

# Revisiting Buddhist Art of Living and Philosophy of Life

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## Article Received:

26 Jun 2025

## Revised:

15 Oct 2025

## Accepted:

26 Oct 2025

## Abstract

The rapid advancement of communication and information technology has fundamentally transformed modern society, fostering unprecedented interconnection and interdependence. This evolution resonates deeply with the Buddhist doctrine of *pratīyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), which asserts that all phenomena arise through mutual causality. Far from being solely a technological breakthrough, the digital age exemplifies an enduring philosophical truth. This paper critically examines the Buddhist art of living as a practical ethical framework grounded in ancient wisdom and reinterpreted in the context of globalization, digitization, and ecological uncertainty. Drawing on core Buddhist teachings, including the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates (*skandhas*), the concept of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness), and the Law of Karma, the study explores how these principles illuminate pathways toward individual well-being and collective ethics. It contends that suffering (*dukkha*), both personal and social, originates from distorted perceptions fueled by craving, attachment, and consumerist ideologies. When exacerbated by unchecked capitalism and technological acceleration, these afflictions undermine not only human consciousness but also the ecological and moral fabric of society. The paper highlights the dynamic interplay between individual mindfulness and collective consciousness, advocating for compassion and ethical engagement as vital forces in reshaping global values. Through the lens of Buddhist ethics, it proposes a transformative vision for humanity—one that cultivates holistic well-being, supports ecological balance, and restores spiritual integrity amidst a fragmented world. Ultimately, integrating Buddhist insights into global consciousness offers a compelling framework for sustaining harmony within the self and the broader world.

**Keywords :** Buddhist ethics, compassion (*karuṇā*), collective consciousness, dependent origination (*pratīyasamutpāda*), emptiness (*Śūnyatā*).

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## Introduction

In the age of rapid globalization and digital transformation, the Buddhist concept of dependent origination (Pratītyasamutpāda) finds contemporary relevance. As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama explains, “Any existent thing is considered to be a whole, that is, composed of parts. Its very existence depends on its parts and it cannot exist in an autonomous or independent manner” (Beyond Religion 23). This notion encapsulates the interconnectedness of global systems, mirroring modern digital society’s cause-effect dynamics. Further, looking back at last couple of decades, condition mostly responsible for the newly discovered phenomenon of global society, it became obvious that what a group of individuals do and more importantly, how they think, on one end of the world, ripples all the way throughout the entire planet (if not cosmos). This ripple effect has been seen to cause enormous change in lifestyles and thought process of completely unrelated people anywhere on earth. Over the last few decades, the emergence of a “global society” has demonstrated how actions and thoughts in one region impact the collective human experience. Buddhist teachings such as compassion (karuṇā) and wisdom (prajñā) offer crucial insights into human behavior and collective well-being. Compassion, as per the Dalai Lama, is more than empathy, it’s “an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering” (Dalai Lama & Cutler 47).

Art of Living, over the years, has emerged as a discipline in its own rights, and is currently an expanding field of research and professional practice. Some universities offer undergraduate, graduate, and professional training on Art of Living. Primary focus, in general, is on understanding individual characteristics and social behavior, based on theory, and methods of higher Living. However, without going deeper into these methods and practices, present work investigates approach towards an art of living and philosophy of life in a broader perspective as seen in Buddhist conceptual practices (Goldman 9-13). There is growing evidence that in some Buddhist practitioners, the very act of concern for others’ well being creates a state of well being within oneself. Buddhist perspective on compassion cannot be entirely different from the notion of wisdom; it’s seldom that we find these words used as separate and independent.

This is probably why Buddhists have very often talked at length on these virtues, only trying to describe the profound experiences of being compassionate. The H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama says further, “According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It’s not passive submission, instead, it is a compassionate altruism that earnestly seeks to relieve others of their suffering. Profound compassion must include both wisdom and loving-kindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom), and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is loving-kindness) (Dalai Lama & Cutler 47).

Buddhism defines five aggregates (skandhas) which categories all individual experience:

1. Form or Matter (Pāli rūpa, Tib. gzugs),
2. Feeling or Sensation (Pāli vedanā, Tib. tshoba),
3. Perception/Conception/Apperception/Cognition/Discrimination (Sanskrit samjñā, Pāli saññā, Tib. 'du-shes),
4. Mental construct/Impulses/Compositional or Volitional factors (Sanskrit samskāra, Pāli saṅkhāra, Tib. 'du-byed), and
5. Consciousness (Sanskrit vijñāna, Pāli viññāṇa, Tib. rnam-par-shes-pa) (Red Pine 2; Nhat Hanh 1; Suzuki 26).

Thich Nhat Hanh in the first verse of the sentence adds that: “After this penetration, he overcame all pain.” Suzuki (29) observes that this particular sentence is unique to Hsuan-chuang’s translation and is omitted in other versions of the Heart Sutra. The Mahayana school goes one step further, individually perceiving each aggregate and discovering that each is “Empty.” If one has to recreate the ‘World’ as one entity, following table can be used as an analogy.

	<b>Aggregate/Skandha (Pali word)</b>	<b>Corresponding Global aggregate</b>
1	Rūpa	Physical world in which we live, including how we connect and communicate with each other, such as Transport and Internet, and our interaction with ecological system.
2	Vedanā	Ability of our world to absorb and transmit the events. Some events go unnoticed, whereas some create a huge impact, good or bad, and are perceived all over the globe.
3	Saññā	Events and experiences are then classified/cognized as per usual categories, such as war, economic depression etc. exactly as an individual identifies a fruit as say an apple, based on previous experience.
4	Samjñā	Perception of consequences is accepted as good or bad or grey as per Opinion of a community. Total sum of these opinions is put together by conglomerates of socio-political leaders in conferences.
5	Vijñāna	Our Collective Consciousness.

The first three aggregates, rūpa, vedanā, and saññā, are general properties of our modern world seen as a whole. The current wave of global society clearly contributes to these three aggregates, as global interconnectedness continuously changes the way we communicate, perceive, and form opinions. Regarding the other two aggregates, a useful analogy suggests that our social, economic, and political problems (and their respective solutions) constitute global samjñā, and our collective consciousness constitutes vijñāna. A closer look at each aggregate reveals that none can exist without the others, and the interconnectedness among the five aggregates evolves more profoundly under the influence of an interdependent global community (Nhat Hanh).

Buddhist texts do not treat the issue of social conflicts directly; instead, they focus extensively on individual affliction. Given that large-scale social conflicts were historically less widespread and that human social structures were not as complex or communicative, yet were spiritually isolated, the Buddhist quest to eliminate dukkha held top priority. Another possible reason for the absence of social conflict analysis may be the assumption that resolving individual afflictions will, in turn, resolve societal issues. After all, the ultimate goal is the emergence of a peaceful society of compassionate human beings (Lama 64-66).

Individual suffering can roughly be defined as mental or emotional affliction that occurs within one’s mind when an individual is presented with difficult choices. The exact understanding of such a state is subtle, and it is more appropriate to define it using similes, as is often done in Buddhist texts, rather than relying on precise definitions. Buddhists use the term dukkha to describe this state of conflict,

meaning suffering, pain, or more accurately, disquietude. It is this state of dukkha that Buddhists seek to resolve through the Four Noble Truths (Rahula 16-22).

This underlying theme closely resembles the teachings of the Four Noble Truths: the Noble Truth of Suffering (Dukkha), the Noble Truth of the Accumulation of Suffering (Dukkha Samudaya), the Noble Truth of the Elimination of Suffering (Dukkha Nirodha), and the Noble Truth of the Path that Leads Away from Suffering (Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada Magga) (Rahula 16-30). Building on these truths, the Buddhist idea of the art of living can be summarized in the following steps:

1. To identify the reality that the root of suffering is attachment to individual interests,
2. Detach from those interests,
3. Learn the “right” way once free from bias, and then
4. Follow the noble path (Lama 58–66).

The Eightfold Path; Right view, Right intention, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration, is the framework for this “right” way, as outlined in early Buddhist texts and taught in contemporary interpretations (Nhat Hanh 45-49; Rahula 45-54). These teachings retain their relevance in today’s increasingly complex world. A deeper understanding of altruism, interconnectedness, and the Buddhist ethical framework could enable both individual and societal transformation (Lama 112-117).

Step-1; Know the cause of suffering which is attachment to individual interest and it is the fundamental root of suffering. Buddhist scholars have long emphasized the interconnectedness of all phenomena and the principle of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), which denies any truly independent existence. Suffering emerges interdependently with passion, aggression, and ignorance and its inability to perceive this interconnection. Eliminating one of these afflictions thus eliminates the others (Lama 56–59; Rahula 17-18).

Step-2; Detach from the suffering-causing interests: Once one recognizes that attachment and ignorance are the root causes of suffering, the natural step is to let go of these interests. In doing so, one moves toward inner peace, as detachment dissolves the foundation upon which individual suffering rests (Rahula 51; Nhat Hanh 63-65).

Step -3; Learn the Right Path: Once detachment from suffering-causing interests is achieved, individuals may experience an “action vacuum,” prompting the question of how to act without self-centered motivation. Buddhist scholars resolve this by prescribing the Noble Eightfold Path, which outlines ethical and mental disciplines that are independent of personal gain. This path includes: Right view (*samyag-dṛṣṭi*), Right intention (*samyak-saṃkalpa*), Right speech (*samyag-vāc*), Right action (*samyak-karmānta*), Right livelihood (*samyag-ājīva*), Right effort (*samyag-vyāyāma*), Right mindfulness (*samyak-smṛti*), and Right concentration (*samyak-samādhi*) (Rahula 45-49; Nhat Hanh 93-100).

Step -4; Follow the right path: The eightfold path provides a framework to act beyond individual desires, enabling ethical conduct rooted in wisdom and compassion. These sequential steps, grounded in detachment, understanding, and mindful practice, form the foundation for addressing suffering in both personal and societal contexts. As the Dalai Lama explains, genuine compassion must include both wisdom and loving-kindness, making it a transformative force in ethical living (Lama and Cutler 295-297). Buddhist ethics, thus, grow in relevance as modern society becomes more interdependent and ethically complex, offering a framework for both personal growth and societal healing (Nhat Hanh 199-202).

Buddhist values and ethics do not lose their relevance with age rather they become more and more enlightening as the world grows more complex every day. Buddhist view and experience would shed a light on a critical understanding of the impact of altruism within society. Such an understanding would lead to both individual development and societal change. A study of systematic methods enshrined in Buddhist philosophy by applied social scientist can prove to be a rare source of panacea for humanity.

### **Emptiness and Dependent Origination in Buddhist Thought**

Philosophers and intellectuals have offered diverse interpretations of the theory of dependent origination, also called interdependence, conditioned genesis, dependent co-arising, or *pratītyasamutpāda*.

This principle can be summarized succinctly:

When this is, that is (*Imasmim sati, idam hoti*)

From the arising of this comes the arising of that (*Imass' uppādā, idam uppajjati*)

When this isn't, that isn't (*Imasmim asati, idam na hoti*)

From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that (*Imassa nirodhā, idham nirujjhati*)  
(Thanissaro 01-20 & Rhys Davids and Oldenberg 32–33).

Fundamentally, it reflects the law of cause and effect, a framework used to explain how to eliminate suffering by eradicating its cause. In simpler terms, a "whole cannot exist without parts." As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama explains, "All conditioned things and events ... don't just arise from nowhere fully formed. Second, there is mutual dependence between parts and the whole; without parts there can be no whole... No phenomenon exists with an independent or intrinsic identity" (Dalai Lama in *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*).

### **The Middle Path: A Foundational Principle of Buddhist Philosophy**

A classical Buddhist parable exemplifies the principle of the Middle Path through the Buddha's dialogue with the affluent disciple Sona Kolivisa. Drawing an analogy to tuning a lute, the Buddha observes that excessive effort results in restlessness, while insufficient effort leads to laxity. Therefore resolve upon evenness of energy, acquire evenness of the spiritual faculties, and take that as your sign" (Nanamoli Bhikkhu 171) & (*Anguttara Nikāya* 6.55, as quoted in *Buddhistdoor*).

Being one of the most fundamental teaching constituting the core of Tibetan Buddhism, understanding 'Middle path' turns out to be a process, which manifests itself in an inevitable need to develop several universal values, and eventually guides an individual into exploring much profound depths of something which can be, for a moment, termed as 'Universal religion' - ethics, compassion and honesty find more than a quantum of solace here in today's post-modern world; a world which otherwise seems to have no qualms in authenticating a seemingly more obvious and logical opportunism, to either counter 'survival of the fittest', or to feed the all-devouring need for comfort, or probably, since the sentiments of modern community are complex to comment on - to experience bliss in enforcing a large and apparent socio-political-religious ego. Nevertheless, what comes out of the process - the process of understanding middle path - is sense of a universal responsibility, not only towards all sentient beings, but towards all subjects for that matter, for its origin is not in the individual's relationship with community and the outside world, rather, it's a natural outcome of being able to see the interdependence at the core of all existence. Whatever be the perspective employed in attempt to comprehend basics of Tibetan Buddhism, eventually it leads to a state of mind, best summarized by the idea of the 'Middle path' (Lama 45-49).

It is sometimes open to interpretation which of the ideas – dependent arising (*sunyata*),

and middle path, is more fundamental, as one leads to the other. Together they constitute the core of Buddhist philosophy. In the middle path philosophy all experiences are devoid of inherent nature (svabhāva), appearing like a dream, and projections of consciousness. Although these projections are phenomenologically experienced, they are recognized as mere conceptual imputations (prajñapti). The rejection of both ontological extremes, eternalism and nihilism, constitutes the foundational principle of the Middle Path, wherein the negation of dualistic extremes is central to its philosophical orientation (Nāgārjuna 304). This teaching asserts that no phenomenon has its own intrinsic existence (svabhāva), since all arise in dependence and are merely “conceptual designations” (prajñapti), a perspective that rejects both essentialism and nihilism and anchors the philosophical core of the Middle Path.

As articulated in Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, these concepts are intrinsically interdependent. “Whatever is dependently co-arisen, that is explained as emptiness; that, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way. That which does not arise dependently cannot exist; thus, any entity that is not empty is ultimately non-existent.” (Nāgārjuna 304).

### Śūnyatā as the Core of Madhyamaka Philosophy

Sanskrit noun from the adj. sūnya means ‘void’, Suññatā (Pāli) stong pa nyid (Tibetan), Kòng / Kū, (Chinese / Japanese), Gong-seong (Korean), meaning “Emptiness” or “Voidness”, literally zero-ness. ‘Form is emptiness and emptiness is form’. Extending the idea of interconnectedness, the idea of emptiness originates in Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra, commonly known as the Heart Sutra, and states that nothing possesses essential, enduring identity (anattā) or a self. This is due to the fact that all phenomena are interrelated and mutually dependent, lacking inherent self-sufficiency or independent existence. This is entirely different from nihilism, and construed as one of the most simple, as well as the most abstruse and paradoxical statement to grasp. Nevertheless, what’s more important here is how Buddhists scholar arrived at the conclusion called Emptiness.

“Whatever arises dependently is explained to be emptiness... That which is dependently originated is itself the middle way” (MMK 24:18–19).

### Understanding Karma: Action, Intent, and Rebirth

Karma (Sanskrit: karman, Pāli: Kamma), traditionally understood as the mechanism of ethical causality within Buddhist philosophy, extends beyond mere action to encompass the intentionality underlying each deed. Central to this conceptual structure is cetana, or volition, which serves as the driving force behind human conduct. According to Buddhist teachings, it is through these intentional acts that vijñāna or consciousness which is continually shaped, conditioned, and influenced (Harvey 39). This process is not singular or momentary; rather, it is cumulative and recursive, with each deliberate or heedless act leaving subtle but enduring karmic imprints. These imprints, far from being inert traces, are dynamic influences embedded in the continuum of consciousness. They play an active role in conditioning future experiences, guiding the unfolding of one’s existential trajectory. Over time, such imprints solidify into patterns that determine not only present circumstances but also the conditions of rebirth and future lives.

In this view, rebirth is not a random occurrence but the karmic echo of past volitional acts. Karma functions as a formative force, constructing the contours of personal identity and existential becoming. It articulates a cyclical worldview wherein intention, awareness, and consequence are intricately interconnected, underscoring the ethical imperative to cultivate mindfulness, compassion, and discernment in one’s actions (Harvey 8, 59).

In Buddhism, the term karma, derived from Sanskrit meaning “action” or “doing”, refers specifically to intentional actions (cetanā) that lead to future consequences (Das 289). The Law of



Karma underscores that the world functions through causality, encompassing physical acts, mental volition, and emotional disturbances alike (Quy 2). This principle underlies the progression of *viññāna* (consciousness), identified as the fifth of the five *skandhas* within the aggregate framework. In contrast to the other *skandhas*, which disintegrate at death, *viññāna* retains karmic imprints and endures through the process of rebirth, establishing a causal continuity across successive lifetimes. This continuity sustains a stream of consciousness that seeds the next existence with accumulated ethical residues.

Buddhism regards physical actions, mental intentions (*cetanā*), and emotional afflictions as equally influential within the framework of karma (Quy 3). The Law of Karma serves as the driving force behind the development of *viññāna* (consciousness), the fifth aggregate in the Buddhist framework. As the repository of karmic impressions, consciousness evolves by assimilating the residual effects of an individual's volitional actions, thereby sustaining continuity across lifetimes and conditioning future experiences (Das 291). At the moment of rebirth, while the remaining *skandhas* disintegrate, the stream of consciousness endures, functioning as a causal condition for the arising of a new constellation of aggregates. Importantly, the arising consciousness in the subsequent life is neither identical to nor completely distinct from its predecessor; it exists within a dynamic continuum governed by karmic causality. In a similar fashion, collective consciousness can be seen as evolving under the influence of karma: "Wholesome actions lead to wholesome states while unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome states, individually as well as collectively" (Locke 307).

The current state of global affairs reflects a deep entanglement with Western ideologies, particularly capitalism, which has permeated even the spiritual hinterlands of ancient wisdom (Payne and Rambelli 12). The craving for wealth and fame (*taṇhā*) has eclipsed traditional human values, while science, once a slow and noble pursuit of truth, has been overtaken by comfort-driven technological advancement. Multinational corporations, driven by shareholder interests, aggressively exploit resources, often disregarding ethical and ecological boundaries. The notion of free will, when divorced from social responsibility, undermines communal harmony and violates nature's law, which Buddhism suggests will eventually respond with karmic retribution (Krishan 298). Capitalism's seductive promise of liberty has fractured our collective intelligence, plunging society into cycles of craving (*taṇhā*) and clinging (*upādāna*) for wealth, sensual pleasure (*kāma-taṇhā*), and personal comfort. This accumulation of unwholesome karmas, when viewed through the lens of Buddhist ethics, is likely to culminate in widespread suffering (*dukkha*) on a global scale (Fisher 102).

## Conclusion

In the wake of global integration of world views, thus scope of Buddhist studies should expand and allow for identification and reconstruction of ideas central to Buddhist universal values and ethics. From a traditional perspective, Buddhism is often categorized as a religion, complete with sacred texts, rituals, ethical precepts, and devotional practices. Yet, when viewed through a psychological or philosophical lens, Buddhism reveals itself as a nuanced science of the mind, an introspective inquiry into the nature of thought, suffering, and consciousness. This dual identity positions Buddhism as a potential bridge between spirituality and rational inquiry, offering a rich framework for understanding both personal transformation and societal well-being.

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, a revered Vietnamese Buddhist monk and the originator of the concept of "Engaged Buddhism," emphasized the inseparability of mindfulness and social responsibility. He wrote, "If you are awake you cannot do otherwise than to act compassionately to help relieve suffering you see around you. So Buddhism must be engaged in the world. If it is not engaged it is not Buddhism." This powerful assertion re-frames Buddhist practice as active rather than passive, centralizing awareness and compassion as tools for ethical living and meaningful social engagement.

Modern applications of Buddhist techniques, especially meditation and mindfulness, have begun to intersect with contemporary problem-solving methodologies. Practices such as reflective journaling, prioritization frameworks, and consequence mapping now resemble a refined art of living informed by both inner inquiry and external accountability. By merging contemplative techniques with analytical structures, individuals can cultivate mental clarity while addressing complex modern dilemmas in a balanced way. Moreover, Buddhism also teaches that our experience of the universe is deeply shaped by how we collectively perceive and relate to reality that it's all interconnected. This inter-connectivity extends into global consciousness, shaped by media, economic systems, and sociopolitical ideologies. As capitalism, hyper-individualism, and false notions of liberty spread, collective consciousness becomes vulnerable to distortion. Excessive craving (*taṇhā*) for material wealth and comfort, coupled with attachment (*upādāna*), results in a fractured worldview. If left unaddressed, these forces fuel mass disillusionment and collective suffering (*dukkha*), inhibiting harmony with the natural environment and human values.

Yet, the relationship between globalization and global consciousness is not unidirectional but it operates as a dynamic two-way feedback loop. Human society holds the power to reshape its collective trajectory through conscious ethical choices. By embracing the core values of Buddhism, such as; compassion, mindfulness, and ethical conduct, humanity can re-calibrate this feedback loop toward sustainability and shared well-being. The transformation of global consciousness is not merely desirable; it is imperative for countering the existential challenges of the modern age. Consequently, the discipline of Buddhist studies must evolve in response to these global shifts. It should expand its scope to actively reconstruct and disseminate values rooted in Buddhist ethics and universal compassion. Through interdisciplinary engagement with philosophy, environmental science, education, and human psychology, Buddhist thought can contribute to building a holistic ethical framework that addresses not only individual suffering but also collective challenges in a rapidly changing world.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



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