice.

Though this distinction between the roles of these three figureheads in relation to their respective followers may seem obvious and superficial, I do think it’s useful to remember as I proceed with this comparative analysis. The relationship between leader and follower in each of these philosophies affects the ways we engage with each tradition. The Buddhist project offers a clear example of a path practitioners can follow, and offers an example of a man (the Buddha) who has successfully undertaken this path in order to gain freedom from suffering. Freud offers his patients a method to work with their minds to lead more satisfying lives in which they can be freed from, or at least more aware of, the limits of their traumatic childhood experiences. Sartre offers a realization about the nature of human existence, and a way for his followers to reorient themselves in accord with his ‘radical freedom’ perspective.

Where Do We Go From Here?
So, where does this leave us? I have picked apart several major comparisons between Buddhism and Depth Psychology. Exploring the connection between the alayavijnana and the unconscious exposed some clear divergences in motivations, methods, and audience demographics between Yogacara Buddhism and the psychotherapeutic methods of Freud and Jung. I have also revealed some similarities between the two traditions, such as Young’s connection between mindfulness and psychotherapy (similar structures that operate on different time-space scales). Scholar Gay Watson argues that the most important link between Buddhism and Depth Psychology is an “overwhelming shared concern with experience.”

I argue that each is concerned not only with experience, but with specific mental factors (both conscious and unconscious) at play in one’s experience.

Though obvious, we must also acknowledge that both Buddhism and psychotherapeutic practices aim to help. They each focus on increasing the overall health of their followers/practitioners through different sorts of mental training. I have also discussed the possibility of the two traditions being of service to each other, and integrating aspects of themselves to form an even stronger, synthetic approach to health and therapy. Watson suggests that Buddhist practices can be used even if not for the aim of attaining Enlightenment. I have expressed concern about the ways some Buddhist practices have been used in the West to help Westerners independently ‘get happy’. This, however, does not dismiss the potential utility of these Buddhist practices for non-enlightened ends, so long as the transmutations of these practices are respectful of the religion’s original intentions.

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99 Watson, p. 6
Moreover, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a big proponent of Buddhist meditative techniques working universally in Eastern and Western cultures, stating, “it is possible to experience mundane (conventional, non-Enlightened) benefits even though their primary aim is Enlightenment.”100 I feel strongly that there are manifold ways in which both Buddhist teachings and Depth Psychology’s practical tools may be of service to each other and to their adherents. As we (members of both Eastern and Western cultures) all collectively address the universal problem of human suffering, both of these traditions has valuable tools to contribute, even if one does not carry these practices out to their full extent (formal psychoanalysis or Enlightenment-based Buddhist practice). The demand for a synthetic understanding of Eastern and Western practices is rapidly emerging as each culture becomes more familiar with the other. By all means, let us respectfully continue this fruitful cross-cultural discussion, looking both for patterns of overlap and for contextually sensitive differences.

**Existentialism Revisited**

Finally, how might Sartre’s Existentialism enter into this comparative dialogue? In this chapter I intentionally chose not address in full the ways in which Sartre’s project could be seen as a therapy, and how this therapy might compare to Yogacara Buddhism’s therapeutic practices to relieve suffering, because I wanted to foreground it in this extensive Depth Psychology discussion first. But now, let us reintroduce Sartre’s views to my comparative analysis.

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100 Watson, p. 172
Sartre’s therapeutic recommendation, though not explicitly termed as such, is for humans to construct their identities through the freedom of choice. Having rid oneself of the illusory sense of ‘self’, he argues that one realizes the radical freedom unique to human existence. He argues that humans are condemned to freedom, and that the only way to make sense of this overwhelming freedom is to make a choice. It does not matter what we choose, just that we do choose. He also offers direct advice about how not to deal with our human condition. In insisting that we are condemned to freedom, he does not allow us to seek alternatives. We cannot find value in material goods, or distract ourselves by consolation from “God”. He decidedly does not encourage humans to wallow indefinitely in their alienated state. If one chooses, actively chooses, to wallow as such, it is a different story. But attempts to flee from one’s freedom or to passively respond to one’s life conditions are not authentic expressions of enacting one’s freedom. For Sartre, we simply must make a choice.

Recall Sartre’s argument that we are individually free without any fixed or inherent meaning in our livelihoods, and thus we are responsible for everything we do. This shares affinity with the Buddhist notion of karma. The doctrine of karma maintains that our past actions in former lives are singularly responsible for our current life situations. We are now who we were before. Additionally, on the Buddhist account, how we act now will determine who we are in our future lives. Both traditions reject a fixed, definable notion of a ‘self’. In doing so, both also discuss the human freedom that comes from a realization of non-self. We are constantly free, under Sartre’s ontological system, to choose whom we want to be in every given moment. Unlike the Buddhist account, for Sartre we are free to choose
our values anew at each moment, completely unrestrained by our pasts. Humans are not bogged down by karmic conditioning on Sartre’s account, they are just condemned to choose.

David Loy and Lack

Loy has written specifically about the intersection of Buddhism, Existentialism, and Psychology. In *Lack and Transcendence*, he characterizes the overarching similarities between Buddhists and Existentialists as both attempting to resolve a profound sense of ‘lack’. This lack, he argues, is the essential groundlessness at the very core of human existence. Both the Buddhists and Sartre recognize the non-essential nature of human beings. In either case, this ‘lack’ is unsettling, overwhelming, nauseating in Roquentin’s case, and so humans try to avoid it or struggle to resolve it. This lack further reveals itself in clinging to an illusory sense of self, desiring material objects, and other conditioned forms of delusion. He argues that much of the frenetic quality of our lives today is due to “those quack cures (which) keep promising to fill in our lack yet never quite do so, which encourages us to run ever faster from our shadow into an ever-elusive future.”101 For Loy, lack defines the development of Western culture, and can also help humans understand themselves. The clearest representation of our attempt to fill this ‘lack’ is through believing in a permanent sense of self. Until one can gain insight into non-self, he/she will continue to futilely try to avoid facing this lack directly.

101 Loy, p. 154
Though both the Buddha and Sartre discuss this sort of ‘lack’, or groundlessness to human existence, they respond to this situation very differently. Sartre argues that Man is simply a ‘futile passion’ and is condemned to be free. Sartre’s ontological system does not try to make sense of the meaningless of human existence. It does not offer a clear, linear therapy to resolve the insight of non-self. His dualism is arguably pessimistic. He states “human reality is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state, since our desire to be is a lack and since the for itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being.”\(^{102}\) For Sartre, the for-itself of consciousness cannot help wanting to become the being in-itself, which it will never become. Sartre’s dualism thus denies the possibility of ending lack, since lack is bound up with his dualistic ontology.

Differently, the Buddha offered a more clearly defined therapeutic path, with the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-fold Path. The Mahayana Buddhists extend the insight of non-self to the insight of the complete and utter emptiness of all conditioned things. Emptiness in this sense ought to be thought of as a positive emptiness, rather than a lack. It is not a nihilistic account, nor an eternalist doctrine. Rather, an understanding of true emptiness releases Buddhist practitioners from the binds of conventional existence (samsara). Loy describes it as follows:

If it is nothingness we dread, then we should become no-thing…In ceasing to deny my groundedness I discover, paradoxically, that complete groundlessness (emptiness) is equivalent to groundedness (essence). This reveals that from the very beginning there has never been any lack, because there has never been any self-existing self apart from the world. The problem of desire is solved as the ‘bad infinity’ of unsatisfiable lack transforms into a ‘good infinity’, which needs nothing and therefore can freely become anything.\(^{103}\)

\(^{102}\) Loy, p. 35
\(^{103}\) Loy, p. 53
Insight into the emptiness of not just the self but all conditioned phenomena, then, becomes the Buddhist ‘solution’ to lack.

Sartre does not advance his argument for non-self to the full Buddhist sense of complete emptiness. As I explained in chapter three, although Sartre’s description of the human predicament is quite similar to the Buddhist prognosis, Sartre’s subject-object dualism forecloses the Buddhist notion of emptiness as a Sartrean solution to lack. In chapter three, I explored how Derek Heyman attempted to underlie a non-dualism in Sartre’s ontology. I was not wholly convinced by the way he tried to finesse the difference between Buddhist non-dualism and Sartre’s dualism. But even if Heyman’s argument is correct, Sartre never explicitly offers anything resembling ‘emptiness’ as a solution to the human predicament of ‘lack’. Thus, the two traditions offer vastly different therapeutic responses to their similar descriptions of the human predicament void of essential meaning.

Solutions

Loy’s account of Sartre’s dualism is much stricter than Heyman’s account. For Loy, Sartre’s dualism is not reconcilable with the Buddhist non-dualistic account of emptiness. Further, Loy argues that Sartre’s dualism makes for alone, if not lonely, lives. He states that Sartre’s fundamental dualism between for-itself and in-itself has the effect of

Irremediably alienating (humans) from the world, including other people. Since we can never know anyone else directly but only by inference, we can never transcend the walls of self-consciousness dividing us. Our little center-points of light may flutter round and dash against the walls, yet they never escape their prison.104

104 Loy, p. 81
The Buddhist account similarly stresses the individual, phenomenological nature of insight into non-self. But, as I will explore in a moment, the Buddhist expansion of the insight of non-self to complete emptiness brings with it an ethical dimension absent in Sartre’s philosophy. This Buddhist ethical dimension centralizes compassion, a force that relieves the otherwise alienating nature of Buddhist practice. Thus emptiness and compassion become the Buddhist ‘solution’ to the human predicament of lack, whereas Sartre’s response to lack offers not a solution, but rather a declaration of radical human freedom.
These two natures, the absolute and the relative, are not opposites; they always arise together. They have the same nature; they are inseparable like a fire and its heat or the sun and its light. Compassion and emptiness are not like two sides of a coin. Emptiness and compassion are not two separate elements joined together; they are always coexistent.

In Buddhism, emptiness does not mean the absence of apparent existence. Emptiness is not like a black hole or darkness, or like an empty house or an empty bottle. Emptiness is fullness and openness and flexibility. Because of emptiness it is possible for phenomena to function, for beings to see and hear, and for things to move and change. It is called emptiness because when we examine things we cannot find anything that substantially and solidly exists. There is nothing that has a truly existent nature. Everything we perceive appears through ever-changing causes and conditions, without an independent, solid basis. Although from a relative perspective things appear, they arise from emptiness and they dissolve into emptiness. All appearances are like water bubbles or the reflection of the moon in water.

-Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche

I will now compare Mahayana Buddhism’s ethical system and Sartre’s ethics. On the Buddhist side, I focus exclusively on Santideva’s Bodhicaryavatara, because it is accessible, it is the definitive text describing the morality of the bodhisattva path, and limiting my discussion to just this text allows for more clarity in comparative analysis.

Before I begin this formal comparison between the two ethical systems, I would like to briefly discuss the theory surrounding contemporary comparative philosophy. I have waited until now to discuss about the theoretical aspect of this scholarship because I think it will be a useful tool for retrospection about how prior
comparative scholarship has been done, as well as a way to freshly engage in this last
comparative analysis surrounding the Buddhist understanding of compassion
(karuna).

**Comparative Philosophy**

I broadly refer to ‘ethics’ as the domain of how we ought to live and why.

Barbra Clayton’s text *Moral Theory in Santideva’s Sikasamuccaya*, for example,
compares Santideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara* to Western ethical guides not simply to draw
parallels and highlight distinctions between Buddhist and Western ethics for its own
sake. Instead, She takes a ‘hermeneutic approach’, first described in J. J. Clarke’s
*Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. This
approach’s objective is to “engage non-Western thinkers and ideas in philosophical
dialogue as part of the philosophical enterprise, not just or primarily for the sake of
comparing them.”

Clayton argues, using a musical metaphor, that scholars in the
discipline of Buddhist ethics are in the process of ‘transcribing’ Buddhist morality
into a ‘key’ that non-Buddhists and Western thinkers can recognize. This, she
continues, “makes it possible for Westerners to take seriously Buddhist moral insights
and issues, and leads to a dialogue with Buddhist ideas such that they can be brought
into contemporary discussions of ethics.” She borrows Gerald Larson’s terminology
in her conclusion that the hermeneutic approach to comparative philosophy seeks to

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get away from talking to one another or about one another, in favor of talking with one another.\textsuperscript{106}

Scholar George Dreyfus takes a similar approach to contemporary comparative philosophy. He states that “one of our tasks as students of Asian thought is to present the material we examine so that it gradually becomes integrated into the larger history of ideas. There is a need for presenting non-Western ideas in terms that can be related to the concepts of other cultures.”\textsuperscript{107} I want to incorporate both of these ideas into my comparative conclusions. Following Clayton’s suggestion, in this chapter I will put Sartrean morality and Mahayana Buddhist ethics in dialogue with one another, anticipating how the two might talk with each other, were that a realistic option, rather than just simply talking to each other. Like Dreyfus, I too believe there is an urgent need to discuss non-Western ideas in terms that can be related to the concepts of other cultures. In some cases, as I criticized Hough in chapter three of doing, it is appealing and superficially satisfying to simultaneously discuss Buddhist terminology and Western philosophy without enough attention to issues raised by transmuting Buddhist terms onto Western ideas, and vice versa. Heeding Dreyfus’s advice, I relate Sartrean ethical ideas and Mahayana Buddhist ethical ideas about compassion in a comparison respectful of each tradition’s intentions, in order to begin to integrate this synthetic comparative material into a ‘larger history of ideas’.

Why Ethics?

\textsuperscript{106} Clayton, p. 13  
\textsuperscript{107} Clayton, p. 13
As I have mentioned, I began this project to investigate the ways in which Buddhist philosophy and the Western paradigms of Depth Psychology and Existentialism might be critically compared. I searched for themes running throughout each tradition, I engaged with prior scholarship, and I critiqued aspects of how this prior work has been conducted. In doing so, I ended up with many overlapping ideas surrounding Sartre’s ontology and Mahayanist metaphysics in particular. The ultimate upshot of all of this work, I hope, is that we can continue to bridge the gap between Western and Eastern philosophical ideas. Were the founders of Buddhism, Existentialism, and Depth Psychology able to engage in a true conversation, I believe they would be receptive towards and learn immensely from one another. Modern trends towards integration—technologically and otherwise—facilitate the ability to cull scholarship from several different disciplines and to add them into Dreyfus’s larger ‘history of ideas’. Because Sartre and the Buddha cannot physically engage in dialogue about how compassion fits into their ethical systems, I attempt to provide an academic analysis simulating how this conversation might proceed. I will provide an outline of the specific Buddhist ethical text I engage with, as well as a summary of Sartre’s ethical views on authenticity and bad faith.

**Research Versus Results**

What I was hoping to arise from this research, and what actually did arise, are two different things. I had envisioned this final chapter illuminating an important distinction between Sartre’s project and the Mahayana Buddhism’s project. Whereas my earlier chapters discussed some helpful points of convergence between the two
traditions, most notably about the concept of non-self, I now turn to a relatively uncharted point of comparison, morality. I had naively been hoping to discover that Sartre and the Buddha, while each engaged with concepts of compassion, tackle the idea in very different ways. I wanted to show that, therefore, Sartre’s philosophy and Mahayanist philosophy have significantly different aims, terminologies, and audiences, and are therefore, in many ways irreconcilable views.

However, in beginning to critically engage with each tradition myself, I found different results. I had assumed that I would be able to find a comparable Sartrean ethical counterweight to the Buddhist concept of compassion, but, as it turns out, no such Sartrean concept exists. I ended up focusing on the question of whether the Buddhist concept of compassion ‘spontaneously arising’ from the insight of emptiness is logically coherent connection? Instead of directly engaging Sartre and Buddha in dialogue about their differing views on compassion, I ended up using my research about the connections (or lack thereof) between Sartre’s metaphysics and Sartre’s ethics to call into question the logic behind this ‘spontaneous’ Mahayanist connection between its metaphysics and morality. This became more interesting, and more philosophically challenging than direct comparisons between Sartrean and the Mahayanist ethics, because Sartre had surprisingly little to say about compassion explicitly. He does, however, offer a type of ethical structure that prioritizes the morals of authenticity and freedom.

In studying the Buddhist union of metaphysics and morality, I present a way in which aspects of Buddhist philosophy are still deeply tied up with some degree of mystical religious aspects. Many aspects of Western philosophy are certainly also
tinged with religious or mystical sentiments. My point here is simply that in my comparative investigation I discovered an aspect of Buddhist ethics (‘spontaneously arising’ compassion) worthy of further scholarship to determine its coherent logic, or lack thereof. In many ways this section of my research has been most engaging and satisfying, because I have been able to engage in comparative scholarship in ways that not only critique prior scholarship, but also add to the continual generating of an overarching human ‘history of ideas’. Let us start with Santideva’s text to illuminate the Buddhist stance on compassion.

**Santideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara***

Santideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara* functions as a guidebook for those undertaking the bodhisattva path. It is a study of the cultivation of bodhichitta—the awakened (or awakening) mind. It describes the bodhisattva path as “the path to liberation from emotional and cognitive defilements that is motivated by great compassion (mahakaruna) and the altruistic aspiration to liberate all sentient beings from suffering, facilitated by the perfection of wisdom (prajnaparamita)”108

Santideva’s text is relatively unique within the Buddhist cannon for its focus on morality, rather than on metaphysics or ontology. He describes the bodhisattva ideal not from a descriptive or philosophical lens, but as an ethical choice, which prescribes how a person should properly live, and his text provides reasons for living that way. His metaphysical views about the bodhisattva path vary little if at all from Yogacarin metaphysical views about emptiness. But unlike the non-ethical

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Yogacarin metaphysical idealism account, Santideva focuses on the theme of compassion, and its connection to the insight of non-self.

As I outlined in my opening chapter, the Mahayana aim of saving all sentient beings from suffering (the bodhisattva path) is in sharp contrast to the more limited framework of early Buddhist soteriology (Theravada Buddhism), which focuses on self-liberation alone (the arhat path). Santideva’s text adopts the Mahayana Buddhist view of the bodhisattva path, offering its readers psychologically astute moral advice through metaphor-dense, descriptive imagery. The *Bodhicaryavatara* is widely read and known both by monastic and lay Buddhist practitioners. Santideva claims that intention and attitude constitute the basis of moral Buddhist practice. His text encourages its readers to develop the right motivations (altruism, compassion) for wanting to embark on the bodhisattva path themselves. Once on the bodhisattva path, beings undertake a set of trainings in the perfections (paramitas) of the bodhisattva, which cultivate generosity (dana), moral discipline (sila), patience (ksanti), vigor (virya), meditative absorption (dhyana) and wisdom (prajna).

This entire moral code was formulated in response and as a solution to the universal problem of suffering. Santideva argues that the source of our own suffering, the suffering we cause others, and our insensibility to the suffering of others is mental affliction. This affliction is the especially the mistaken view that phenomena possess inherent, substantial essences. Sound familiar? This is precisely in line with the Yogacarin account of selflessness detailed in chapter two, and is very similar to Roquentin’s musings on self in Sartre’s *Nausea* detailed in chapter four.
In each case, sentient beings suffer due to mistakenly clinging to a substantial sense of self. As I outlined, the Yogacara Buddhist view goes beyond Sartre’s/Roquentin’s views by claiming (as Santideva does) that not only are humans void of essential natures, but all conditioned phenomena (dharmas) are equally void of substantial meanings and permanent existences. The emptiness of all dharmas on the Mahayanist view, then, is a more radical claim than Sartre’s ontological position about the self, although the two views share many affinities. Sartre’s selflessness is conventionally true in Buddhist terms insofar as it really truthful, it just does not represent the ultimate (enlightened) truth of complete emptiness.

For Santideva, one’s understanding of the non-self doctrine leads to compassion. He describes the bodhisattva’s (one who has attained Enlightenment but stays in samsara to help all beings attain Enlightenment) line of reasoning as follows:

If everyone similarly dislikes pain and fear, on what basis can one worry about one’s own pain and not that of others? (Because ‘I’ am empty of any inherent nature) there is nothing essentially distinctive about me that I can justify privileging my own pain over others.

Implicit in this argument are the assumptions that 1. Suffering is naturally unpleasant and 2. That sentient beings desire the cessation of suffering. These two claims underlie all Buddhist thought. Recall that the Four Noble Truths detail a path leading to the cessation of suffering for precisely this reason. An additional underlying premise is that as a bodhisattva, there must be an altruistic aspiration underlying one’s aspiration for attaining Enlightenment. Therefore, because there is no firm essential ground to seek one’s own happiness and not seek that of others, one
should adopt the bodhisattva path to help all beings realize the end of their suffering.\(^{109}\)

Importantly, the bodhisattva still suffers in the conventional sense because of his/her compassion for others. Even after attaining Enlightenment for him/herself, the bodhisattva still conventionally suffers just by watching other beings suffering. However, the liberated bodhisattva uses his/her enlightened wisdom and his/her cultivated perfections (paramitas) for this very purpose. The bodhisattva path outlines rigorous perfection practices for the bodhisattva to undergo prior to attaining liberation such that upon said liberation, the bodhisattva can minimize his/her own conventional suffering to thus be as freely available to serve others as possible. This is the overall aim of the bodhisattva path: using the insight of non-self and the wisdom of liberation in tandem to compassionately serve other beings in their own awakening processes. Santideva goes on to say that suffering will not cease, on the bodhisattva’s account, until all sentient beings have been liberated from their suffering.

Part of the bodhisattva path is being willing to give up all of one’s possessions—including material pleasures and desires—to proceed on the ‘proper’ path, which consists of protecting, purifying, and cultivating one’s bodhichitta (awakened mind) for the sake of others. And again, one undertakes this process for the benefit of others, not for the freedom and benefits accrued for oneself by attaining Enlightenment.

\(^{109}\) Clayton, p. 90
The final stage of the bodhisattva path provides a direct connection between one recognizing emptiness and realizing compassion. Mahayanists argue that compassion ‘spontaneously arises’ upon liberated wisdom.

When one sees that self and other exist only relatively, like the two shores of a river, and that self, like all things, is conditioned and impermanent, one will see the truth about the self, and realize that all of one’s suffering stems from grasping after and for that illusion. Once this illusion is cleared away, one will be able to see that all others are as much ‘the self’ as one’s own body-mind complex, and in this was, the suffering of others, and the good of others, will become as much a concern as one’s own good and happiness…through seeing one’s true nature as empty, one will also see that there is no real happiness if others are in pain. Having realized this, one ought to endeavor to eliminate suffering wherever it is found, and vow to remain in samsara, undertaking the good of all beings.¹¹⁰

Now that I have outlined Santideva’s description of the bodhisattva path, let us tie it into Mahayana morality at large. For Santideva, ethics is fundamentally built around and concerned with mental transformation. It is an individual process that has great impact on larger communal structures. The perfections to be attained within the practice are mental attitudes first and foremost, rather than external actions. They prioritize intentionality and attitude, rather than the results of one’s intended actions. Results will follow, once one’s intentions are perfected. Santideva argues that the moral discipline of mindfulness (the capacity to sustain focused attention and awareness) is integral to engaging in the proper compassionate actions. If the bodhisattva lacks mindfulness, Santideva argues, seemingly compassionate actions will just cause suffering both to the giver and to others. Therefore, mindfulness and awareness are at the very heart of Santideva’s ethics and they go part and parcel with realizing compassionate intentions and embodying them in engaging with others. “A

¹¹⁰ Clayton, p. 93-94
distracted mind is vulnerable to the mental defilements that cause suffering,”¹¹¹ he warns.

Additionally, Santideva argues that the insight of non-self has three major ethical implications. First, knowing the nonexistence of self will produce compassionate feelings, leading those with this enlightened perspective (bodhisattvas) to benefit others. Second, this insight allows bodhisattvas to become more patient with others’ wrongdoing, because they know not to blame others. Third, an understanding of emptiness allows the bodhisattva to not emotionally attach to worldly phenomena or engage in the desirous behaviors of grasping and clinging. These points illustrate how closely tied up the Buddhist metaphysical argument is with its ethical implications.

Thus for Mahayana Buddhists, compassionate intentions are the ultimate ethical trump card. Santideva explains that the doctrine of skillful means (upaya kusala) states that a skillful Buddhist practitioner can use appropriate means for each situation, which justifies transgressing moral codes when properly motivated by a compassionate mind. He does not see the laws as unchanging or universally determining action. Beings ought to be principally concerned with acting with skillful intentions in compassionate ways, rather than in strictly adhering to moral laws.

This is not to say that Mahayana ethics live solely in one’s intentional mind or are entirely void of human-to-human contact. Santideva argues that we need to learn how our mental defilements affect others. He suggests “instead of taking (others’)

¹¹¹ Edelglass, p. 390
actions against us personally and reacting in anger, we can respond with equanimity and compassion, taking as our goal not revenge, or even justice, but the solution of a complex human problem.” But unique to the Buddhist moral project here is that our suffering is not a hindrance to moral perfection, but it is the very thing that makes the path to perfection possible. Our suffering provides us with the necessary opportunities to realize liberation from attachment and from Batchelor’s realm of ‘having’ rather than ‘being’. Without the experience of suffering, we could neither understand the suffering of others, nor have a motivation to realize our own bodhichitta (awakening), Santideva argues.

Even more exceptional to Buddhist ethics is the universalizability of suffering. Santideva argues that because all sentient beings are the same in their desire for happiness and aversion toward suffering,

There is no morally significant difference between my suffering and the suffering of others; I ought to relieve both kinds of suffering. To realize compassionate care for the suffering of others, I ought to regard others as myself. Regarding others as myself is not simply a change in perspective, an understanding of the needs, desires, aversions, and concerns of others: regarding others as myself is primarily the cherishing of others as I would cherish myself.

Thinking this way, Santideva argues, reorients the mind away from seeking to use others as means to one’s ends, and towards offering oneself as a means for the satisfaction of others’ desires, which simultaneously responds to one’s own deepest needs. He states, “Attachment to self causes my own suffering; desiring the benefit and working to achieve the happiness of others liberates me from suffering.” This insight is what Santideva calls the perfected wisdom (prajnaparamita). He

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112 Edelglass, p. 390
113 Edelglass, p. 390
114 Edelglass, p. 390
encourages practitioners to continue meditate on emptiness beyond their first realizations of selflessness. He suggest that “cultivating the direct apprehension of emptiness beyond inferential understanding is practiced in mediation, but also developed in the social perfections such as generosity, moral discipline, and patience.”

So for Santideva, moral development and practice requires a synergistic cultivation of the mind and a complete individual mental transformation. Ethics is not separate from non-self. On the Mahayanist account, the insight of non-self dictates one’s morality, and the two insights are cultivated in tandem.

Mark Siderits’ Argument for Buddhist Compassion

Mark Siderits presents a similar case for Mahayana Buddhist ethics, predicated on an understanding of non-self. His argument for Mahayanist compassion is as follows:

1. Suppose that we are each obligated to prevent only our own suffering.
2. In the case of one’s own future suffering, it is one set of skandhas (a bundle of causally conditioned aggregates) that does the preventing for another set of skandhas that has the suffering.
3. In the case of one’s own present suffering, it is one part that does the preventing for another part that has the suffering.
4. The sense of ‘I’ that leads one to call future skandhas and distinct present parts ‘me’ is a conceptual fiction (non-self doctrine).
5. Hence it cannot be ultimately true that some suffering is one’s own and some suffering is that of others.
6. Hence the claim that we are obligated to prevent only our own suffering lacks ultimate grounding.

115 Edelglass, p. 390
7. Hence either there is an obligation to prevent suffering regardless of where it occurs, or else there is no obligation to prevent any suffering.

8. But everyone agrees that at least some suffering should be prevented (namely one’s own).

**Conclusion:** Therefore there is an obligation to prevent suffering regardless of where it occurs.\(^{116}\)

Detailed commentary on this argument would be tangential. I provide it as a way to show that the Buddha’s suggestion that compassion naturally arises upon a true understanding of non-self is not the same thing as saying ‘If I have no self, then you and I aren’t really distinct people, we are really one, so I should be just as concerned about your welfare as I am about my own.’ The Mahayanists are not denying the distinctness of individuals. Instead, they are denying that there are even such things as ‘persons’. An equal concern for all sentient beings arises not because you and I are the ‘same’ or ‘one’, but because neither of us is ultimately real. Humans use the convenient conventional designator ‘person’ to distinguish between causal karmically conditioned strands (karmic seeds attached to each ‘person’), but again, there is no essential, permanent aspect of a person to which we could ultimately attribute the term ‘self’.

Therefore, the Buddhist argument for universal compassion arises out of an understanding of the doctrine of non-self. It centers on the notion that there are not ultimately such things as persons, and the assumption that suffering ought to be prevented if possible, regardless of where it occurs.

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\(^{116}\) Siderits (2007), p. 82
Now that I have presented these accounts of Buddhist benevolence, let us see how they compare to Sartrean ethics. Why does compassion not spontaneously arise in Sartre’s understanding of selflessness? Is there a similar ethical counterweight to compassion in Sartre’s moral system? Let us see.

**Owen Flanagan’s View**

Philosopher Owen Flanagan tackles material similar to Siderits’ work in his book *The Bodhisattva’s Brain*. In it, Flanagan draws parallels between Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia (human flourishing) and the Buddha’s project of alleviating suffering. He insists that Buddhist ethics is eudaimonistic because it is “dedicated to the task of providing a theory of individual human flourishing and individual happiness.”

He does, however, recognize that happiness is not necessarily the highest good of Buddhism. He argues that the “best way to read Buddhism is in a way that makes a wise and virtuous and mindful life the highest form of life, with happiness a normal accompaniment of such a life. He argues that an important aspect of compassionate action on the Buddhist account is eudaimonia. Flanagan’s idea is that wholesome actions benefitting others lead to a happier perspective for both the giver and the receiver.

After establishing this claim, Flanagan asks how the Buddhist doctrine of non-self necessarily leads to compassionate action/altruism. He divides Buddhist thought into two major camps: metaphysics (the non-self doctrine) and morality (compassion, the bodhisattva path). He ultimately decides that it remains unclear whether or how

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the non-self doctrine logically entails the Buddhist ethical view of compassion.

However, he posits a few interesting explanations worthy of closer investigation.

He suggests the strongest conclusion about the Buddhist connection between non-self and compassion is that perhaps there is in fact no logical connection between non-self and compassion. The Buddhist texts (such as those written by Santideva, enumerated upon above) describe a sense of ‘naturally arising’ compassion when one realizes the depth of the non-self doctrine. Flanagan interprets this ‘natural arising’ as not necessarily rational or logical. He states:

One credible idea for how the wisdom of non-self might relate to the compassion aspect of the practice need not depend so much on seeing a strict logical relation between a certain metaphysical view of the person and a certain moral posture (compassion), since there is no such strict logical relation. Rather, being motivated to adopt the virtues of compassion depends on the clarity and depth of one’s understanding of the metaphysical thesis that I am a selfless person. One doesn’t just have to think the right thought, but has to think it with feeling, or, what is different, to think it in the right way. That is, to the degree that one sees that one is a selfless person one will see that one has reason to be less selfish. But this will motivate only to the degree that one is motivated in advance to think/feel that selfishness is a vice—that is, only if one has a positive attitude toward being unselfish.\textsuperscript{118}

Here Flanagan is positing that the relationship between an understanding of non-self and Mahayanist moral claims about compassion need not be thought of as a logical relation. Instead, he posits that perhaps one’s motivation to adopt compassionate practices stems from the richness of one’s understanding the non-self doctrine. Instead of a pure logical connection, here he is saying compassion is motivated in sentient beings in equal accord with the motivation to see selfishness as karmically unwholesome. Or, in other words, is motivated by the degree to which that person has experientially understood the non-self doctrine.

\textsuperscript{118} Flanagan, p. 120
Recall that the Buddhist belief in karma underlies the insight of the non-self doctrine. Realizing that there is no essential, fixed self, and that ‘persons’ are only bundles of impermanent aggregates is a major progressive step on the Buddhist path of attaining Enlightenment. Included in this process is engaging in wholesome behaviors to try to improve one’s karmic conditioning. Through wholesome karmic actions, Buddhist practitioners can, eventually, liberate themselves to Enlightenment, the non-karmic liberated realm of being. The non-self insight promotes an interest in and deep care for all sentient beings, and the Enlightenment motivation further promotes wholesome karmic actions. It seems, then, that the connection (logical or otherwise) between the Buddhist non-self doctrine and compassion is karma. Whether or not this connection is logical, the concept karma does seem to implicitly connect the Buddhist insight of non-self and the Buddhist argument for universal compassion.

A second, even more insightful and resonant claim Flanagan makes about this connection is his recognition that Buddhism is fundamentally a therapeutic practice. Therefore, Buddhism doesn’t simply advocate recognition that there is no self. This insight leads somewhere on the path; it is part of the larger Buddhist philosophical system. Flanagan suggests,

Understanding and absorbing the fact that I am anatman takes one a certain distance down the road to flourishing because one sees one’s nature truthfully, without illusion…one needs to absorb and eventually live this truth (of non-self).119

When seen as a therapy, Buddhism becomes a method to uncover natural human compassion and lovingkindness towards oneself and others. The Buddha claimed that seeing oneself in the right way (as an anatman—void of an internal

119 Flanagan, p. 125
permanent self) would “make craving and acquisitiveness easier to overcome, and in this way make compassion easier to experience and act on.”¹²⁰

**Eudaimonia and Therapy**

The overall argument here is that seeing oneself without the illusion of a fixed, permanent self produces the “best psychological environment to let go of unhealthy craving.”¹²¹ From a Western point of view, this looks like a lot like therapy. Attaining the non-self insight can, in this way, become a way to improve one’s mental state and general wellbeing. For the Buddhists, the release of desire—the force that binds sentient beings to samsara—is not only psychologically useful, but has an added soteriological motivation. The Buddha argued that through realizing the illusion of the self, one realizes that what the ego wants (money, power, fame) does not bring lasting happiness. The ‘self’ who wanted these material objects and then attained them is still dissatisfied, because that ‘self’ has changed from then until now. The ‘self’ will never be satisfied, because it is itself constantly changing. The egoic self gives the illusion of a fixed, permanent, essence, which makes the realm of having (money, material goods, etc.) attractive. But in truth, the egoic self cannot ever be fulfilled. The non-self insight directs one to awareness of this existential truth.

Flanagan argues that once one’s egoism wanes and one gains a firmer, wiser grip on non-self and impermanence, one sees that the “relation to his/her past and future self differs in degree but not in kind from (his/her) relations with others. The

¹²⁰ Flanagan, p. 125
¹²¹ Flanagan, p. 130
world is in flux and so am I. So are you. So are we all together.”\textsuperscript{122} This illustrates that an awareness of the impermanence of self as well as all conditioned phenomena brings an attention towards compassionate action insofar as our relations to each other do not differ in kind, but rather degree. By this Flanagan suggests that the non-self doctrine also implies that human beings are all, essentially, of the same substance. We are each impermanent bundles of constantly arising and passing aggregates, which in sum give the illusion of the self. These aggregates are distinctive according to their karmic conditioning. My bundle of aggregates is different from yours only on the basis of its karmic content. Each of our aggregates, however, is of the same basic substance. This, on the Buddhist account, leads to a ‘spontaneously arising’ compassion towards all beings, in realizing the essential sameness of our internal makeup (impermanent skandhas).

Flanagan offers a third possible explanation connecting the non-self insight and universal compassion, based on the social nature of human beings. He argues

The motivation to live compassionately comes from choosing to take the only attitude available toward being a selfless person that holds prospects for flourishing, for as much happiness and goodness as a selfless person has prospects of achieving…(it is an attractive claim because) it is just a contingent empirical fact about the way which we gregarious social mammals have evolved that first fitness and then flourishing come from extending ourselves to others.\textsuperscript{123}

Regardless of which connection between non-self and compassion seems most plausible, each of Flanagan’s arguments relies on his assumption that there is a Buddhist sort of parallel to Aristotle’s eudaimonia. This suggests that the Buddha would support seeking happiness and flourishing for oneself and that the compassion arising from the non-self insight is the sine qua non for eudaimonistic living.

\textsuperscript{122} Flanagan, p. 131
\textsuperscript{123} Flanagan, p. 160
In a structure similar to my prior comparative criticisms, I argue that Flanagan’s analysis does not take the significances of karma, rebirth, and soteriological motivation to the Buddhist project into consideration strongly enough.

An important point of contrast between an Aristotelian system and that of the Buddha, and one that Flanagan dwells very little on, is the Buddhist idea that one’s karma determines one’s nature. For the Buddha, a person’s past lives and actions are embedded into his/her current seeds of karmic conditioning, and these seeds determine his/her nature in this current life. According to the Buddha, human form is considered the most favorable nature to be reborn into among sentient beings stuck in samsara. To have been reborn as a human illustrates that one has engaged in wholesome actions in his/her past lives, because human form is considered a highly favorable birth. To be born as a frog, for example, shows that one either has led unwholesome recent past lives, or is working his/her way through his/her karmic conditioning in order to achieve a more favorable future rebirth.

Differently, Aristotle argues that nature is determined at a species level. He does not pull on any of these Buddhist understandings of karma in his account of species birth. Aristotle’s account is a more classificatory, demythologized, straightforward way of understanding nature. Given this, can the Buddhist project be critically compared to Aristotle’s ideas about human flourishing? Does this comparison call for a convergence of belief about the nature of human/sentient beings? While a worthwhile exploration, this falls beyond the scope of my project. I will let this open-ended question linger over the rest of this analysis, as it closely relates to my larger overarching question: In what ways does the Buddhist doctrine of
karma render the project incomparable to Western philosophical projects with other salient similarities?

I have no doubts that Flanagan has recognized and considered these dissimilarities between Aristotle’s eudaimonia and the significance of the karmic content underlying Buddhist accounts of nature. However, it seems he has made the conscious effort to not centralize these critical points of departure. This is partly due to the fact that he is approaching the comparative material from a more ‘Buddhism as neuroscience’ perspective, rather than a ‘Buddhism as a philosophical, religious system’ approach. My thesis has tried to centralize the latter approach. And in so doing, I have argued that the motivation to attain Enlightenment and the laws of karma significantly impacts analyses of both the Buddhist moral system and its metaphysics. Perhaps Flanagan assumes that these factors do not way as heavily into a comparative analysis of Aristotelian flourishing and Buddhist compassion. Now that I have outlined both Flanagan’s views and my own views on the connection between non-self and compassion, let us reintroduce Sartre into the discussion, with particular attention to how his ethical structure compares to the Buddha’s highly integrated ethical and ontological structures.

**How Might Sartre’s Ethics Fit in Here?**

As I have mentioned, a giant differentiating factor between Sartre’s phenomenology and the Buddhist framework is Sartre’s choice of subject in his phenomenological analysis. Unlike the Buddha, Sartre focuses exclusively on human beings and what it means to be human, rather than simply what it is to be in the world
and what it is to be a sentient being. By privileging the human dimension and limiting himself to this domain, Sartre’s analyses do not serve a deeper ontological purpose to explain something beyond the realm of human existence. The Buddhists, on the other hand, do attempt a larger scale project in their attempt to explain the laws (karma, rebirth, impermanence, interdependence, emptiness) governing all sentient beings. Let us keep this divergence of scope in mind as we analyze the points of connection between Buddhist compassion and Sartrean ethics.

The Buddhist emphasis on compassion truly feels in accord with its entire project and not stuck on or of ulterior social/cultural motivations. Throughout the teachings of each Buddhist school (Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana), there is at least some central argument relating to compassion. The Buddhist project understands non-self as a claim not only about humans and how we may be able to live better in this world, but as a deep ontological law about existence writ large. What about Sartre?

**Sartre’s Ethics**

Here I will focus specifically on Sartre’s discussion of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) in *Being and Nothingness*. We can think of bad faith as a type of self-deception in the sense of humans falsely trying to impose substantial meaning into the void of human existence through advancing false views. Self-deception, crudely, is hiding the truth from oneself. In acting of bad faith, one regards him/herself as an object, rather than as a radically free subject void of any inherent essential nature or meaning (the view of human nature Sartre deems authentic).
In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre offers an example of this concept through a description of a café waiter. This waiter does his best to conform to everything that a waiter should be. He exaggerates his every move, tries to very hard to *look the part* of an exemplary waiter. It is as if he is play-acting. Scholar Neel Burton describes the waiter’s actions as those of

An automaton whose essence is to be a waiter. However, in order to play-act at being a waiter, the waiter must at some level be aware that he is not in fact a waiter, but a conscious human being who is deceiving himself that he is a waiter.  

Sartre describes the waiter's quick steps, the eager way he leans forward when others speak, and the deftness with which he balances his plates and trays. Burton further explains

All of it adds up to a kind of performance. In a sense, the waiter is playing the part of a waiter. He is carrying on as though the style and the purpose of all his actions were dictated by his being a waiter. He is carrying on as though being a waiter were to be a thing, as a table is a table or a chair is a chair. This sort of phenomenon is not restricted to waiters, of course, as Sartre goes on to say, ‘There is the dance of the tailor, the grocer, the auctioneer.’

This play-acting affects a sphere far beyond just this waiter. Acting in bad faith is the way most people live their lives, Sartre suggests. Sartre contends that each these tradespeople (the tailor, the grocer, the auctioneer) lend a shallowly mechanical touch to their duties in the workforce partly as a way of making their clientele more comfortable. Sartre states, "A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer." But this type of play-acting is not restricted only to the world of trade and commerce. Sartre argues that humans do this in all walks of life.  

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125 Sartre (1956), p. 59
naturally tend to flee from the immense emptiness of our existence, into a sort of ‘existential flight’. Bad faith is Sartre’s parallel way of describing ‘existential flight’.

**Bad Faith**

For Sartre, ‘bad faith’ is our human attempt to find security and substance in a self-chosen role (such as that of the waiter) which we can play in any given life situation. It is a way to deceive oneself into feelings of safety. One can cling to one’s material role (waiter, grocer, etc.) and attribute to this title a sense of self well beyond its due worth. Rather than face the selflessness of existence, acting in bad faith allows the illusion of self to continue, through overly identifying with one’s role in the workplace. It is human habit to deceive oneself into thinking one does not have the radical freedom to make choices, for fear of the potential consequences of making a choice. This tendency stunts one’s potential and paralyzes human beings from their radical freedom to choose. Bad faith is, then, an act of playing it safe, or failing to recognize the multitude of choices available to each of us in any given circumstance.

By living through bad faith, a person places him/herself at the mercy of circumstance, rather than acting with agency. In this way, beings allow themselves to become more akin to objects than to active, conscious subjects.

Recalling Sartre’s terminology for this duality, the person acting with bad faith is more akin to a ‘being-in-itself’ than to a ‘being-for-itself’. However, Sartre argues that to act on bad faith—to pretend not to have freedom to make choices—is itself a choice. The seemingly limited perspective of bad faith is itself a type of
freedom. We can pretend to disregard our freedom by pursuing pragmatic or superficial concerns regarding ‘social roles and value systems’ but to do so is itself a choice, the choice of pretending to oneself that one does not have the freedom to make choices. It is self-deception to regard oneself as an object, rather than a free human subject.

Sartre also suggests that it is of bad faith to flee from one’s anguish. It is inauthentic not only to deny the nature of existence, this overwhelming human freedom, but it is also inauthentic to not allow oneself to feel the associated feelings of anguish, nausea, etc., like Roquentin does in Nausea. Any attempts to flee from the true human condition—be it a fleeing from freedom, responsibility, or one’s anguish—are foolish attempts at self-deception. They are choices of inauthenticity.

The bulk of Sartre’s argument here is, again, that man is condemned to be free. In his more psychological-based works (The Psychology of Imagination), Sartre goes so far as to argue that freedom is the very definition of man. And as I have already outlined, the basis of Sartrean freedom is ontological. It stems directly from his understanding that humans are not an in-itself (object) but a for-itself (subject), and that there is no essential permanent self to connect and solidify one’s life.

This condemnation does not mean humans will not continue, perhaps eternally, to play-act and self-deceive. Sartre suggests that what Batchelor calls ‘existential flight’ is a natural human reaction to the negative feelings involved with coming to terms with the true reality of existence. It is our predisposition to not want

127 Burton, p. 96
to feel these states of nausea, anguish, etc. And in our attempts to flee, we act in all sorts of ways that represent bad faith.

In enacting bad faith, Sartre says we put on a uniform and enact a role for the world. It is a misrepresentation of what it means to be a for-itself. It gives us a sense of stability and understanding of one’s role in the world. It is comfortable. And, we can hardly blame humans for falling into this type of pattern. It’s overwhelming (nauseating, even, to use Roquentin’s term) to sit with the ‘burden’ of freedom, of man’s existence stripped of any essence. But that does not permit humans, on Sartre’s account, to not deal with this freedom in authentic ways.

**Authenticity**

Authenticity is Sartre’s solution to bad faith. Or, rather, pursuing a life made with authentic choices is the way to escape descent into bad faith. Avoiding bad faith involves freely choosing one’s actions and committing to them. However, Sartre is not unrealistic. On his ethical account, one need not always live in good faith in order to live authentically. For Sartre, what is most important is an awareness of the human tendency to slip into bad faith, and one’s active attempts to avoid this tendency. To live authentically in good faith is to strive for authenticity as much as one can. He explains, “The actions of men of good faith have, as their ultimate significance, the quest of freedom itself.”

For Sartre, the upshot of the overwhelming, unlimited human freedom is that this freedom allows humans to make authentic choices. Sartre’s notion of freedom ultimately boils down to making choices. We are, in our

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unlimited freedom, compelled to make a choice, any choice. It is up to each individual free agent to exercise his/her freedom in a way that is authentic to him/herself. Such authenticity can be cultivated through making choices. For Sartre, being an authentic subject also involves learning to live without an illusory sense of self. Authenticity is achieved by “a conversion that entails abandonment of our original choice to coincide with ourselves consciously and thereby free ourselves from identification with our egos as being-in-itself.” This sounds starkly similar to the Buddhist account of non-self. Sartre continues that human beings attain authenticity by take moral responsibility for their egos. He calls for a shift from a focus on identifying with one’s ego/permanent sense of self towards attention to the realms of ‘existence and autonomy’. This conversion (the transition from Batchelor’s realm of ‘having’ to ‘being’) avoids the flight to bad faith that so many humans continue to endlessly pursue. For Sartre, authenticity is ‘outgoing and generous’; it is focused not on oneself but on existence (being).\textsuperscript{129} It is living out and enacting the ontological truth of our human situation.

Rather than allow ourselves to live lives as objects—at the discretion of others’ wills or at the manipulation of our governments or societies—we ought to live as subjects. The waiter play-acting in the example above ought to, Sartre suggests, look deeper than his superficial role. Being, the authentic realm, transcends the superficial labels of one’s mere job description (waiter, grocer), labels that humans often falsely take up as their whole identities. Instead, for Sartre humans have the freedom to recognize the ways they have been limited in the past—through self-doing

and/or through adhering to social/cultural limitations. They also have the freedom to reject these past limitations and to presently pursue their human potential for authentic, radically free lives. For Sartre, we are whom we choose to be, not simply whom we have been before.

**Karma Versus the Freedom to Choose**

I see an obvious connection between Sartre’s description of human choice and the Buddhist concept of karma. However, unlike the Buddhist karmic system, there is not an overt ethical pivot in Sartre’s description of freedom and choice. For the Buddhists, our choices affect our karmic conditioning. When we engage in wholesome actions and behaviors, we produce positive karma, and when we engage in unwholesome actions and behaviors, we produce negative karma. For the Buddhists, we are a sum of our karmic conditioning—the only continuous thread (though one’s karmic conditioning itself is constantly changing) linking our previous, current, and future ‘selves’. We are who we have chosen to be, and will become what we are currently behaving like.

In both Sartre’s and the Buddha’s case, one’s choices and the freedom to make a choice are central constitutive factors to determining who one currently is. But for Mahayanists, the choice to engage in wholesome or unwholesome behaviors affects one’s karma, which has both moral and soteriological implications. As I have discussed, to attain liberation, a Mahayana Buddhist practitioner must gain insight into non-self, insight into the emptiness of all dharmas (conditioned phenomena), and cultivate a state of non-attachment. One must use skillful means (positive karmic...
actions) to pursue the path of the bodhisattva. In choosing wholesome actions, the Buddhist practitioner places him/herself continuously closer to a state of awakening. It is through following the moral outlines set out in the paramitas (perfections of the bodhisattva), and through abiding by the noble eight-fold path that a being can release his/her negative karmic conditioning and gain the necessary insight into the true nature of things in order to awaken.

A Comparative Look

The Sartrean concept of authenticity, some scholars argue, is the only Existentialist ‘virtue’. It seems to be as close to an outright moral doctrine as Sartre offers, and is, therefore, the most useful material to draw upon in comparison to Mahayana Buddhist moral doctrines. A resonance between the two traditions I was not initially expecting to find is the fact that Sartre’s authenticity takes as its foundation his ontological argument about the illusory nature of the self. He contrasts living authentically with identifying strongly with one’s own ego-based sense of self.

Thus if we understand Sartre’s description of authenticity as his sort of moral code, then we see that, just like the Buddha, Sartre ethics are integrated with his metaphysical view of non-self. Sartrean authenticity involves steering clear of self-deception, which implicitly assumes insight into the separation of the self from one’s roles in the material world (such as being a waiter). Authentic living involves a view of the self located within the deeper ‘being’ realm. Similarly, Mahayana Buddhism links its metaphysics and its ethics in its argument that compassion ‘spontaneously arises’ upon the insight of selflessness from a liberated being. As explored in my discussion of Flanagan’s text, the Buddhist insight of non-self naturally leads to a
compassionate view of all sentient beings. For Mahayanists, a compassionate outlook is the only coherent way to make sense of things once a being has fully understood the extent of the non-self doctrine.

Though I have problematized a logical connection between the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and its ‘spontaneously arising’ compassion, I do not call into question the intimate connection between these two insights. Regardless of how coherent the connection is, the fact remains that this union of ethics and metaphysics is important to the coherence of the Buddhist project. I have also shown that although the ethical discourses surrounding these two traditions vary, these ethical views share a similar reliance on prior ontological claims about the self. Further, as I explored in chapters three and four, the two metaphysical arguments about non-self are themselves quite similar. Though I dissected the nuanced points of divergence between the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and Sartre’s own account of non-self, the fact remains that the both are offering comparable ways to understand one’s being in the world as a fundamentally selfless existence.

Conclusion

To now return to the questions I asked at the beginning of this chapter: 1. Is there a logical connection between the Buddhist insights of non-self and compassion? and 2. Does Sartre’s ethical system extol a sort of compassion comparable to the Buddhist sense of compassion? Let us conclusively tackle the first question first.

I have explored a few of Flanagan’s attempts to logically bridge the Buddhist transition from non-self to compassion. However, like him, I am still not convinced
that this spontaneously arising Buddhist compassion is logically coherent. Perhaps it is a spiritual quirk of the religion. Perhaps ‘spontaneously arising’ compassion was the Mahayanist solution to the otherwise incompatible metaphysical and ethical Buddhist views. Or, perhaps this spontaneously arising compassion is a deep phenomenological experience that those who have not experienced cannot understand. As I have discussed, the Buddhist doctrine of the Two Truths differentiates between conventional (worldly) and ultimate (understood only by Enlightened beings) truth. I am ready to posit that this spontaneously arising compassion falls firmly into the ultimate truth category of Buddhist knowledge. Non-Enlightened beings can try their best to understand the connection between non-self and compassion, but we non-enlightened beings (on the Buddhist view) are limited by our mental faculties of reasoning, logic, and what each of us have individually experienced. Perhaps the connection between non-self and compassion will be patently clear, coherent, and satisfying once one attains Enlightenment, but not before then.

To address the second question (is there a comparable Sartrean counterweight to Buddhist compassion?), I argue that there are significant ways we can compare Sartre’s ethics and that of the Buddha. In each case, their ethical system stems from the metaphysical truth of non-self (presented in slightly different formats by each thinker). Sartre’s ethics depart from Mahayanist ethics in his claim that an understanding of non-self leads one to examine the ways he/she has been fleeing from authentic living. For Sartre, one cannot begin to live authentically until the realization of non-self has been experienced. Even then, one has a choice about what
to do with this newfound insight. In *Nausea*, Roquentin spends considerable time immensely overwhelmed by his human predicament, and wants desperately to flee from his newfound knowledge. He tries to escape into ‘existential flight’, initially unable to authentically face his radical human freedom. He realizes, however, that all attempts to flee prove futile, and he eventually chooses to embrace his radical human freedom, accepting the non-essential selflessness of human existence. Sartre is sympathetic to the human tendency to fear this radical freedom, and he understands how easily people like the play-acting waiter fall into habits of bad faith. Still, he suggests authentic living as the most truthful and empowering form of living insofar as it embraces the uniquely human freedom of choice.

Thus while Sartre’s discussion of authenticity is neither an outright ethical discussion, nor does it have many parallels to the Buddhist notion of compassion, there are still similarities between each tradition’s ethical system. Now, I will conclude my thesis by reviewing the claims I have made and highlighting topics worthy of further research.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

In an attempt at clarity and summary, I will first briefly review what I have illustrated in this thesis. I address both my comparative claims between Sartrean and Buddhist philosophy, as well as my claims regarding connections between Depth Psychology and Buddhist philosophy. Then, I will engage the reader in questions I see arising from this work that I have left somewhat open-ended. I flag these questions as areas worthy of further comparative scholarship.

A Review of the Existential Comparison

In my discussion of Sartre’s dualism, I outlined how Sartre understands that the subject/object split is not solely about ontology, but rather, is a phenomenological dilemma. Though his duality differs from the Cartesian model, Sartre still clearly differentiates two types of being—being for-itself and being in-itself. Derek Heyman tried to underlie a Buddhist non-dualism onto Sartre’s ontology. In my analysis of Heyman’s work, I argued that this philosophical strategy was neither particularly helpful nor fully respectful of the intentions of each original philosophical tradition. However, Heyman’s work does prove an interesting example of the type of contemporary comparative scholarship being conducted between Sartrean and Mahayana Buddhist ontology.

Sartre also moralizes about his ontological duality. He calls attention to the human tendency to flee from the existential anxiety (or nausea) that accompanies insight into the non-essential, selflessness of true human existence. He further describes the human tendency to deny this selflessness by pretending we are only
objects, rather than subjects. The example of the café waiter play-acting and over identifying his role in the workforce served as one such example. This example also illustrated what Sartre calls ‘bad faith’, which roughly translates as ‘self-deception’. For Sartre, the antidote to leading a life of self-deception is authenticity. Authentic living involves embracing of our radical human freedom to choose.

In analyzing several previous pieces of scholarship (Heyman, Batchelor, Hough) and formulating my own arguments about them, I have continued to ask: Is there a genuine comparative lens through which to view Buddhist compassion and Sartrean ethics? I worried that the Buddhist concepts of karma and rebirth limit its comparative potential to Western ethical models.

First and foremost, I problematize the way previous comparative scholars have not acknowledged how significantly the laws of karma and rebirth factor into both moral and ontological Buddhist claims, but are nearly absent from all Western philosophical traditions. Additionally, Sartre maintains a Cartesian dualism in his distinction of for-itself and in-itself, “entirely alien to the spirit of Buddhism.”

Finally, Sartre’s understanding of selflessness does not extend to the complete and utter ‘emptiness’ that Mahayanists discuss as the ultimate truth. For Mahayanists, ‘non-self’ is conventionally true, but the emptiness of all conditioned phenomena is the ultimate truth, an insight graspable only upon attaining liberation.

These core differences, I argue, render the two traditions incomparable in many cases. This is a more radical claim than that of scholar Steven Laycock, who similarly recognizes these key differences, but maintains that the two traditions are

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130 Laycock, p. 25
nevertheless very comparable. Like Heyman, Laycock claims that there is room to overlay Buddhist concepts in the ‘cracks’ of Sartrean theory. Laycock insists that it is precisely at those

Crucial junctures at which congruence seems most assured, that the Sartrean theory lapses, while the Buddhist theory does not, into infidelity with its own professed phenomenological commitment to dwell exclusively upon the ‘things themselves’, describing the ‘matters’ of consciousness precisely as and only as they appear.131

Laycock is committed to supporting Heyman’s suggestion that there is room to do useful comparative work within and between these Sartrean theoretical lapses (such as the ‘impossible synthesis’ of Sartre’s dualism). Such work, Laycock asserts, hopes to illuminate the ways in which Buddhist philosophy would support and/or resolve these cracks in Sartre’s arguments.

Unlike Laycock, I want to say: But why? How is asserting that aspects of Buddhist philosophy merely hold up against Sartre’s ontology helpful? I further call into question the accuracy of this comparative scholarship insofar as it often, but not always, relegates the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth to levels of importance much lower than they ought to occupy. In my mind, karma and rebirth serve as a comparative Buddhist trump card, disallowing a true full comparison between Sartrean and Buddhist ontology. This is not to say that there are not important similarities between the two traditions. I have discussed at length the substantial convergence in views about non-self between each tradition. But in all of my research, I have failed to be convinced that comparative analyses of Sartrean and Buddhist ontology have ever, to date, presented the two paradigms on equal, or fair, footing. Because, I am not sure it is possible.

131 Laycock, p. 26
However, I still suggest that this prior scholarship has been helpful in illuminating complex aspects of similarity and difference within each framework. This prior comparative scholarship also offers dense yet accessible accounts of each philosophical tradition, which I found illuminative about each tradition on its own terms. There is clearly much more comparative work to be done here. The initial scholarly accounts comparing Sartre’s selflessness and the Buddhist non-self insight I have presented are helpful in showing both promising and problematic attempts at comparative claims, and they also highlight areas (the importance of karma, Sartre’s irreconcilable dualism) in which future scholars can expand on these comparisons.

**A Review of the Depth Psychology Comparison**

What have I concluded about the overlapping aspects of Buddhism and Depth Psychology? I fault most contemporary comparative claims between Buddhism and Depth Psychology for taking an unnecessarily myopic stance in focusing on ‘happiness’, without a universal definition of the term. I also took up Dan Lusthaus’ concern about whether Yogacarin Buddhism is or is not a ‘psychologism’. By psychologism, he refers to the notion that psychological factors are the ultimate explanatory tools for understanding anything. An argument can be made that Yogacara Buddhism is not a type of psychologism since it seeks to erase mental conditioning, rather than to reify mental factors. However, this elimination of mental factors on the Yogacarin account only happens upon Enlightenment. Up until this point, like psychologism, Yogacara Buddhism focuses on mental factors, and the alayavijnana (unconscious) in particular. I ultimately argued that an answer to
Lusthaus’ question is unimportant. His comparison does, however, draw very helpful attention to the close similarities between the Yogacarin account of the unconscious and psychological (particularly Depth Psychology) accounts of the unconscious.

Following my discussion of Lusthaus’ work, I took up this connection, comparing Freud and Jung’s accounts of the unconscious to the Yogacarin account of the alayavijnana, the unconscious storehouse of karmic conditioning. The major difference between these respective accounts of the unconscious is that for Freud and Jung, the unconscious is not directly accessible. It is only through psychoanalysis with an interlocutor (a psychoanalyst) that Depth Psychology patients can access their unconscious mental states. The focus in Depth Psychology practices is to reveal traumatic past events buried in one’s unconscious and to work through them. The goal here is on living well in the present moment, free from the traumatic limits of one’s past.

I contrasted this with Buddhist mindfulness practices, which call attention to the present moment not by resolving past conflicts, but simply by releasing arising thoughts on a second by second basis. Shinzen Young describes the difference between Depth Psychology and Buddhist Mindfulness as a difference of time-space scale. Mindfulness is concerned with a much smaller span of time than Depth Psychology is. Further, the notion of cure does not factor into the Buddhist framework the way it strongly factors into Depth Psychology. Buddhist practice encourages an awareness of one’s neurosis and an attention to where one’s mind wanders, but it does not attempt to ‘cure’ one’s problems. It centralizes awareness of one’s pains and one’s pleasures, but not a resolution of them, whereas patients of
Freud and Jung’s psychotherapies are motivated to undergo analysis with hopes of a ‘cure’ or resolution.

The Mahayana Buddhist project aims towards the non-personal reduction of suffering. The bodhisattva path consists of sentient beings pursuing their own liberations in order to help other suffering beings also seek liberation. In this way, while Buddhist mindfulness and meditation practices do help reduce the pain of the individuals partaking in these practices insofar as they draws attention to the present moment, mindfulness practice is not, ultimately, a selfish endeavor. These practices do not lead to a ‘cure’ for oneself or others; The Mahayana Buddhist project has the broader, depersonalized aim of eliminating universal suffering.

Depth Psychology differs from both Sartre’s Existentialism and Mahayana Buddhism in another important way. Depth Psychology privileges its patients’ past experiences in ways that neither of the other two traditions do. Sartre argues that humans can transform their pasts not through extended awareness and reflection on these experiences, but through making present day choices. For Sartre, our actions define us, and we can continuously remake ourselves, breaking free from past limitations, through active attention to the freedom of choice in the present moment. For Mahayana Buddhists, the past resolves itself without active attention placed on it, through the karmic rewiring involved with engaging in wholesome actions and bringing one’s attention to the present moment. Neither Buddhism nor Sartre’s Existentialism rely on a sort of interlocutor in the way that Freud and Jung roles as psychoanalysts serve in therapeutic mediation between their patients’ conscious and unconscious minds. In this way, it seems that both Mahayana Buddhism and Sartre’s
Existentialism afford their practitioners/followers more freedom to change their circumstances without formal reliance on others.

**Prospectus for Further Research**

My examination of whether there is a coherent logic to the Mahayanist ‘spontaneously arising’ compassion upon the non-self insight is exceedingly worthy of further exploration. I described a few ways in which Flanagan has attempted to make logical sense of this connection. Most notably, he offered the Buddhist concept of the Two Truths as a way to explain this connection (it is an ultimate truth, a truth which non-enlightened beings cannot conceive of). Still, there might be other arguments worth considering about the Mahayanist union between non-self and compassion.

Additionally, given the length and scope of this thesis, I was unable to engage with the connections between Buddhism and Depth Psychology as fully as I had wanted. I attempted to synthesize many of the prevailing views and important arguments from cross-cultural comparative philosophers, writers, and Buddhist practitioners in chapter five. A topic for future exploration could be continuing the analysis of how Western emphases on happiness are impacting translations of Buddhist philosophy into Western terminology, and are then, thereby, impacting the cross-cultural integration of these ideas? I would like to take up continued exploration of how Western Buddhism is becoming a new, synthetic philosophical view of its own, and how it might be obscuring or misinterpreting Eastern Buddhism’s original intentions? How is this philosophical and practical integration
of Buddhism into Western happiness-centric paradigms useful, and how might it be harmful?

In *Cross-Cultural Dialogue and the Resonance of Narrative Strands*, scholar Jeremy Safran outlines a few important pitfalls that the cross-cultural conversation between Buddhism and psychotherapy can take. One common form this encounter can take consists of “the distorted construction and marginalization of the other as a means of validating one’s own world view.”132 I do not think this is, by any means, the dominant way this contemporary discourse has been operating, but it is certainly something to look out for. Safran explains that another common tendency in this comparative arena is to idealize the other. He argues (and I agree) that there is still considerable evidence of this type of idealization in Western psychotherapists’ engagement with Eastern Buddhism. It would be helpful to examine evidence of this type of idealization in contemporary comparative uses of the two traditions. Lastly, another comparative approach consists of looking for commonalities or common principles. Safran argues that this method can be very valuable, especially at the beginning of comparative analysis to help ‘render the alien more familiar’. However, he also worries that this approach can “function at a sufficiently high level of abstraction that it forecloses deeper understanding”.133 Instead, Safran suggests cross-cultural dialogue ought to engage in a type of thick description that explores in detail and with nuance both the similarities and differences between the two traditions.134 This type of comparison is respectful of the original intentions and specific social/cultural contexts each tradition comes from.

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132 Unno, p. 53
133 Unno, p. 53
134 Unno, p. 54
The pitfall Safran points out that is most common to the Buddhism and Psychotherapy dialogue is the co-opting of one culture by another through the imposition of one’s own preexisting cultural narrative upon the others. This is what I argued has been happening in Western uses of Buddhist terminology and philosophy in Western happiness pursuits. Safran optimistically looks forward, arguing that while is some cases

Gross distortions emerge from the unconscious imposition of a particular Western cultural narrative on Buddhist teachings, in other cases the resonance between particular narratives emerging from Buddhism and Western psychology can lead to a creative evolution a revitalization of both cultures.135

He hopes that continued cross-cultural dialogue fosters a ‘mutual and genuine confrontation’ in each of these traditions, ultimately leading to the evolution and enrichment of both. The point here is that although the danger of misrepresenting or distorting the Buddha’s philosophy constantly looms over this cross-cultural comparison, scholars have to be aware that some sort of evolution in the Buddha’s teachings is inevitable, as his theories are related to and used to benefit both contemporary Eastern and Western concerns.

I was also unable to provide either a full account of Sartrean philosophy or Mahayana Buddhist philosophy here for a complete comparative analysis. In each case, I had to substantially pare down the scope of my research. I chose areas in which I thought the most engaging connections and points of divergence would arise from my analysis. For the Buddhist side of my project, I focused only on Mahayana Buddhism, and often limited myself even further to a particular Mahayana Buddhist school, Yogacara. As I mentioned in chapter one, by limiting myself to a Yogacarin

135 Unno, p. 60
focus, I was able to focus exclusively on this particular school’s interpretations of the Buddhist doctrines of karma, rebirth, and dependent origination. And as I noted, various Buddhist schools have slightly different interpretations of these concepts.

An extremely useful and valuable topic of further research would be to chart out each of the various Buddhist lineages’ interpretations of karma and rebirth, and then to analyze how each of them does or does not relate to Sartre’s ethical system. I began this work by comparing and contrasting Yogacara’s close integration of ethics, soteriology, and ontology, all linked together through the doctrines of karma and rebirth, to Sartre’s moral structure, particularly his discussion of ‘authenticity’ and radical human freedom. Other Buddhist schools view this integration of ethics, soteriology, and metaphysics differently, and there is interesting work to do in comparing these varied Buddhist interpretations of karma with either Sartre’s ethics in particular, or Existentialist ethics in general.

I am sure there are several more avenues worthy of further scholarship stemming from my work beyond the ones I have just listed here. This comparative scholarship between Buddhist philosophy and specific Western traditions is in its relatively early stages of dialogue. The most useful comparative strategy seems to be to make close comparisons, such as the connection between Mahayanist and Sartrean ontological views of the self, with due respect and attention towards to the larger structures and assumptions underlying each respective project. Broad comparative claims, such as those made between Buddhism writ large and ‘Western philosophy’ come across imprecise and end up wrongly characterizing aspects of each tradition. Nevertheless, we have, already, made clever and useful comparative claims in this
comparative field. As this scholarship continues, we can continue to discover ways in which Existentialism, Depth Psychology, and Mahayana Buddhism can be of service to each other, and, through putting them in dialogue, in service of illuminating a new, synthetic understanding of the insights contained within each tradition.
Index of Buddhist Terminology

Abhidharma The Buddhist teachings are often divided into three categories: 1. The Tripitaka: the sutras (teachings of the Buddha), 2. The Vinaya (teachings on conduct,) and 3. the Abhidharma which are the analyses of phenomena that exist primarily as a commentarial tradition to the Buddhist teachings. These Abhidharma texts are the most philosophically dense of the three categories, involving complex arguments, and expected rebuttals for the major Buddhist doctrines.

Alayavijnana Usually translated as 'storehouse consciousness' or ‘ground consciousness’ In Yogacara philosophy, this is the underlying stratum of existence that is 'perfumed' by volitional actions and thus 'stores' the moral effects of karma.

Anatman Sanskrit for ‘not-self’.

Arhat Accomplished Hinayana (early Buddhist) practitioners who have eliminated their karmic obscurations. They are the fully realized and free from the bonds of samsara, enabling them to proceed to nirvana.

Atman Sanskrit for a permanent ‘self’.

Bodhicitta Literally, ‘the awakening mind’. The aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all living beings.

Bodhisattva Literally, ‘awakening being’. An individual seeking to become a Buddha who has committed him/herself to the Mahayana path of compassion and the practice of the six paramitas (perfections/levels). After achieving Buddhahood, this being works to free all other beings from samsara.

Bodhisattva levels (perfections) The levels or stages a bodhisattva goes through to reach enlightenment. These consist of ten levels in the sutra tradition.

Bodhisattva Vow A vow in which one promises to practice diligently and undertake the Buddhist path in order to bring all other sentient beings to Buddhahood.

Buddha-nature (Sanskrit tathagatagarbha) The original nature present in all beings which when realized leads to enlightenment. It is often called the essence of Buddhahood or enlightened essence.

Buddhadharma The teachings of the Buddha.

Compassion (Sanskrit karuna) In Buddhist terms, this is the desire for liberation of all sentient beings (human and non-human) regardless of who they are. This feeling can only be developed with extensive meditation and understanding of the Buddhist path.
**Conventional truth** There are two truths: relative and absolute. Conventional or relative truth is the perception of an ordinary (unenlightened) person who sees the world with all his or her projections based on the false belief in self.

**Dependent Origination** (Sanskrit *pratityasamutpada*) The principal that nothing exists independently, but rather comes into existence only in dependence on various previous causes and conditions (karma). There are twelve successive links/chains within this process, beginning with ignorance and ending with old age and death.

**Dharma** Meaning phenomena (conditioned arisings) when lowercase, and meaning the teachings of the Buddha when uppercase

**Emptiness** (Sanskrit *Shunyata*) Is also translated as voidness. The Buddha taught in Mahayana (the second turning of the wheel of dharma) that both external phenomena (dharmas) and concept of self or "I" have no real existence and therefore are "empty."

**Hinayana** Literally, the ‘lesser vehicle’. A pejorative term given by followers of the Mahayana lineage to the spiritual path of those who practice Buddhism for ‘selfish’ motives (the arhat path rather than the bodhisattva path).

**Impermanence** (Sanskrit *anitiya*) This term refers to the Buddhist notion that all things in samsara are impermanent. Once created, they arise and pass away. Although this is particularly true for human illness and death, the idea refers to the nature of all things (dharmas). Failure to understand this concept is one of the reasons for suffering. It is considered one of the three marks of existence (the other two are non-self and suffering).

**Karma** Literally, ‘action’. Karma is a universal law that when one does a wholesome (kusala) action one’s circumstances will improve and when one does an unwholesome (akusala) action negative results will eventually occur from the act.

**Madhyamaka** The most influential of the four schools of Indian Buddhism founded by Nagarjuna in the second century C.E. The name comes from the Sanskrit word meaning "the Middle-way", meaning it is the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. The main argument of this school is that all phenomena—both internal mental events and external physical objects—is empty of any true nature. They take a stronger view about emptiness than earlier Buddhist schools or Yogacarins. This school does, however, hold that phenomena exist on the conventional level of reality (but not ultimately).

**Mahayana** Literally, the ‘Great Vehicle’. These are the teachings of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, which emphasize emptiness, compassion, and universal Buddha-nature (tathagatagarbha).
**Paramita** These are the six virtues, or ‘perfections’, that the bodhisattva perfects during his development. They are: generosity, discipline, patience, energy, meditation and wisdom (prajna).

**Prajna** In Sanskrit it literally means ‘perfect knowledge’, but it can also mean wisdom, understanding, or discrimination. Usually it means the wisdom of seeing things from a non-dual point of view (such that one understands emptiness/non-self).

**Refuge** In the Buddhist context to take refuge means to accept the Buddha and the Buddhist teachings as the path one wants to take to liberation.

**Rupa:** (Sanskrit and Pali) Meaning physical body or form. One of the five Skandhas.

**Samsara** Conditioned existence of ordinary life in which suffering occurs because one still possesses attachment, dualism, and ignorance. It is in contrast to nirvana.

**Sangha** Literally ‘community’. The community of people committed to the practice of the Dharma. Sometimes used to refer exclusively to ordained monks and nuns.

**5 skandhas** Literally, ‘heaps’. These are the five basic impermanent aggregates that together make up the illusory ‘self’. They are: body/form (rupa), feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness. First is form, which includes all sounds, smells, etc. everything we usually think of as outside the mind. The second and third are sensations (pleasant and unpleasant, etc.) and identification. Fourth are mental events, which actually include the second and third aggregates. The fifth is ordinary consciousness such as the sensory and mental consciousnesses.

**Tantra** Literally, ‘continuum’. A Buddhist text that describes an accelerated path to Enlightenment by means of mantra, transformative imagination, and yogic exercises.

**Ultimate truth** (Sanskrit divisatya) There is the conventional or relative truth that is the world as we normally experience it with solid objects. The ultimate or absolute truth, however, is that ultimately all phenomena (both selves and external objects) are empty.

**Vajrayana** Literally, ‘diamond vehicle’. The path to Enlightenment as described in the Buddhist tantras.
Bibliography


