Contemporary Approaches to Buddhist Pedagogy for Chaplaincy Education

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Editors' note: Dr. Jitsujo Gauthier is chair and Associate Professor of Buddhist Chaplaincy at University of the West. Dr. Gauthier is also a Zen teacher, priest, and preceptor within the Zen Peacemakers and White Plum Asanga lineage. In this article, Dr. Gauthier introduces the work of Vietnamese Buddhist leader Thich Vien Ly, whose Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam *outlines key pedagogical approaches derived from teaching methods used by the Buddha and in canonical Buddhist texts. Dr. Gauthier summarizes and re-organizes Thich Vien Ly's work, providing illustrative examples of how these pedagogical methods can be applied in North American classrooms, sanghas, and clinical pastoral education programs. Dr. Gauthier also introduces new teaching methods addressing resistance from a Mahāyāna Buddhist worldview and a Buddhist "window of tolerance" based on recent research in trauma. With her attention to intersectionality and embodiment, Gauthier offers concrete exercises, demonstrating that Buddhist paradigms of learning have a lot to offer the fields of education, chaplaincy, and spiritual care.*

In 2008, together with many distinguished Buddhist monastics, scholars, and diplomats, I attended the dissertation defense of Thich Vien Ly[1] as a graduate student at University of the West. I was new to Zen Buddhism and recall feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the many different Buddhist cultures that gathered. I remember people

1. Tan Ngoc Ho (Thich Vien Ly), "Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam" (PhD diss., University of the West, 2009), subsequently published as a book in 2020, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam* (Bodhi Wisdom, 2020), https://dieungu.org/images/file/tdrmj3LQ1wgQACMl/luan-an-tien-si-tan-ngoc-ho-2009-book-layout-05-final.pdf.

repeatedly saying how important and valuable this scholarship was. Years passed; I finished my PhD and was hired to teach full time in the Buddhist chaplaincy department. I had a lot of experience within clinical chaplaincy, spiritual care, and Zen, but little knowledge and cultural sensitivity around the many forms of Buddhism.

A lot of fear, resistance, and thoughts from imposter syndrome arose during my first few years of teaching. It felt intimidating teaching students who were born Buddhist or practicing Buddhist monastics since childhood or early adulthood. I was not the expert in the room, and yet there I was in the role of professor. When I was in the role of a hospital chaplain, I was taught to meet care-seekers where they are, to practice not advising and instead to cultivate the mutual power between us. I started to bring clinical chaplaincy skills into the classroom to create containers for students and teachers to learn simultaneously. I learned how to allow each student's wisdom, practice, and expertise to become part of our mutual learning.

Every new year was a challenge that helped me grow. My facilitation skills improved, and my Zen practice began to feel more and more alive. A few years ago, two of the MDiv students ask if they could TA my classes, which encouraged me to become clearer about pedagogy. One day, in a Communications Skills for Buddhist Chaplains course, I was speaking about the dearth of Buddhist pedagogy for contemporary classrooms. One of the students said, "That is what my Buddhist teacher, Ven. Thich Vien Ly, wrote his dissertation about. I will bring you his book." When I saw Ven. Thich Vien Ly's photo on his book, I remembered attending his 2008 dissertation—"Why didn't I know about this book?" I said. The student replied, "That's what happens: We Asian Buddhists write things, make contributions, and no one sees or notices." His response opened an opportunity for me to face cultures of whiteness, my own karma, the conditioning of occupying a white Irish Scottish French-Canadian body, and the humility of being a convert to Sōtō Zen Buddhism.

After reading through Thich Vien Ly's book, I felt inspired. His research not only outlines many Buddhist approaches and methods of teaching, but also articulates cultural complexities and gaps in understanding as Buddhism spread from China into Vietnam, which may shed light on how Buddhism is transitioning into the Americas. Sōtō Zen stresses the value of ancestors, importance of lineage, uncovering of roots, and polishing of bones, so it feels important to me to connect

with Thich Vien Ly and his contributions.[2] This paper is a way to honor the teaching, practices, and research of those who came before me. The pedagogies I put forth are gleaned from Zen Buddhist training, teaching within inter-Buddhist environments at University of the West, colleagues of various faiths, my own experiences in the natural world, and, most significantly, the research of Thich Vien Ly.

INTRODUCTION

Many intersections and complexities have appeared as Buddhism has taken root in US soil over the last century and a half. Communication gaps appear across cultures, languages, classes, ethnicities, races, and worldviews, as well as in the form, study, and practice across Asian, Asian-American Pacific-Islander, African, Australian, European, and American Buddhisms. Intersectionality creates a spectrum of power and social privileges in Asian, African, Black, Brazilian, European, Indigenous, Latinx, Middle Eastern, White, and culturally mixed human bodies.[3] Environments vary in convert temples, heritage temples, and urban, rural, and mountain monasteries. Buddhist texts written in English by Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Sri Lankan, Cambodian, Indian, Tibetan, and Thai Buddhist scholars remain hidden on library bookshelves and never make it into the US mainstream cultural context. Innumerous Buddhist practice texts written in English outline principal teachings and practices from a variety of traditions, yet few footnote primary Buddhist sources.[4]

Against this backdrop, this article demonstrates how such gaps may become cultural meeting points that produce fruitful opportunities to teach and learn Buddhism in new ways. It is written for present and future Buddhist educators in academic, clinical, and Dharma center

2. I contacted Thich Vien Ly to send him a copy of this article, and I hope to stay in contact and find ways to collaborate. He said he might want to translate this article into Vietnamese for his temple community.

3. "Wheel of Power and Privilege," Just 1 Voice, 2021, accessed August 19, 2024, https://just1voice.com/advocacy/wheel-of-privilege/?srsltid=AfmBOopkm4wFpE1lv1A8WowntaBna7dbNffnRnhqgy9csFBK5mlxdyLL.

4. For notable exceptions to this neglect, see Ann Gleig and Scott Mitchell, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of American Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2024), part III, "Practices," 271–376; and Paula Arai and Kevin Trainor, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2022), parts III and IV, "Bodies in Transition" and "Body-Mind Transformations," 235–354.

settings; other educators may also find it useful. In section I, I review Buddhist resources for co-learning. I bring together voices from contemporary Buddhist chaplaincy and pedagogy, reflecting on themes of embodiment. I then review Buddhist textual traditions, highlighting doctrines that can be used for co-learning, to cultivate self/non-self reflexivity, and to gain insight into interdependence. In section II, I offer my integration of these Buddhist sources in my pedagogical practices and offer concrete exercises. I begin by outlining Thich Vien Ly's research on Buddhist pedagogies and demonstrate ways I've made use of these insights in my work. I then offer an exercise for reflecting on resistance and introduce a Buddhist Window of Tolerance. It is my hope that Buddhist educators across many fields may be inspired to try such methods within their own contexts.

I. BUDDHIST RESOURCES FOR CO-LEARNING

A. Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy

Given the lack of Buddhist texts in English that explicitly center Buddhist doctrines and approaches to learning in contemporary classrooms,[5] Buddhist chaplaincy texts tend to be predominantly from Christian or theistic perspectives. Using non-Buddhist texts helps Buddhist students understand Abrahamic traditions, the theistic context in the US cultural context in which chaplaincy is situated, and ways to bridge gaps between these worldviews to provide adequate spiritual care; however, the US mainstream Buddhist, secular, and theistic cultures are missing the opportunity to learn from Buddhist-centered approaches to learning. Few academic books are written on subjects of Buddhist chaplaincy, ministry, spiritual formation, and care. Such pedagogies can help Buddhists feel more deeply rooted within their tradition and begin engaging in inter-Buddhist and multifaith dialogues for Buddhist spiritual caregiving.

Buddhism has a lot to offer the fields of education, chaplaincy, and spiritual care with its long history of compiled systematic methods of critical and pragmatic reflexive praxis,[6] and there is a growing potential

5. Elaine Yuen, "Creating a Contemplative Classroom," *National Teaching and Learning Forum* 25, no. 5 (2016): 6–7, https://elaineyuen.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Creating-a-Contemplative-Classroom-NTLF-2016.pdf.

6. Bhikshuni Lozang Trinlae, "Prospects for a Buddhist Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18, no. 1 (2014): 7–22.

for contemporary translations of methods for pedagogy.[7] Examples of innovative Buddhist scholars whose work can be built on are Cheryl Giles and Willa Miller, Nathan Michon and Daniel Fisher, Thich Duc Thien and Thich Nhat Tu, Sumi Loundon, and Chenxing Han, who compile a range of Buddhist voices using Buddhist frameworks, ministry, rituals, and texts to address contemplative caregiving, counseling, spiritual formation, being with living and dying, social inequity, and the pastoral role.[8] Ayo Yetunde, Judith Simmer-Brown, Victor Gabriel, Monica Sanford, and Duane Bidwell offer ways to bridge gaps in interfaith chaplaincy, in cultivating the right use of power, in spiritual authority, and in transforming in mutuality and spiritual friendship.[9]

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7. Bijoy P. Barua, "Buddhist Learning Pedagogy and Decolonization: Reimagining in the Context of Neocolonial Education and Development in Bangladesh," in *Decolonizing and Indigenizing Visions of Educational Leadership*, ed. Njoki N. Wane et al. (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2022), 27–41; Tan Ngoc Ho, "Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam"; Namdrol Miranda Adams, "The Water in Which We Swim: The Influence of the Contemplative on Higher Education in American (Capitalist) Culture" (PhD diss., University of Portland, 2021); Justin Thomas McDaniel, *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand* (University of Washington Press, 2010); Tanya Storch, "Buddhist Universities in the United States of America," *International Journal of Dharma Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–16; Judith Simmer-Brown and Fran Grace, eds., *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (State University of New York Press, 2011); Jeffrey Samuels, "Toward an Action-Oriented Pedagogy: Buddhist Texts and Monastic Education in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (2004): 955–971.

8. Cheryl A Giles and Willa Miller, *The Arts of Contemplative Care: Pioneering Voices in Buddhist Chaplaincy and Pastoral Work* (Wisdom, 2012); Nathan Jishin Michon and Daniel Clarkson Fisher, eds., *A Thousand Hands: A Guidebook to Caring for Your Buddhist Community* (Sumeru Press, 2016); Nathan Jishin Michon, ed., *Refuge in the Storm: Buddhist Voices in Crisis Care* (North Atlantic Books, 2023); Thich Duc Thien and Thich Nhat Tu, eds., *Buddhist Approach to Harmonious Families, Healthcare and Sustainable Societies* (Vietnam Buddhist University Publications, 2019); Sumi Loundon Kim, ed., *The Buddha's Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists* (Simon and Schuster, 2006); Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (North Atlantic Books, 2021).

9. Victor Gabriel, "Implications for Interfaith Chaplaincy from a Tibetan Buddhist Understanding of Religious Location and the Two Truths," in *Navigating Religious Difference in Spiritual Care and Counseling: Essays in Honor of Kathleen J. Greider*, ed. Jill Lynnae Snodgrass and Kathleen J. Greider (Claremont

Several Buddhist educators offer methods for being with the dying from various perspectives,[10] and others articulate ways Buddhist spiritual formation and maturity may facilitate and challenge ethics, identity, and ministerial functioning.[11]

Buddhist doctrines demonstrate a variety of methods to cultivate concentration, awareness, loving kindness, compassion, equanimity, spaciousness, deep listening, and joy. Carrie Doehring writes, "Theological reflexivity is a key component of spiritual integration—a means for compassionately understanding how embodied theologies of fear, guilt, shame, rage, and despair have been internalized through interacting social systems of power and privilege."[12] Kathleen Grieder proclaims that *everyone inhabits a particular location in relation to religion*, and "our religious location is but one aspect of—and also

Press, 2019); Pamela Ayo Yetunde, "I Know I've Been Changed: Black Womanist Buddhist and Christian Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Care for a Homicidal White Male Buddhist," in *Navigating Religious Difference in Spiritual Care and Counseling: Essays in Honor of Kathleen J. Greider*, ed. Jill Lynnae Snodgrass and Kathleen J. Greider (Claremont Press, 2019); Monica Sanford, *Kalyāṇamitra: A Model for Buddhist Spiritual Care* (Sumeru Press, 2020); Duane R. Bidwell, "Deep Listening and Virtuous Friendship: Spiritual Care in the Context of Religious Multiplicity," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 35 (2015): 3–13; Judith Simmer-Brown, "'Listening Dangerously': Dialogue Training as Contemplative Pedagogy," *Buddhist-Christian Studies,* 33 (2013): 33–40.

10. Kirsten DeLeo, *Present Through the End: A Caring Companion's Guide for Accompanying the Dying* (Shambhala, 2019); Koshin Paley Ellison and Matt Weingast, *Awake at the Bedside: Contemplative Teachings on Palliative and End-of-Life Care* (Wisdom Publications, 2016); Joan Halifax, *Being with Dying* (Shambhala Publications, 2014); Jonathan Watts and Yoshiharu Tomatsu, *Buddhist Care for the Dying and Bereaved: Global Perspectives* (Wisdom Publications, 2012).

11. Tom Kilts, "A Vajrayana Buddhist Perspective on Ministry Training," *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 62, no. 3 (2008): 273–282; Tina Jitsujo Gauthier, "Formation and Supervision in Buddhist Chaplaincy," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 37 (2017); Elaine Yuen, "Humility and Humanity: Contemporary Perspectives on Healthcare Chaplaincy," in *Shadows & Light: Theory, Research, & Practice in Transpersonal Psychology*, vols. 1 & 2, ed. F. L. Kaklauskas et al. (University Professors Press, 2016), https://elaineyuen.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Yuen-Humility-and-Humanity-Shadows-Light-2016.pdf.

12. Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Presbyterian Publishing, 2014), 12.

always dynamically interacting with—our complex cultural identity as a whole, which includes all aspects of our identity, such as personality, age, sexuality, economic status, gender, ethnicity and race, nationality, and first language."[13] Similarly Zenju Earthlyn Manuel writes about the importance of embodiment as essential to awakening from a Zen Buddhist perspective: "We need this particular body, its unique color, shape, and sex, for liberation to unfold. There is no experience of emptiness without interrelationship";[14] no-self means being empty of separate existence.[15] Buddhism teaches that understanding and accepting the three marks of existence—impermanence (P. *anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and no-self (*anattā*)—is a natural result of analyzing the five *khandha*s of body (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññ*a), mental formations (*saṅkhāra*s), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and understanding the teaching of dependent origination (*paticca-samuppāda*).[16] Each of the five *khandha*s are streams that coexist and inter-are with the others. It is important to know the qualities of each *khandha* to realize the interrelation of self/no-self. Individuals will view the three marks of existence and the five *khandha*s through different hermeneutics. Given the range of spiritual locations and hermeneutics within intercultural classrooms, there is a need for pedagogies that value ethical reflexivity, multiple perspectives, co-learning, or what Christine Hong

13. Kathleen J. Greider, "Religious Location and Counseling: Engaging Diversity and Difference in Views of Religion," in *Understanding Pastoral Counseling* (2015): 235.

14. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender* (Simon and Schuster, 2015), 26.

15. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (Parallax Press, 2009), 9–10.

16. For further exploration on the *khandha*s, three marks, and dependent origination see Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Grove Press/Random House, 1974), 52–66; and R. Epstein and D. Rounds, eds., *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra: A New Translation with Excerpts from the Commentary by the Venerable Master Hsūan Hua* (Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2012), 89–135.

describes as ways of teaching that are essential for a collective decolonized future.[17]

B. Textual Sources for Buddhist Pedagogy

Buddhist doctrines provide examples of teaching and learning chaplaincy that include self/no-self cultivation and methods for reflexivity, embodiment, and co-learning.[18] This differs from Eurocentric structures that center rationality and theory in academic disciplines. Many Buddhist doctrines are taught through texts that describe their exposition as taking place within nature, monasteries, and community life, which offer readers a more embodied way of understanding that differs from the more rational, analytic, and disembodied method common to the American university.

For example, the *Lotus*, *Heart*, and *Śūraṅgama* sutras were taught on Vulture Peak;[19] the *Diamond Sutra* was originally preached in a park;[20] the Buddha's first sermon on the middle way and the noble truths took place in Deer Park in Sarnath;[21] and the *Mettā sutta* was given to a group of monks meditating in the forest as an antidote to their fear of the

17. While there are many views on decolonial pedagogy, Christine Hong's research presents some of the history of colonization, the effects of whiteness on academia, her personal experiences growing up as Korean-American Christian in the US educational system, as well as pedagogical examples from her teaching experience that disrupt coloniality and invite intercultural and interreligious spaces for mutual learning. Christine J. Hong, "Decolonial Futures in Theological Education," in *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lexington Books, 2021), 1–12.

18. Fuminobu Eishin Komura, "Spiritual Care as an Embodiment of Buddhist Loving-Kindness and Compassion Teachings: A Buddhist Chaplain's Perspective," in *Buddhist Approach to Harmonious Families, Healthcare and Sustainable Societies*, ed. Thich Duc Thien and Thich Nhat Tu (Vietnam Buddhist University Publications, 2019), 607.

19. Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*; M. Shinozaki, B. Ziporyn, and D. C. Earhart, trans., *The Threefold Lotus Sutra: A Modern Translation for Contemporary Readers* (Kosei Publishing, 2019); Epstein and Rounds, eds., *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra*.

20. Master Xingyun, *Describing the Indescribable: A Commentary on the "Diamond Sutra,"* trans. Tom Graham (Wisdom, 2001).

21. Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta," in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Pali Text Society in association with Wisdom Publications, 2000), SN 56.11.

earth spirits.[22] The *Amitābha sūtra* of the Pure Land school, which affirms each person's potential to be a buddha, was expounded in the Jetavana Monastery in Shravasti;[23] the Buddha spoke of five qualities necessary for contemplative maturity in a mango grove;[24] and Huineng, an ordinary human who became the sixth patriarch of Chan, was awakened by overhearing someone reciting the *Diamond Sutra* after delivering firewood to a customer's shop.[25] The subject of many Chan and Zen koans focus on the journey of wandering between monasteries and encountering hermits, cloistered sages, and nonhuman teachers.[26] There are many images of the Buddha teaching in a forest surrounded by a community of monastics, animals, hungry spirits, hell beings, gods, and demigods. Such settings invite the six realms beyond the human sphere; integrate contemplative pedagogies; and emphasize collective learning and practice in meditation, chanting, ethical discussions, and contemplating philosophical concepts.

Hierarchy and patriarchy exist in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhisms, yet cultural understandings and practices of hierarchy and patriarchy vary, just as they may differ from and within Eurocentric oriented societies.[27] Even so, there are Buddhist sutras that reflect

22. Buddhaghosa, *The Suttanipāta : An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses, Together with Its Commentaries: Paramatthajotikā II and Excerpts from the Niddesa*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, 2017), Sn 1.8.

23. Xingyun 星雲, *The Amitabha Sutra and the Pure Land School* (Buddha's Light Publishing, 2006).

24. Bhikkhu Ānandajoti, "The Discourse About Meghiya [*Meghiya Sutta*]," Sutta Central: Early Buddhist Texts, Translations, and Parallels, accessed June 11, 2025, https://suttacentral.net/ud4.1/en/anandajoti?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false.

25. Huineng, *The Platform Sutra: the Zen Teaching of Hui-neng*, trans. Red Pine (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006).

26. Yuanwu, *The Blue Cliff Record*, trans. T. F. Cleary & J. C. Cleary (Shambhala, 1977).

27. This topic deserves further exploration that is outside the parameters of this paper. For example, preaching/teaching of Dharma has been predominately written by men for men, as well as delivered and received within a hierarchical setting, which continues today in many Asian Buddhist and North American Buddhist communities. Hsiao-Lan Hu, *This-Worldly Nibbāna: a Buddhist-Feminist Social Ethic for Peacemaking in the Global Community* (SUNY Press, 2012); Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (SUNY Press, 1993).

pedagogy that is not imposed or power-over, but rather invitational, shared, and explored within a communal context. For example, the Buddha's last sermon in the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta* encourages followers to "live with yourselves as your island . . . your refuge . . . with no other as your refuge."[28] In this sutta the Buddha, rather than simply imparting dogma, encourages Ānanda and the sangha to not rely on him, to seek their own answers, and to develop the contemplative skills to discern truth and delusion through deep introspection and direct experience.[29] The raft parable and water snake simile in the *Alagaddupama sutta* encourages open dialogue without clinging to views, but also the importance of developing critical thinking and proper understanding, especially in relation to the teachings of no-self.[30] More specifically, a raft needs to be held on to properly while crossing a turbulent river, and a snake needs to be picked up by its head and not its tail so you don't get bitten; so too the Dharma teachings first need to be held and properly grasped before putting them down or letting them go.

Primary Buddhist sources (i.e., sutras, scriptures, commentaries) in the Pāli and Mahāyāna traditions offer methods of instruction for Buddhist chaplaincy and embodiment. For example, both the *Brahmajāla sutta*[31] and the parable of the blind men and the elephant[32]

28. "Mahāparinibbāna Sutta," in *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Wisdom Publications, 1987), 231–278; Tony Page, ed., *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra: Last and Most Impressive Teachings of the Buddha About Reality and the True Self,* trans. Koshō Yamamoto (F. Lepine, 2008).

29. "Mahāparinibbāna Sutta," 231–278.

30. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., "Alagaddupama Sutta," in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Wisdom Publications in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 2009). Although further investigation around self/non-self and the five *khandha*s is outside the parameters of this paper, these concepts within the context of Buddhist spiritual care, counseling, and leadership are an important aspect of Buddhist chaplaincy and whole-person education.

31. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and Its Commentaries* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1978); Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 1–50.

32. Bhikkhu Ānandajoti, "The First Discourse About the Various Sectarians," Sutta Central: Early Buddhist Texts, Translations, and Parallels, accessed June 11, 2025, https://suttacentral.net/ud6.4/en/anandajoti?lang=en&reference=none&highlight=false.

provide teachings on ethics (*sīla*), perspective taking, or the value of having multiple views. The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna sutta*[33] offers practices for mindfulness, bearing witness,[34] and ministry of presence;[35] and the *brahmavihārās*[36] introduce a framework for spiritual formation. Linji's *Host and Guest* outlines power dynamics in the teacher/student relationship;[37] the *Heart Sutra* invites spiritual inquiry into self/no-self, the interplay of form and emptiness, the six sense gates, and the two truths.[38] Finally, the *Lotus Sutra* offers teachings on pastoral theology and spiritual leadership, such as the chapter "Life Span of the Thus-Come One," which offers all-pervading presence and faith development, and the chapter "Perceiver of the World's Sounds," which offers compassion practices and deep listening skills.[39] There are numerous Buddhist pedagogies, yet few are compiled and re-envisioned for whole-person education programs.

II. INTEGRATION: MY BUDDHIST PEDAGOGY

A. Fivefold Approach to Buddhist Pedagogy Based on the Research of Thich Vien Ly (Tan Ngoc Ho)

I find Thich Vien Ly's (Tan Ngoc Ho) work as a useful basis for my integrative approach to Buddhist pedagogy. His *Beginning and Development*

33. This sutra outlines the four foundations of mindfulness, i.e., mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and *dharma*s. "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta," in *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Dīgha Nikāya*, trans. Maurice Walshe (Wisdom Publications, 1987), 335–350; and "Brahmajāla Sutta," ibid., 67–90.
34. Bernie Glassman, *Bearing Witness: A Zen Master's Lessons in Making Peace* (Bell Tower, 1998).
35. Amy Lawton and Wendy Cadge, "'Ministry of Presence' as Emotional Labor: Perspectives from Recipients of Care," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 1135.
36. This sutta outlines how to develop within the four divine abodes of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. "Dhanañjāni Sutta," in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya,* trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom, 1995), 791.
37. There is a section in this text that outlines the shifting roles of host and guest, e.g., guest examines host, host examines guest, host examines host, and guest examines guest, demonstrating the changing of power dynamics of teacher and students within koan practice. Yixuan, *The Record of Linji*, trans. T. Y. Kirchner, ed. R. F. Sasaki (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 23–24.
38. Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding,* 168.
39. Shinozaki, Ziporyn, and Earhart, *Threefold Lotus Sutra*.

of Buddhist Education in Vietnam[40] draws upon such teaching approaches and methods described above in the Pāli Tipiṭaka; the Āgama sutras of the Chinese Tripiṭaka; Mahāyāna sutras in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan; his personal experience as a Buddhist and student of Buddhism; and the experiences of his colleagues, Dharma friends, and teachers as he describes how Pāli, early Chinese, and Mahāyāna Buddhist approaches and methods influence instructional procedures in Buddhist education in Vietnam. Ly presents the Pāli Tipiṭaka and Āgama sutras of the Chinese Tripiṭaka as presenting the Buddha as a teacher to real world situations, while the Mahāyāna canon situates the Buddha as a teacher to bodhisattvas, *mahāsattva*s, and supernatural audiences.

The Pāli, early Chinese, and Mahāyāna canons all identify, record, and reflect the many Buddhist approaches and methods used by the Buddha, his immediate followers, and the evolving *mahāsaṅgha*. Ly compiles and organizes twelve methods of instruction from these canons: (1) repetition, (2) experimental, (3) narrative, (4) active mindfulness, (5) indirect and subtle, (6) questioning, (7) investigative, (8) inductive/deductive, (9) advancing progressively, (10) regulation, (11) preventative/prohibition, and (12) silent. These methods reflect the many dialogues, explanations, and debates found in Buddhist doctrines and systems of education. Ly re-envisions the gap between east Indian and the southern Chinese Buddhist cultures as a geographic meeting point of two significant Buddhist cultures which then flourished and expanded within Vietnamese Buddhism.[41]

Ly's research reflects Buddhist pedagogical approaches and methods of instruction used for thousands of years in traditional monastic training, which naturally evolved to broader systems of Buddhist education (e.g., Dharma centers, preschools, primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, and seminaries) in Asian Buddhist countries. As Buddhism establishes itself in the Americas, it encounters the diversity and complexities of American cultures, histories, spiritual movements, and mainstream and indigenous methods of education, including Western academia. Differences arise from individual beliefs, worldviews, and identities, but also due to familial, cultural, and social histories and contexts. Notions of personal and religious location and difference go beyond whether we call ourselves religious or spiritual

40. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam,* 209–234.
41. Ibid., 209–234.

or not, as well as whether we are appreciative, skeptical, or ambivalent of religion.[42] Unique intersections and expressions of culture, conditioning, religious location, and tradition are all rich ingredients for teaching and learning. Therefore, each Buddhist educator will embody Buddhist pedagogies, attitudes, and positionality differently, as well as interpret and employ methods and approaches outlined by Thich Vien Ly differently.

The following sections provide more details of Ly's twelve methods as a way to focus on Buddhist chaplaincy pedagogy in the United States. I organize them within five categories: (1) teaching academically, (2) teaching contemplatively, (3) teaching experientially, (4) teaching ethically, and (5) teaching gradually. This fivefold approach may also be applied to Buddhist education more broadly. In addition to outlining how Ly articulates each method within these five categories, I provide examples that re-envision them for whole-person education programs both inside and outside the classroom.

(1) Teaching Academically

The academic study of Buddhism[43] in the context of teaching in Buddhist universities, seminaries, CPE programs, and many contemporary American sanghas helps develop critical thinking and analysis. Learners may analyze how different expressions of Buddhism interact and affect historical, social, and cultural elements within themselves, their peers, and their respective communities. Learners can grow to see many Buddhisms and develop reflexivity in accord with many hermeneutics, perspectives, worldviews, and intersectionalities. The

42. Greider, "Religious Location and Counseling," 235–256.

43. It is important to note that while the First Amendment of the US Constitution endorses a separation between church and state, academia and the academic study of Buddhism exists within Protestant Christian educational frameworks and pedagogical approaches where traditional academic methods of instruction often reflect theistic patriarchal worldviews. For more in-depth learning see Christine Hong, "Upsetting the White, Christian, Patriarchy" and "Uncivilizing Teaching and Learning," in *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lexington Books, 2021), 61–96; Barua, "Buddhist Learning Pedagogy and Decolonization," 27–41.

following are three Buddhist methods of instruction outlined by Ly that align with the academic study of Buddhism.

An example of what Ly calls the *Indirect and Subtle Method* is using a current event, such as a death or conflict, to teach Buddhist principles such as compassion, suffering, no-self, non-attachment, sympathetic joy, and so on.[44] Sometimes teaching can be very direct. However, indirect or subtle ways of teaching involve telling a story that indirectly communicates a particular view. Using a current event as a case study can help students explore, question, and share feelings, reactions, and conditioned responses within a controlled situation.

The *Questioning Method* identified by Ly involves asking a specific series of questions that create an unfolding exploration and discovery of answers within the listeners for themselves. The questions are usually incisive (sharply focused), searching, with a curious intent, and arranged in a way that may reveal fallacies and open new pathways in the mind.[45] One useful application of this method to explore with students is Byron Katie's "Four Questions": Can you know that's true? Can you *absolutely* know that's true? How do you react, or what happens, when you believe that thought? Who would you be without that thought?[46]

What Ly calls the *Investigative Method* encourages and invites everyone to ask their own questions, to self-explore, to be skeptical, and to feel empowered without needing to trust or give authority to any one person.[47] I use "A Sutra Writing Exercise" created by Zen teacher Wendy Egyoku Nakao to help students cultivate their own authority. This exercise sets up a dialogue between the student and Buddha (i.e., their Wise Mind, True Self, or Awakened One within). Using a style like those in Buddhist sutras, learners can uncover innate wisdom to resolve problems, write a sacred text, and see this potential to awaken

44. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 217.
45. Ibid., 218.
46. "4 Questions to Change Your Life: An Interview with Byron Katie, Creator of 'The Work,'" The Work of Byron Katie, accessed June 11, 2025, https://thework.com/2015/04/4-questions-to-change-your-life-an-interview-with-byron-katie-creator-of-the-work/.
47. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 219.

for themselves. Through this writing and reflective listening exercise, learners become aware of habitual and new ways of learning.

Academic approaches that include methods other than a traditional lecture-discussion model may keep teaching and learning in the classrooms alive. Paulo Freire recognizes that education has often been used as an oppressive tool, perpetuating inequality and maintaining power imbalances. Freire recommends emphasizing dialogue, respect, and cooperation to cultivate a classroom environment where everyone's voices are valued, heard, and understood.[48] Similarly, Parker Palmer articulates a pedagogy that is highly relevant to Buddhist education, as it underscores the importance of the teacher's inner life and its impact on teaching effectiveness. His main conviction is that teaching and learning can be truly transformative when educators create safe and inclusive spaces for students to explore their authentic selves.[49]

(2) Teaching Contemplatively

Contemplative teaching methods are not common in academic settings in the US and require a different skill set. Educators need to relinquish the role of expert and methods of imparting knowledge while developing skills to facilitate experiences with learners. This requires time and practice. Ly identifies the *Repetition Method*, also called *saṅgāyana*, which involves repeating important concepts over and over to encourage memorization and embodiment. This method allows the body and mind to take in concepts slowly, to deepen understanding, and to make meaning over time. Historically, group recitation of sutras, teachings, and verses has been a foundational method of learning within Buddhist education.[50]

I have found repeating concepts a few times within one class, from one class to the next, from one semester to another, or over the course of a degree program is effective. For example, emotive language is

48. Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," in *Toward a Sociology of Education*, ed. John Beck, ChrisJenks, Nell Keddie, and Michael F. D. Young (Routledge, 2020), 374–386.
49. Parker J. Palmer, "Teaching in Community: Subject-Centered Education," in *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass, 2017), 117–144.
50. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 214, 215.

difficult to learn, so every week after a short meditation I invite students to practice describing their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual experience, and over time they come to relate to their *khandha*s differently. I give them a Feelings Wheel and Sensations Chart[51] to expand their felt sense vocabulary and feeling language. Another method is to invite students to do a Mirror Exercise at home every day for a month in which they gaze in a mirror, first silently, then repeating a mantra or words of affirmation like "I love you" or "I will never abandon you" to cultivate wholesome communication patterns, intimacy, and inner wisdom.

What Ly calls the *Active Mindfulness Method* uses physical activities, body movements, and postures to develop concentration, attentiveness, and mindful awareness of what is occurring (P. *sati*). This is based on the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna sutta*.[52] This sutta teaches that the foundations of mindfulness can be manifested when standing, walking, sitting, or lying down. Practitioners develop focus and awareness of the (1) composition and sensations of the body; (2) feelings that arise as pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral; (3) stasis, activity, and function of mind; and (4) process of perception, how objects of perception are seen and understood as Dharma, and how to see reality as it is occurring. By cultivating these four types of awareness, we gain direct insight into how the five *khandha*s operate.[53] I have used a Gazing Exercise where students spend one to three minutes looking into the eyes of their classmate to help activate and examine the *khandha*s (sensations, feelings, perceptions, and mental formations) as they arise into consciousness.

Contemplative activities invite experiential learning of the whole body, beyond the intellectual and cognitive. Ways I integrate contemplation into a class include meditation, listening dyads, group rituals, Way of Council,[54] artmaking, writing, interactive exercises, videos,

51. A Feelings Wheel or Sensations Chart provides an extensive list of labels one can use to reflect on one's current emotional and sensory state. Through labeling and self-reflecting, we can feel more in control and more responsive rather than reactive. There are many variations; see, for example, Gloria Willcox, "The Feeling Wheel," https://www.gottman.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-Gottman-Institute_The-Feeling-Wheel.pdf.

52. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 217.

53. Walshe, trans., "Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta," 22:335–350.

54. Jack M. Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, *The Way of Council* (Bramble Books, 1996).

service-learning, and group decision making. A framework I use in my classes to develop a contemplative environment is:

- Sit in a circle without a table for part of the class.
- Begin with ten minutes of meditation (students rotate leading).
- Check-in: Go around the circle and invite each person to briefly share what is happening in their body, heart, and mind, i.e., physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually.
- Recite an important section within a course text out loud together.
- Divide into dyads, each person reflects for two minutes: How do you see yourself as *khandhas*?

(3) Teaching Experientially

There are many ways to offer experiential teachings that inspire educators and learners to see each person's unique expression as Dharma. Learners may expect information and insight to be provided by educators, instead of looking within themselves to discover innate wisdom, hindrances, and resistance; educators can resist providing answers and giving advice. The below two methods outlined by Ly invite experimentation and storytelling.

The *Experimental Method* is used when skeptical or doubtful points are raised by learners. This method encourages learners to find the knowledge they seek by experimenting.[55] One experimental method I use is to invite students to call a relative or friend when there is a conflict, miscommunication, or disagreement to practice their reflective listening skills, which involves repeating what the person has said so that they feel heard, reflecting back their feelings, reflecting meaning, reframing, rephrasing, etc. to see if these methods actually work.

The *Narrative Method* makes use of telling stories and using parables to illustrate the Buddhist teachings (Dharma), as well as the cycle of life or the inherent nature of all things (*dharma*).[56] There are many ways to bring the spirit of experimentation and aspects of storytelling into the classroom. Using the raft parable and water snake simile, I might emphasize to students the value of first understanding themselves, their different identities, and their social conditioning and how the

55. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 215–216.
56. Ibid., 216.

*khandha*s function before cutting off delusion and jumping in to experience no-self. I often tell personal stories of what happened yesterday, last week, or ten years ago to model using the self to illustrate Dharma. Chaplaincy students present a Family or Cultural Map of intergenerational suffering, various forms of violence, death, or addiction, which helps everyone better understand different cultures, karma, and conditioning.[57]

(4) Teaching Ethically

Given the wide range of intersectionality and gaps among Buddhists in the US, it is important to ritualize a space.[58] Ethical frameworks in contemporary classrooms can create a container for learning that is inclusive and exploratory of multiple hermeneutics, practices, and viewpoints of *sīla*, precept, vow, and ethical conduct.[59] There are three methods outlined by Thich Vien Ly that are ethical in nature: *Regulation Method*, which uses ethical codes (*sīla*) that are not based on punishment but rather encourage discipline, safety, and trust; *Preventative Method*, which devises new codes of conduct to prevent misdeeds and misconduct that affect the individual and community well-being; and the *Silent Method*, which deliberates silence as a method of instruction; such silence reflects that the question or direction of inquiry may be unhelpful.[60] Ly refers to the parable of two arrows to illustrate how

57. R. W. Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family* (Fortress Press, 2005), 68–88. Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2014), xxviii.

58. Yuen, "Creating a Contemplative Classroom," 67.

59. For a few viewpoints on the vow and the three-fold training—*sīla*, practices to embody Buddhist ethics and use precepts as relational guideposts to take action in the world; *samādhi*, practices to develop concentration and contemplation within the body and the mind; and *prajñā*, practices that cultivate insights or wisdom to further integrate deeper, broader understandings of *sīla* and *samādhi*—see Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 150; Bodhi, *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, 57–98; and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, *Shantideva's "A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life"* (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2016), 42–47.

60. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 221–223.

pragmatics in a quest for knowledge can be unhelpful, and the often unanswerability of metaphysical questions.[61]

In my experience, silence in the classroom can provide space to listen, contemplate what is being asked, and process what has been voiced more deeply. Rather than regulation, I use learning frameworks to help students self-explore and develop autonomy and agency, and rubrics to communicate my expectations around learning, assessment, and grading. For preventative methods I facilitate the process of developing group agreements. Below is an example of how I integrate these three methods in chaplaincy classes to invite ethical reflexivity:

- Refrain from giving advice; employ methods that encourage self-inquiry.
- Create agreements around communication, power dynamics, safety, space, cultural differences, expression, conflict, etc.
- Honor silence, participate in group silence, identify different silences (e.g., active silence, passive silence, invitational silence, compassionate silence, awkward silence,[62] numb/fearful silence, etc.).
- Develop rubrics and create transparent learning frameworks that cultivate agency.

(5) Teaching Gradually

Ly outlines the *Advancing Progressively Method* as presenting Dharma in a cumulative manner, teaching through sequential numbering, images, examples, and so on, or organizing content in ways that logically help students move from simple to more complex concepts, from known to the unknown.[63] Course syllabi that include objectives, learning outcomes, activities, and rubrics; curriculum that gradually introduces ethics of body, speech, and thought via contemplative and reflexive

61. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Cūḷamālukya Sutta," in *Majjhima Nikaya: Khotbah-khotbah Menengah Sang Buddha* (DhammaCitta Press, 2013), 869; Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 222.
62. Anthony L. Back, Susan M. Bauer-Wu, Cynda H. Rushton, and Joan Halifax, "Compassionate Silence in the Patient–Clinician Encounter: A Contemplative Approach," *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 12, no. 12 (2009): 1113–1117.
63. Ho, *Beginning and Development of Buddhist Education in Vietnam*, 220–221.

activities; and having students voice their own learning goals are ways to design a cumulative approach for learning.

The *Deductive/Inductive Method* is when a teacher either (a) begins with an abstract idea and invites students to apply this idea to their experiences, or (b) begins with facts encountered within experience, and through observing, analyzing, interpreting, and understanding these facts learners build a framework to see themselves within the world more clearly. This inductive method of observing, analyzing, interpreting, and understanding the facts within an experience resembles scientific methods of observation. In science the focus is usually outward whereas in Buddhist philosophy or *abhidharma* teachings this inductive method and focus is introspective.[64] Introspection that involves examination of the five *khandha*s requires a practice of concentration, ethics, and insight, which can be challenging, causing resistance and hindrances to arise.

A way I teach this is through facilitating a Not-Knowing Exercise, where one person asks a series of questions that begin very concretely and gradually become more abstract and intimate. The other person can only answer "I don't know," no matter what is asked. For example: Do you have a head? ("I don't know"), Are you wearing glasses? ("I don't know"), Are you a good person? ("I don't know"), Do you like me? ("I don't know"), Are you afraid of dying? ("I don't know"), etc. This can bring nuance and intimacy to not-knowing in relationship and awareness of varying hermeneutics of perceptions, boundaries, nonverbal communication, identity, fear, trust, and resistance.

B. Practicing with Resistance

In 2009, I was invited to participate in a one-day street retreat with the Zen Peacemakers. A lot of fear and resistance arose in my body-mind. I found all kinds of reasons not to attend. I had many ideas about life on the streets, what this street retreat would be like, and challenges I might face. I felt afraid to confront these abstract ideas, to see for myself and learn from my own experience. As I began to take Buddhist chaplaincy students outside the classroom, and Zen students outside the temple gates, I saw similar fears and resistance arise in them. This led me to develop the below pedagogy and framework around how to practice with resistance in ways that enhance insights into *dukkha*,

64. Ibid., 219–220.

discomfort, trauma responses, self-regulation, and the Middle Way. The following section offers my integration of Thich Vien Ly's twelve methods outlined in the previous section with experiences of resistance that students may face.

In her article called "The Right to Resist: Philosophies of Dissent," Jinting Wu explores spirituality as a form of pedagogical resistance and transformation in school settings. Wu views spiritual practices such as contemplation and meditation as a pedagogy of unlearning and becoming. She discusses "how resistance, viewed in light of the radical re-mapping of subjectivity, shifts our attention from altering outside circumstances to the subject's own transformation by which to experience the world anew."[65] Wu also notes, "A small number of empirical studies have focused on connecting spirituality with diversity and equity concerns in the classrooms, and interrogated the ways spiritual expressions constitute anti-oppressive pedagogies and can precipitate social change through transforming human consciousness."[66] She sees resistance as an opportunity for self-transformation by shifting attention from outside circumstances to the complexities of the silent inner journey.[67]

What happens when resistance arises in the body, mind, or relationship? Is resistance a signal to go in another direction? To pause and look within? A sign to push through? Or wholeheartedly resist? There may be a self-protective urge to keep unfamiliar experiences at bay and under control. The courage to seek wisdom and stay with

65. Jinting Wu, "From Without to Within: Inner Transformation as a Pedagogy for Social Activism," *Journal of Contemplative and Holistic Education* 1, no. 2 (2023): 2; Jinting Wu, "Resistance Through Transformation: Spiritual Practices as a Pedagogy of Unlearning and Becoming," in *The Right to Resist: Philosophies of Dissent*, ed. M. Wenning and T. Byrne (Bloomsbury, 2023), 142.

66. Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan, "The Role of Spirituality in the Anti-Oppressive Higher-Education Classroom," *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 2 (2009): 121–131, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510902757138; Elizabeth J. Tisdell, "In the New Millennium: The Role of Spirituality and the Cultural Imagination in Dealing with Diversity and Equity in the Higher Education Classroom," *Teachers College Record* 109. no. 3 (2007): 531–560; Cynthia B. Dillard, Daa'Iyah Abdur-Rashid, and Cynthia A. Tyson, "My Soul is a Witness: Affirming Pedagogies of the Spirit," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13, no. 5 (2000): 447–462.

67. Wu, "Resistance through Transformation," 142–145.

Fig. 1. Colorized version of *Shihonhakubyoamidakoshozu,* Heian period, depicting Avalokiteśvara, Amitābha, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. This image is a photo taken by the author of a colorized reproduction at Dharma Rain Zen Center in Portland, OR.

resistance may feel foreign and difficult. Being with resistance may be extremely uncomfortable. Going beyond a cozy comfort zone of your constructed, conditioned self does not need to be like climbing a mountain, sky diving, or traveling to a foreign land. Rather it can be a culmination of many little decisions, tiny actions, micro-efforts, or small intentional changes.

Each person may have a different interpretation and response to resistance. What is yours? In the image below (fig. 1) the Buddhist practitioner is full of resistance as they are pushed by Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (compassion), pulled by Amitābha Buddha (pure life force), and invited by Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva (wisdom/protection) into awakening. When you feel a moment of resistance do you imagine these three bodhisattvas are at play within you? How do you interpret resistance? Where do you feel it in your body? Each of these bodhisattvas are aspects of you and not separate from you—what are you resisting?

Perhaps resistance is necessary for growth. If there is no resistance or tension, then there is no growth. It's like the story the Buddha explained about tuning a string instrument. If the strings are too loose, the sound will be very dull or have no sound at all. If the strings are too tight, the sound will be very acute, or the strings will break. Each of

us needs to discern this practice of not too tight and not too loose. We need to use all the ingredients, such as our conditioning, our trauma, our delusion, devotion, values, vows, and aspirations, to awaken. What are the ingredients within your resistance?

Some may feel resistance in the body and think, "No, I can't," while others may push through by thinking, "Yes, I will." Resistance may trigger dysregulation or a trauma response of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn,[68] igniting hyper-arousal (oversensitivity or emotional reactivity), or hypo-arousal (apathy, lack of sensation, or rigidity). Acute emotions like fear, anxiety, anger, panic, dread, numbness, and apathy may arise. How can we be with difficult feelings without feeling overpowered by them? How can we turn the light inward and practice interbeing with the five *khandhas*? The Buddhist Middle Path is a way to gain awareness and stretch our capacity to be with suffering. However, first you need to discover resistance, and then discern wisdom and delusion.

C. A Buddhist Window of Tolerance

The window of tolerance, a zone that lies between experiences of hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal, was coined by psychiatrist Dan Seigel to help people process intense emotions and response to stress in a regulated way.[69] In *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*, David Treleaven suggests using the Middle Path and the window of tolerance to observe and tolerate a range of emotions without exceeding each individual's capacity.[70] A Buddhist lens on the window of tolerance is a framework that I have found helpful when asking students to learn through experience, stretch within resistance, and voice their limitations. Most students who see the nature of their suffering cultivate the awareness to

68. Such extreme responses to resistance mirror Dan Siegel and David A. Treleaven's work on how trauma responses of hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal can be self-regulated by the person having them (see note 77, below). The next section goes into greater detail.

69. Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 3rd ed. (Guildford Press, 2020); David A. Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (WW Norton & Co., 2018), 91–97.

70. Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*, 87–90.

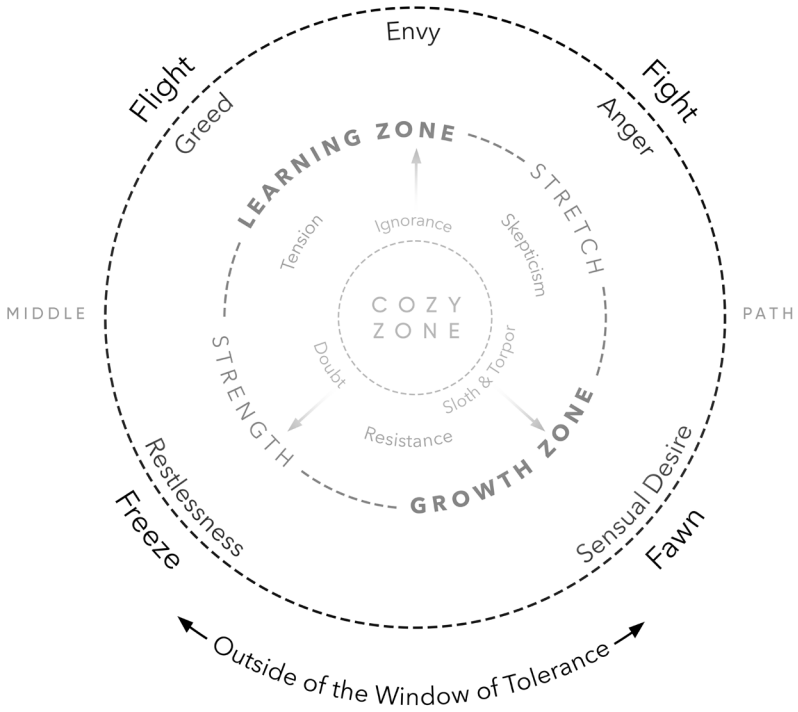

Fig. 2. Buddhist Window of Tolerance. Image designed by Sarah Ford, www.sarahfordcreative.com. Used with permission.

stay within their window of tolerance or notice when they are outside of it; this enhances their ability to self-regulate.

This may be challenging for those who experienced early-childhood, adolescent, or adult trauma.[71] Being sensitive to trauma is a good thing. The Middle Path encourages each person to find a Middle Way for themselves between the overindulgence of sensual pleasures and extreme asceticism of repression. The process of finding the Middle Way can strengthen the body-mind and cultivate the ability to be

71. "Any experience that is stressful enough to leave you feeling helpless, frightened, overwhelmed, or profoundly unsafe is considered a trauma." Pat Ogden, *Sensorimotor Psychotherapy: Interventions as for Trauma and Attachment* (Norton, 2015), 66.

comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. Stretching requires many small muscles and gently moving outside of the coziness of your comfort zone.

The Buddhist Window of Tolerance (BWOT) image (fig. 2), which I built on David Treleaven's work, outlines five ways of practicing with discomfort: (1) understanding your comfort zone, and what feels safe; (2) stepping out of what feels overly comfortable; (3) stretching within your window of tolerance; (4) noticing when you have moved outside of your window of tolerance; and (5) stepping back into your window of tolerance. This graphic is intended to start a conversation that helps learners communicate when they are within or outside their window of tolerance. It is not a one size fits all model, and the hindrances do not necessarily align with the trauma responses. See if you can use this framework as a dance floor to cultivate agency and discover wisdom within your resistance. Practice moving within the growth/learning zone without having a trauma response and without getting stuck in your cozy zone.

1. What Is My Comfort Zone?

A comfort zone is not a place of growth. Perhaps it is an overly cozy bubble-like space that is sequestered from aliveness. The story of the Buddha growing up within the palace walls is a good metaphor. There is comfort inside a palace, presumed safety engulfed in pleasures and privileges. There is most likely resistance to step out of comfort, change a daily routine, leave home, or go beyond what is known. Who will I be outside of these palace walls? For the Buddha, going outside the palace walls changed his whole life, career path, identity, and community. Merely standing at the edge of comfort can be a very difficult place. As illustrated in the image above (fig. 2), hindrances like ignorance, doubt, sloth, and torpor line the walls of this cozy comfort zone. Tension, skepticism, and resistance to stretch and find the strength to learn and grow might be uncomfortable. Hindrances can cause nervousness, complacency, numbness, anxiety, or fear of change. The mind may construct all kinds of stories about "the dangers out there" and ruminate on how "to stay safe." The inner shift needed to transform such ruminations and delusions may feel like climbing fortress

walls as opposed to passing through a gateless barrier. There must be an inner leap of faith to enter a learning and growth zone.

2. How Can You Step Out of Your Cozy Zone When Feeling Nervous or Afraid?

Just the thought of stepping out of a comfort zone can create barriers and blocks in the body-mind. Sensations, feelings, acute emotions, and negative thought patterns may instantly arise. This is a normal part of change. To truly live life in a way where there is aliveness and adventure takes tremendous trust. The Zen Peacemaker practice of "plunge" is like a call to action to take a plunge into the unknown! This is probably more appealing to adventure seekers; more cautious spiritual travelers may consider this a dip. Nonetheless, plunges or dips are both adventures into the present moment, where resistance easily arises. Thoughts may arise like, "I don't want to . . . be here . . . get wet . . . be cold . . . feel disoriented . . . make a mess of things . . . ," "It would be easier if I just didn't. . . ," or "This is . . . too much . . . unjust." How do we dance with such thoughts, be in movement with them, neither suppress nor attach to them? How do we engage with the sensations, feelings, emotions, blocks, and barriers that accompany thoughts? Many Buddhist primary resources and frameworks mentioned in this paper, such as the three-fold training of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*, are available to use.

3. How Can I Stretch into My Window of Tolerance Without Overstretching?

Learning to stretch within your window of tolerance is key to thriving in life. Dancing takes courage. Hindrances will be there. Trauma may arise in the middle of the dance floor, body-mind filled with sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts—how can we awaken in this challenging place? Using the Middle Path to stretch in a way that does not invoke overwhelm may take practice. How does it feel to stretch in ways that feel alive? If muscles are tight, it's important to be gentle, go slowly, breathe deeply, and ease into the stretch. Hindrances like anger, greed, sensual desire, envy, and restlessness line the outside edge of tolerance, so stretching too far, being too forceful, or pushing or pulling too hard may cause dysregulation. Overriding such signals in the body-mind can cause injury or harm; however, giving up the moment resistance arises, without trying to stretch at all, then what?

The body becomes more and more stiff, rigid, and inflexible. This can lead to spiritual maladies and unduly forms of pain and suffering.

For some, being at the edge of comfort is a stretch. For others being in dysregulation is a comfort zone. Trauma responses can arise physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. Maybe being still and serene is a stretch for you. When trauma arises, extra care is needed; this is a time to move slowly and tenderly while staying active. Maybe connecting with nature, walking barefoot on the earth, drinking a cup of tea, humming, deep breathing, saying, "Ahhhh," shaking, rocking back and forth, circling wrists, or singing is needed.[72] It is so important to be in the tension to develop strength and tolerance within the learning/growth zone—to extend and expand beyond who we think we are capable of being within each moment. Being with hindrances and seeing them as delusion develops strength. Learning how to develop such strength in the body-mind develops compassion and a greater capacity to be with immense suffering.

4. Notice When You Have Moved Outside of Your Window of Tolerance

You may easily stretch too far and find yourself dysregulated, off the dance floor, bumping into walls, and contending with all kinds of hindrances. Some signs of being outside of your window of tolerance may be physical (e.g., increased heart rate, body heat, flushed face); mental (e.g., ruminating, engaging in negative thinking, beating yourself up, character assassinating, blaming others, replaying a conversation/event over and over); or emotional (e.g., overwhelming regret, shame, guilt, obsession, fear, worry, or despair). The important thing is to notice that life stopped being fun, that a light challenge on the dance floor suddenly became a dark nightmare. Here you can practice gently and lovingly stepping back into your window of tolerance.

5. Stepping Back into Your Window of Tolerance

Learning happens when a stretch, push, or pull goes too far. The lotus blooms within muddy water. There is no lotus without the mud. It's important to be willing to get wet, be messy, and not seek perfection. It takes trust to allow others to push and pull us out of our comfort

72. For a comprehensive list of contemplative practice for self-regulation see Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Penguin UK, 2021), chaps. 10–14.

zone. The window of tolerance is a learning/growth zone, an active space that invites flexibility, connection, trust, and change. When you find yourself in a place of resistance, ask good questions, be curious, and explore the resistance. Allow this place of resistance to feel alive in your body, heart, and mind. In this way your life becomes a playful adventure!

CONCLUSION

Buddhism has a lot to offer the fields of education, social action, and spiritual care. Buddhism has a long history of cultivating many practical teachings, contemplative methodologies, and reflexive practices of various forms of concentration and awareness necessary to be present in body and mind. Thich Vien Ly illustrates how different Buddhist pedagogical approaches can be used to inform Buddhist education in various contexts for ethical development, insight, and to re-envision cultural gaps. I demonstrated ways to integrate Ly's compiled Buddhist-centered pedagogies into seminaries, universities, CPE programs, temples, and Dharma centers. Such educational approaches can offer fresh resources for co-learning, re-centering Asian pedagogies in which Buddhism arose, and cultivating intercultural learning environments.

At the same time, I recall Ouyporn Khuankaew's warning about romanticizing Asian Buddhist traditions.[73] She invited Buddhist leaders to be conscientious of the ways we hold and carry on Buddhist traditions, and to make sure to not also carry on the patriarchy, so that everyone has the opportunity to live an awakened life. Khuankaew encouraged us "to stop preaching" and explore how to facilitate people to wake up. She characterized those in marginalized positions, with seemingly no place in society or role in the sangha, to be the best teachers. The above approaches to Buddhist pedagogy can create containers for learning that emphasize deep listening, critical thinking, trauma-sensitivity, and intercultural care. As educators create spaces for students and teachers to meet in mutuality, innate wisdom will naturally arise, and

73. Ouyporn Khuankaew, "How Does/Should the International Aspect of Buddhist Ministry Inform Our Work?," Education and Buddhist Ministry: Whither—and Why? Conference, Harvard Divinity School, August 24, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmecdu8FMlA.

students will be empowered to gain their own insights, navigate stress, and find resiliency.