negotiation and conflict management research

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Negotiation and Conflict Management Research

How Do Buddhist Monks Frame Conflict? A Buddhist Approach to Paradox

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Keywords
paradox, conflict, cognitive boundary, Buddhism, ethnography, Korean Buddhist temple

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https://doi.org/10.34891/wy45-9f66

Abstract

Paradox theory proposes that some conflicts need not be mitigated or eliminated because conflicts can help people create synergy. In organizational studies, the concept of a paradox is typically theorized as a unique response to conflicts. Such a conceptualization allows organizational scholars to investigate how a paradox is manifested in one's decision-making. Deviating from the existing literature, this study develops an alternative approach to a paradox, particularly from a Buddhist perspective. To this end, I conducted a three-month ethnographic fieldwork in a Korean Buddhist temple that allowed me to investigate how Buddhist monks frame conflicts, dualities, and tensions that are central to Buddhist philosophy. While living and working closely with Buddhist monks, I found that the monks try to make sense of conflicts by deconstructing cognitive boundaries between opposing elements of conflicts, which, they believe, unconsciously cause tension in their minds. By theorizing this Buddhist perspective, this study contributes to individual-level paradox research.

Volume 15, Number 2, Pages 148-165

The world is full of conflicts, dualities, and tension (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Schad et al., 2016). The central thesis of a paradox suggests that the conflicts need not be feared or reviled, but rather should be embraced because the opposing elements of a conflict can "inform and define one another, tied in a web of eternal mutuality" (Schad et al., 2016, p. 6). Organizational scholars opting for a paradox perspective argue that contradicting elements that seemingly appear to operate independently are actually tightly connected and co-evolve interdependently (Lewis, 2000; Putnam et al., 2016). Therefore, the interrelated elements of a conflict can "exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382).

While most organizational paradox studies anchor on an organizational or macro-institutional level of analysis (Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016), a body of individual-level studies has investigated how managers embrace conflicts among different populations within an organization (Besharov, 2014; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007 Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Smith, 2014 Smith, 2014; Waldman & Bowen, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015; Zimmermann et al., 2018). These studies documented how individuals are willing to live with conflicts, and even use them to create synergy in their organizational settings.

Despite this surge in the literature, there is little research that investigates the cognitive mechanisms of a paradox. Existing studies tend to focus on the differences among individual responses to conflicts (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014). Because of the focus on the differences, little attention has been paid to the cognitive process of how individuals make sense of conflicts, cope with them, and finally convert them to paradoxes. Filling this gap requires research into one's mindset, mentality, or cognitive framing of conflicts, which still remains largely underexplored.

The Buddhist context could offer fresh insight into this question. To empirically immerse myself in the Buddhist context, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a Korean Buddhist temple (hereinafter, H-Temple) for three months. I tried to understand how Buddhist monks view, experience, and tackle conflicts while digging deeper into the potential cognitive mechanisms they use to address conflicts. Such a deep immersion allowed me to use informal conversations and dialogs with the monks and explore theoretical insights into paradoxes from a Buddhist perspective.

The findings reveal that H-Temple monks seek to deconstruct the cognitive boundaries of a conflict's opposing elements. They do so by questioning the ontological realities of separate categories, which I call boundary-destroying work. This boundary-destroying work decomposes the biased meanings, concepts, values, and moralities that inadvertently and unconsciously create linguistic boundaries in our mind, such as 'you and I,' 'success and failure,' 'better and worse,' 'business value and religious value,' and 'sacred and secular.' Based on this conceptualization, I developed the idea of Sunyata (Śūnyatā in Pāḷi) as a Buddhist approach to paradox.

The findings of this study contribute to individual-level paradox research in three ways. First, they show that paradox is essentially a cognitive process of how one mindfully detaches oneself from bias, prejudice, and attachment to a particular concept or meaning. Vince and Broussine (1996, p. 6) observed that "attachments provide individuals with a basic frame for meaning and relatedness." They argued that conflicts are reinforced through cognitive attachment to one of two contradicting elements. Aligned with this research, this study, by revealing Buddhist monks' worldview, shows how individuals can detach themselves from sources of conflicts that they mindlessly follow. Second, this study sheds light on the importance of boundaries in paradox research (Ashforth et al., 2000; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Scholars argue that creating clear cognitive boundaries helps people reduce conflicts, for example, between work and family (Rothbard et al., 2005), and personal identity and vocational identity (Kreiner et al., 2006). However, this study suggests that building boundaries may inadvertently create unnecessarily fine lines that discourage people from negotiating, integrating, and reconciling the contradictory elements of a conflict. Third, this study integrates paradox research with the concept of mindfulness, which has only recently received organizational scholars' attention (e.g., Kudesia, 2019). Integrating mindfulness into

paradox research enriches the study of individual-level paradox by explaining how a self-reflection process can help reframe conflicts.

This study begins with a review of the paradox literature. I narrow down the literature review to individual-level paradox research because this study focuses on cognition at the individual level. I then describe the methods and explain why H-Temple is a useful setting for this research. The findings are presented through a series of dialogs and ethnographic tales (Van Maanen, 2011). Finally, I explore Buddhist monks' worldview on conflicts and interrelate them with the notion of mindfulness.

Theoretical Background

Paradox as a Unique Response to Conflict

Organizational scholars have long investigated individuals' responses to conflicts (Jarzabkowski, & Lê, 2017; Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2015). The literature suggests that some managers may be able to realize potential synergies from contradictions and thus willing to accept them, whereas others may just want to avoid or simply ignore them (Hahn et al., 2014). This implies that there are different reactions among individuals. A compelling research question here is how individuals make sense of conflicts and handle them in their own organizational settings.

Three distinct streams are prominent in this research area. The first stream aims to theorize people's reactions to conflicts. For example, Lewis (2000) conceptualized six defensive and three proactive tactics used to respond to conflicts. Extending Lewis's work (2000), Lewis and Smith (2014) explicitly differentiated a strategic response from a defensive response. They argued that those strategically reacting to conflicts may likely embrace them as a source of potential synergy and creativity (i.e., a paradox). Other scholars have developed relevant constructs e.g., paradoxical mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018) to theorize a paradox as a unique response to conflicts.

Drawing upon the abovementioned theoretical works, the second stream of research particularly examines senior managers' paradoxical mindset, given that leaders are more frequently positioned to tackle contradicting demands in an organization (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith & Tushman, 2005). In the Chinese context, Zhang et al. (2015) coined a term, a paradoxical leader behavior, in which people with different values are coordinated effectively. Waldman and Bowen (2016) also conceptualized the notion of paradox-savvy leader, referring to someone capable of not only embracing conflicts for themselves but also of helping others with different identities to create new meanings from contradictory elements of conflicts. This line of research allows organizational scholars to examine the interactive dynamics between structure and cognition and between leaders' sensegiving and employees' reactions (e.g., Besharov, 2014; Gümüsay et al., 2020).

The third stream of research investigates whether people's reactions to conflicts change over time. It emphasizes the possibility that a paradox is something from which one can learn and develop. For example, Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) examined how individuals address contradicting demands from the market and public spaces by shifting their responses toward conflicts in organizing, belonging, and performing. In their model, individuals initially use defensive responses to conflicts, but they actively engage in and ultimately accept conflicts over time. The authors developed a specific term, "adjusting," defined as "recognition that the needs of both parties were important and interdependent, and thus that both had to be achieved" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 254). Similarly, Lüscher and Lewis's (2008) action research documented how the authors' interventions shifted managers' approach to conflicts related to organizational change and stability from a logical and rational approach to an intricate and paradoxical one, by allowing the managers to learn the value of accepting the opposing elements of conflicts.

Altogether, there have been three important implications of individual-level paradox studies. First,

some people are willing to engage in conflicts and embrace them in their organizational lives as being paradoxical, whereas others are unwilling to do so or simply ignore the conflicts. Second, the role of organizational leaders tends to be paradoxical, in that it involves coordination of contradictory organizational values, goals, and identities, as well as management of conflicts for themselves. Third, people may be able to learn to shift their reactions to conflicts from defensive to proactive. An overarching insight into these implications is that a paradox represents individuals' cognitive capacity that enables them to capture the interdependencies of contradictory elements and subsequently accept them to create synergy. These studies highlight how people differently react to conflicts, which is explained by the propensity of people to hold a paradoxical mindset (Hahn et al., 2014; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018).

Gap in the Individual-Level Paradox Literature: Paradox as a Cognitive Process

Prior studies have theorized different responses to handling conflicts. However, owing to the skewed attention toward the different styles, reactions, strategies, and tactics among individuals' responses to conflicts, there is little research that explores the cognitive mechanisms related to paradoxical mindset. This is especially relevant to the current debate on the ontology and epistemology of a paradox (Hahn & Knight, 2021; Smith & Tracey, 2016; Schad & Bansal, 2018; Raisch et al., 2018). If paradox is something cognitively constructed and not 'out there' to be discovered, it is important to know how paradox is constructed in one's mind and how it can persist in one's everyday life. This requires researchers to explore the cognitive mechanisms of a paradox, rather than theorizing the differences among reactions to conflicts.

While organizational-level research has extensively investigated the question by documenting structural processes in detail (e.g., Jay, 2013; Smith & Besharov, 2019), scholars have paid relatively little attention to the individual-level cognitive mechanisms. More research is needed to grasp the detailed process involved in the cognitive construction of paradox. Broadly, the cognition literature has long suggested that managers make decisions neither in a complete vacuum nor with full information and contextual data (Stubbart, 1989), but that they develop a set of mental templates for decision-making (Walsh, 1995). The mental template "reflects intuition and cognitive constructions of decision-makers" (Porac et al., 1989, p. 398). Within the paradox literature, Sharma and Bansal (2017) proposed that paradoxes are constructed in one's mind with the emergence of new mental templates.

I assume that the mental templates in the Buddhist context are unique because of the Buddhist meditation practice that trains Buddhist monks to develop a holistic worldview of conflicts. In the Buddhist meditative tradition, phenomena are assumed to arise from multiple, intertwined conditions and causes, which is often expressed in the dependent co-arising or dependent origination theory. The theory represents complex, interconnected relationships among individual phenomena or attributes, rather than sequential causal chains between phenomena (Macy, 1991). In fact, a number of theoretical works suggest that Buddhism's central theses can be useful in reframing a dynamic view of dualities and contradictions that are core to the paradox theory (e.g., Husgafvel, 2018). Meanwhile, organizational scholars have also investigated how Eastern philosophy e.g., Daoism can be linked to paradox research in various organizational contexts (Chen, 2008; Fang, 2012; Li, 2012). Building on some of these studies, I explore a Buddhist way of mental representation that may help people reshape contradicting elements of conflicts.

Method

Research Site

To investigate the conflict between spirituality and secularity that Buddhist monks confront in their

daily lives, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in H-Temple for three months, from May to July 2015. H-Temple is one of the largest and most ancient temples in Korea. It was established approximately 1,300 years ago and has achieved the Chong-Lim status.[1] The Chong-Lim status is highly regarded in Korean Buddhist society because of its strict requirements for ordainment, systematic education, and long history. Among the 940 registered Korean temples in 2013, only eight have achieved the Chong-Lim status.

Data Sources

Participant Observation

The participant observations were the primary data sources of this study. To observe the monks' day-to-day life closely, I tried to immerse myself completely into the monastic life and donned the monks' attire as a gesture of my stay as a novice monastic at H-Temple. To record my observations, I carried around a notebook and documented important events, stories, and tactics that monks used to deal with conflicts. I summarized observations made during my monastic life in a diary around 8 pm to 10 pm every evening. A brief description of the daily schedule is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Example of My Daily Schedule at H-Temple

Time	Activity
3:30 a.m. – 4:00 a.m.	Waking up
4:00 a.m. – 5:30 a.m.	Morning worship in the main worship hall
5:30 a.m. – 6:30 a.m.	Breakfast at the multi-purpose Buddha Hall
6:30 a.m. – 7:00 a.m.	Cleaning of a big garden in the temple
7:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.	Morning tea with Monk H
9:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon	Work or meditation with monks in and out of the temple
12:00 noon – 12:30 p.m.	Lunch at the multi-purpose Buddha Hall
12:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.	Work or meditation with monks in and out of the temple
5:00 p.m. – 5:20 p.m.	Dinner at the multi-purpose Buddha Hall
5:20 p.m. – 6:20 p.m.	Walking around the mountain
6:20 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.	Talking with monks for research development
9:00 p.m.	Going to bed

In-Depth Interviews and Informal Conversations

I also conducted 29 formal interviews with monks. Among the 62 monks in the temple, only 29 monks consented to be interviewed. Most interviews were conducted in the monks' rooms where I made tea together with the monks, drank it extremely slowly, and washed teacups. The process of making tea allowed the opportunity to start a conversation. After trust had been established, the interviews were long and friendly. Unplanned informal conversations also revealed dee insights into the emotions, stress, and frustrations of the conflicts experienced by these monks. To capture their experience, I noted not only

[1] In Chinese characters, *Chong* (叢) refers to being total or complete, and *Lim* (林) means forest.

what was spoken but also recorded the non-verbal actions and periods of silence, as these non-actions also convey information about the monks' knowledge, values, belief systems, and attitudes.

Archival Documents

Two types of archival documents were analyzed in this study. First, the historical records of H-Temple were used. H-Temple has set up a museum to display its cultural assets and records, which is governed by an independent committee. With the help of the museum's curator, I was granted access to H-Temple's historical records. comprised H-Temple's written history, prior master monks' writings, and a few photographs. Second, I supplemented the omission of voice and text records by collecting the monks' meditation diaries. Most monks wrote about their meditation progress upon entering ordainment. Some of them elaborated on the details of their daily experiences and intense meditation progress. I collected three diaries and photocopied 183 pages of narrative text from the diaries (single-spaced notes).

Data Analysis

During the data analysis process, I repeatedly iterated between field data and relevant literature to develop a grounded theory of the Buddhist approach to a paradox (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Van Maanen, 2011). Field researchers have long suggested that the aim of a grounded theory could be either to reveal differences among multiple research participants (or cases) or to capture commonalities that may be transferable to other settings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Suddaby, 2006). The aim of this study was the second one, because I was interested in theorizing what we can call "Buddhistic". Accordingly, all the field data were analyzed to capture a unique mentality commonly reflected in the data from the 29 H-Temple monks.

Theorizing a paradox from the perspective of Buddhist monks was, however, challenging since much of the data were non-verbal and often highly esoteric. In other words, the use of traditional approaches to text analysis was not useful. For this reason, I shifted my analytical approach from a positivistic traditional text-based analysis to a more interpretive one (Vaara et al., 2016). In this empirical setting, it is important to know how meanings, often highly implicit and complex, are constructed through both linguistic and non-linguistic communicative tools. It is an interpretive approach that directs researchers' attention to various forms of communication that "play a central role in the social construction of organizational reality" (Vaara et al., 2016, p. 505). Thus, instead of reducing a vast array of evidence to axiomatic codes, I tried to offer a think description of the narratives by weaving my experiences with the monks' stories.

Specifically, I attempted to capture the sources of conflicts, tension, and dualities that H-Temple monks face in their monastic lives. Over time, I found that the conflicts they experience emanate from two sources: boundary-drawing to perceive the world and unconscious perception of linguistic contradictions. These findings motivated me to investigate the other aspect of the data—the monks' worldview of conflicts. The worldview emerged, as I focused on how monks deconstructed cognitive boundaries generated by their everyday language use.

Results

Overview

The Buddhist meditation practice is an intellectual and solitary journey to see the world without any bias and attachment. Other aspects of life, such as material well-being, mental well-being, friends and family, and even missionary work, are miscellaneous issues that are neither urgent nor salient in the life of

Buddhist monks. They spend their meditative activities aiming to solve a single question, and it is this single question that anchors them in this world.

Since meditation is a core practice in Buddhist organizations, I initially wanted to understand why monks practice meditation and how it relates to the conflict they face at the intersection of spirituality and secularity. In the early stages of the fieldwork, I mostly talked with Monk S, Monk H, and other senior H-temple monks about this issue. Yet, I often failed to understand what exactly the monks were trying to achieve and why their pursuit of finding answers would even lead them to abandon their secular life and family. It turned out that the difference in my worldview and the monks' worldview was so large that understanding their mentality was highly challenging.

Owing to such problems, I decided to participate in focused meditation at H-Temple to acquire novice knowledge of meditation and to demonstrate my sincerity to the monks. Because I could not fully follow the monks' meditation schedule, I partially shadowed them and practiced meditation only in the afternoon. After a week, I joined H-Temple Master Monk B's meditation program at the Seoul Medication Center for 10 days.

As they became aware of my participation in the meditation program, three senior monks and two junior monks at H-Temple agreed to speak to me. I also spoke to seven senior monks who had been introducing meditation to people. These senior monks shared their meditation diaries with me. The data exposed two sources of conflicts confronted by H-Temple monks: boundary-drawing to perceive the world and unconscious perception of linguistic contradictions. Table 2 offers selective quotes from conversations with the monks and their meditation diaries.

Table 2

Selected Evidence of Conflicts Monks Confront in Their Monastic Lives

Types of tension	Selected evidence
Boundary-drawing to perceive the world	**Informal interview quotes (I)** "We need to draw boundaries to perceive what we want to see from what we do not want to see. This is the essential source of conflicts." "We must build a boundary between physical elements. This is a natural process to cognize external things. Yet, the problem is that we create unnecessary boundaries that create dualities, which inevitably generates conflicts."
	Monk meditation diary (D) "Why do people think that they are different from each other? At the end of the day, we are the same species." "That's right. I am distinguishing humans from other species. That is another boundary I make." "So much separation is out there, and so many boundaries dwell in my mind. Living without separation rather gives me wisdom and freedom."

	Conversation (C) "There is only one teaching that there is only one open oneness. However, we all are born to separate things to sense things. The separations create all the ethics, justice, and values, which in turn create all the conflicts people suffer. Now, I realize that it is our nature to separate this world." "All conflicts actually rise from the fact that we build boundaries between ourselves and all the others. We never understand how closely we and the other things are connected."
	Observation (O) "The teaching [non-separation] is very simple. Indeed, it is hard to live with it. I hope all of you will at least try however. See things as they are, before you make meanings in your mind. Don't make meanings." [Anonymous monk A1 preaching in a public space]
Unconscious perception of linguistic contradictions	**Informal interview quotes (I)** "Why are there so many conflicts? That is because of the language we use. We separate 'you' and 'I' by creating the words 'you' and 'I'." "What I realize through this life is that we suffer so much from unnecessary things that we create by ourselves. All our thoughts and ideas are not real. It is merely created by language."
	Monk meditation diary (D) "When I say 'I' and when I think of 'I,' 'non-I' is created. How can I know myself without saying and thinking of 'I'? How can I think about something without using language?" "It is ironic that learning happens only through language. But, language always creates bias." "I should have kept a child's mindset that does not separate 'right' from 'wrong.' Children indeed don't separate people and fight for values."
	Observation (O) "How are biases created by language? I caution that we all should be careful about speaking and thinking. Language delivers our message, but it unconsciously creates misunderstandings." [Anonymous monk A2 preaching in a public space] There was only silence between the ethnographer and an anonymous monk in a 20-minute interview. [Anonymous monk A3 preaching in a public space]

Boundary-Drawing to Perceive the World

H-Temple monks believe that conflicts are cognitively constructed in one's mind. According to them, people unconsciously draw boundaries to perceive the external world and then infuse opposite meanings to the two differentiated elements. This process occurs when people habitually infuse meanings to the natural world, which inevitably distorts the natural world into a social one. Zerubavel (1993, p. 5) described that "we transform the natural world into a social one by carving out of it mental chunks we then treat as if they were discrete, totally detached from their surroundings." H-Temple monks claim that this boundary-making process creates conflicts. From the Buddhist perspective, the drawn boundaries even cause attachment to one side and then generate suffering (Rāhula, 1974). In this study, I found that one of the reasons H-Temple monks meditate is to deconstruct such boundaries that are firmly embedded in human nature.

Early on in the fieldwork, I wanted to know how conflicts and Buddhism are related. A conversation with a senior H-Temple monk forced me to rethink the question. What he offered to me was important evidence about the monks' worldview, which related to how Buddhist monks make sense of physical entities.

Monk A: We are meditating in a temple, but that does not mean that we abandon our life as a human. Our bodies live in this world. We eat, drink, feel, and see. We get sick as well. We also see the secular world and worry about people's suffering.
Me: Why, then, do you not get out of the monastery [to help people]? Why do you stay here?
Monk A: Why should I do so?
Me: [pause] I mean why do you not share what you have realized with people?
Monk A: Why should I do so?
Me: Your realization can guide people, whether it is about spiritual value, liberalization, love, or anything good. Do you not want to share it with other people? I am curious why you stay here all the time.
Monk A: Do you think Mother Teresa is a good person?
Me: Yes.
Monk A: Why?
Me: Because she devoted her entire life to helping others.
Monk A: Why is helping others a good deed?
Me: [pause] Because through that, she helped others live in a better world.
Monk A: Yes, but what makes you think that it [helping others] is good?
Me: [silence]
Monk A: Feelings, logic, emotions, whatever your philosophy is, it is void. Morality is socially invented; therefore, it is void. Why should you be sad when your mother dies? Is it not a natural process? Why is life always better than death? Why should you be sad knowing very well that everybody will die someday?
Me: [being provocative] That does not make sense to me. Also, your comparison between death and life is different from the case of Mother Teresa. We have a natural inclination to help others, don't we? What then is the difference between humans and animals, stones, and trees?
Monk A: Stones and trees do not move, think, and feel. However, we do. That is the difference. This is the source of the agony and tragedy that we face.

Other conversations with H-Temple monks followed a similar pattern. Although the conversations were often too esoteric to analyze, there was one common salient aspect. The monks rejected what they

sensed through the outside world because they believed that human senses, logic, and other human-invented epistemologies, including morality and value, are essentially unreliable. They seemed to challenge, through their meditation practice, the physical entities that people see, smell, and taste. Through the meditation practice, H-Temple monks became skeptical of the outside world. They tried to discard prior knowledge and experience.

Another important conversation that I had in H-Temple supports this interpretation. H-Temple monks tended to see the secular world as an enormous desire-based system in which desire governs human behavior. Yet, they thought of the Buddhist monastery as an organizational system that could offer a setting where they could escape from desire. Monk D wrote in his diary: "If the ultimate aim of human beings is happiness, then what is happiness? People say that it is the satisfaction of the five senses. It is satisfaction of desire … But, that is not true. The satisfaction of desire causes attachment and suffering." This note motivated me to explore the relationship between human desire and the secular world. To further discuss the concern, I went to meet Monk G, who had been meditating for more than a decade.

> **Monk G:** Desire is really an ironic thing. It brings happiness but also makes human beings fall into suffering. Once, you fall into this swamp, others start to look like competitors who desire what you think should have been yours. If all people think that way, the world out there [secular society] will become an arena of constant struggle where people only follow their desires. However, the sad thing is that people do not realize that desire is the source of suffering.

Meanwhile, an anonymous H-Temple monk wrote:

> All organisms crave their survival. They hunt only when they are hungry. However, humans are different. A human's craving never stops. … The thing that sustains human society is not only the craving for survival, but also craving for obtaining something more. The craving plays the role of an engine in moving human civilization forward, but ultimately leads to destruction.

H-Temple monks explained that human desire gives rise to hedonism, and is the ultimate source of conflict. It separates one from the others (e.g., 'you' and 'them') by building boundaries against them.

One day, Senior Monk V narrated a story to me to elucidate this point further. He introduced me to a particular meditation technique called void sight meditation. The void sight meditation aims to reduce sexual desires. More than 1,000 years ago, ancient Buddhist monks in South Asia focused on the dead body of a young woman for a very long time. As her flesh decomposed, bugs started inhabiting the body, and it gave a foul smell. These negative images associated with a woman got implanted in the monks' minds. In addition, through a repetitive thought experiment, the monks imagined a disfigured woman whose breast was placed on her forehead and her eyes were on her abdomen. This visualization motivated the monks to question why people respond sexually to a certain shape of a woman's body, face, or breast. Senior Monk V said:

> **Monk V:** Some tribal men sexually respond to obese women, long-necked women, or women with big ears. We should question why we automatically react to a particular shape of a woman's body. Why does cognition automatically connect our sexual desires to a certain body shape? And, since when?

Eventually, ancient monks asked themselves why they responded sexually to a certain shape of a woman's body or a young woman's naked body. According to the void sight meditation, the body is just a random collection and assemblage of body parts. This thought experiment shows that even sexual desires

are externally driven. The monks believe that there is no such thing as an aesthetically perfect body shape. Senior Monk A commented on void sight meditation as follows:

> **Monk A:** In fact, void sight meditation is a very old style of meditation practice to realize that there is no separation, and there is no (physical) reality constructed by your five senses. If you realize why there is no physical separation, you will see that your conception of language creates separations like forehead and hair [pointing to his own forehead and hair]. It is what you have learned, which separates the world from yourself.

Four hundred years ago, René Descartes, a French philosopher, undertook a thought experiment. He concluded that his being cannot be challenged because he is the one thinking. However, H-Temple monks even challenge their very existence. They argue that their physical selves are defined by unstable human senses. I discussed René Descartes with Monk C.

> **Monk C:** There are numerous comments about him (René Descartes), but what he found through his thought experiment was 'ego.' He realized that the ego exists against the world. He believed that the ego is essentially different from the world. However, we do not try to differentiate the ego from the world. By being skeptical about the world, we can also be skeptical about the self, our body, or whatever defines ourselves. Finally, we aim to see that the self [pointing at himself] who is thinking and talking to you is not even a true reality that we want to see as a being.

According to Monk C, the boundary between the human body (or being) and the external world is not drawn. Monk C noted that the boundary creates a worldview that drives humans to exploit the world.

Unconscious Perception of Linguistic Contradictions

Not only do H-Temple monks try to avoid drawing cognitive boundaries in their mind, but they also question *linguistic boundaries* defined in this study as linguistic demarcations that separate normative values, such as the notions of justice from injustice, rightness from wrongness, and morality from amorality, which are all conceptualized by human language. They further claim that conflicts in many cases are merely rhetoric that people unconsciously communicate by building the linguistic boundaries. Empirically, just as the H-Temple monks deconstruct a woman's body in their imagination, they also deconstruct people's everyday use of language.

For example, in the third month of the fieldwork, I was informed that I could have an extremely rare opportunity to meet H-Temple's venerable Monk Y. I was told that in the presence of Monk Y, I must not speak, but wait for the monk to speak first. One day, Monk S finally set up a meeting with Monk Y, and I was given about 20 minutes with the monk in his room. However, in the meeting, Monk Y did not speak, and I also remained silent. The meeting ended without any conversation, and the only observation I made was that Monk Y's movements were extremely slow and he behaved as if I was not present in the room. As no conversation took place, there was no text (language) to analyze.

Over time, I came to realize that language is not necessary to know each other. Monk Y probably wanted to teach that the omission of language can allow us to know each other in a better way. I tried to understand the meaning of the silence by talking to Monk H. He immediately smiled and provided an insight into linguistic separations in our conversation.

> **Monk H:** What do you study?
> **Me:** I am studying business.

Monk H: So, you study how to make more money?
Me: Actually, it is the opposite. I am studying how to create a good firm. Many people are interested in the research area.
Monk H: [Silence] Then, why are there so many bad firms?
Me: [pause] That is why I am here. I am studying sustainability. That is, I want to answer how to maintain material well-being for the next generation.
Monk H: Is the sustainability you are talking about possible only if human civilization collapses?

During the conversation, I learned that Monk H stripped values that people superimpose on things. For Monk H, sustainability was only a human-invented concept, which was exclusively based on human rationality, sense, love, and morality. Sustainability is defined as a form of development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Management scholars assume that sustainability or sustainable development is preferable to unsustainability. Yet, the monk pointed out that the concept of sustainability is merely a linguistically constructed concept.

Monk B similarly elaborated that "if other organisms, such as animals, plants, and insects could speak, they may not want to coexist with human." Related to the meaning of sustainability, Monk K and I discussed the reality of the world. Monk K commented, "Imagine the world is merely a reflection. What you see, feel, smell, and touch are not real, but merely a reflection of something that you linguistically speak of which does not actually exist." Finally, he asked me, "what is the sustainability?"

In the meantime, Monk N told me that "people construct unnecessary values through the language they use, whether it is scientific or the language of everyday use." As such, H-Temple monks aim to rid themselves of bias and meanings that surface through language. For example, whether sustainability is valid compared with non-sustainability is not even an important question. Mindless engagement with this question just results in unnecessary attachment and obsession with human survival, sacrificing other species and natural environment.

A set of H-Temple scholarly monks I interviewed claimed that epistemology determines ontology. The language people use may help them communicate differences in what they see, but those differences are also imposed on reality. The monks sought to strip away cognitive constructions that included different meanings and interpretations of reality. One anonymous H-Temple monk asked, "Why should I pursue sexual desire, appetite, money, and long life?" He said that one could ask this question differently: "Why should I pursue friendship, asceticism, social good, and morality?" He consistently denied the separation between these contradictory words and between the opposite meanings behind the words.

Both Monk H and Monk V described how language creates two opposite meanings that unconsciously generate dualities, tension, and conflicts. People construct words that separate such as 'justice' from 'injustice', 'you' from 'me', 'love' from 'hate', and 'morality' from 'immorality'. Language creates such categories. These categories assign positive or negative values to concepts, ideas, or thoughts. H-Temple monks try to escape from this cognitive process and dissolve such boundaries by not drawing them in the first place.

At some point, I observed that some of the monks at H-Temple want to return to their childhood. They were trying to learn how to cognize the world without linguistically separating objects and ideas. Monk C finished his conversation with me by saying that:

Monk C: The deeper people empty their minds, the more they can embrace others. I think we try to remove all colors we have and finally want to make our mind purely transparent. Once it becomes transparent, we have the power to embrace other colors without any bias.

Eventually, I became curious to know what the monks thought about the conflict between the temples' business activities (e.g., tourism) and meditation practices (e.g., silence), which are critical for the temple's growth and survival. Fortunately, I was able to attend a lecture by H-Temple's revered meditation monk, Monk J. I was surprised to see that his face lacked any expression. After the lecture, I had a rare opportunity to talk to Monk J.

Me: I felt that your voice was monotonous and slightly passionless. I mean it was very calm. Were you also doing meditation as you preached?
Monk J: Monks are respected by the community. However, monks are also human beings. Like many other people, monks also want to build a reputation. They love their work (preaching and lectures) may want to be popular. This is obsession, which is a poison. How can you avoid that? Do not infuse whatever you think meaningful into what you are doing. If you completely detach yourself from it, you will be free. You will no longer feel that you need to gain a reputation to spread Buddha's teaching.
Me: From my observations, I think that some monks have created a boundary between Buddhism and business. Indeed, I realize that it is difficult to engage in both at the same time.
Monk J: Do not try to think that Buddhism and business are valuable. Do not infuse your meaning or value with these ideas. Do exactly the opposite. You can see no difference among Buddhism, business, and any other thing. See an object without any bias. It is you who draws a line.

Monk J explained that doing something without passion does not mean doing nothing. I realized that H-Temple monks try not to see contradictions arising from conflicts between Buddhism and business because they avoid assigning any positive or negative meanings that linguistically frame what business and Buddhism represent.

Discussion

In this study, I explored how Buddhist monks view, experience, and make sense of conflicts. By deeply immersing myself into the monks' day-to-day monastic life, I found that Buddhist monks critically rethink existing concepts, ideas, notions, and values that, they believe, inevitably contribute to the formation of conflicts in our mind. In this section, I interpret the findings, using the notion of mindfulness, and then describe the study's contributions to paradox research.

Buddhist Mindfulness Approach to a Paradox

The findings of this study show that H-temple monks deconstruct cognitive boundaries between the opposing elements of conflicts. Their narratives describe that these opposing elements stem from separations, particularly when people perceive physical entities and unconsciously use language to depict them. The monks try to deconstruct these cognitive boundaries by being mindful of their perception and language. They believe that the boundaries create unnecessary attachments to certain objects, concepts, ideologies, and moralities. Without these boundaries, there is no separation, and without separation, there is no conflict. There is only an empty space.

These findings, along with my interpretation, now direct us to investigate a potential mechanism of how the monks' meditation practices are linked to their boundary-destroying works (Ashforth et al., 2000; Barrett & Oborn, 2010; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In pursuing this linkage, I integrate the findings with the notion of mindfulness, given that mindfulness is a core concept in Buddhism, which has been practiced and advanced over the last 2,500 years (Anālayo, 2019a, 2019b; Purser & Milillo, 2015; Weick & Putnam,

2006). In Buddhist monastic community, the notion of mindfulness is often identical to meditation practice (Anālayo, 2019b). Although the aim of meditation differs, practicing meditation essentially means being mindful to how our mind works, and further how the mind captures the external world (Anālayo, 2019b). It is typically understood that the ultimate aim of all meditation techniques is to be aware of a state of mind and the external world without any bias (Rāhula, 1974).

In academia, cognitive psychologists define mindfulness as a data-interpretation process that enables people to sense, interpret, and organize mindfully external data such as environmental incidents, events, and changes (Langer, 1989; Langer et al., 1978; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindfulness refers to individuals' cognitive capacities used to polish the meanings they assign to their experiences (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003; Kudesia, 2019). A key theoretical concern here is the role of the conceptual categories in assigning meanings. In day-to-day lives, people create conceptual categories to encode, interpret, and organize all sensory experiences to give particular meanings to their experiences (Langer & Moldavian, 2000). The linguistically created conceptual categories then enable people to decide which categories they use to interpret the raw data. The filtered data are then categorized as 'clean or dirty,' 'good or bad,' 'right or wrong,' 'safe or dangerous,' 'us or them,' 'justice or injustice,' and so forth.

While mindfulness research from this Western perspective claims that making such conceptual categories helps people to process external data quickly, the perspective of H-Temple monks offers a similar-yet-opposing view. H-Temple monks view conceptual categories as inadvertently creating biases. H-Temple Monk L mentioned, "If you finally remove all the boundaries and separations in your mind, what remains is just a big circle. It is empty. There is nothing you can conceptualize and assign meanings and values to." This suggests that to be completely mindful of conflicts, people may even need to dismantle the existing conceptual categories they have unconsciously built, accumulated, and reinforced over time.

In Buddhist monks' communities, the boundary-deconstructing works are conceptualized as *Sunyata* (*Suññatā* in Pāḷi). While Sunyata is translated to mean nothingness, emptiness, and vacuity in the academic community, Buddhist monks define it as a mental state known as liberalization, enlightenment, or *Nirvana* (*Nibbāna* in Pāḷi) (Rāhula, 1974). It is a worldview that gives us the ability to shape their world without bias. Figure 1 presents the Buddhist symbol that graphically represents emptiness—no separation and no boundary.

Figure 1

Symbol of Buddhist Sunyata: Emptiness

Contributions and Implications

In this study, I explored the Buddhist context to show how meditation helps people address conflicts with mindfulness. The findings show that Buddhist monks redefine the particular meanings, concepts, and values attached to elements of conflicts that people mindlessly attend to, recognize, and interpret using their own conceptual categories. As below, I further articulate how these findings can specifically contribute to the paradox literature.

Individual-level paradox research has investigated how individuals manage, react to, and experience conflicts (Putnam et al., 2016). The studies reveal individuals' multiple responses to conflicts (Lewis, 2000). In doing so, scholars theorize a paradox as a unique response to conflict. They argue that managers who comfortably embrace conflicts may have a paradoxical mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018) and use paradoxical frames (Hahn et al., 2014). However, owing to the skewed attention to the different reactions among individuals, little research has explored the cognitive mechanisms of how paradoxical mindsets work; that is, how a paradox is constructed in one's mind.

This study contributes to the abovementioned area of inquiry. The findings reveal that meditation practice may play a significant role in removing firmly rooted conceptual categories that people build to access external data. While the conceptual categories are useful, they inadvertently and unconsciously create biases to particular meanings and values. This study suggests that Buddhist meditative mindfulness is an important cognitive process. It helps people deconstruct a specific set of concepts, notions, and meanings created by the conceptual categories they often mindlessly attach to their organizational life.

Conclusion

Conflicts are omnipresent in organizational life. Individuals have different aims, desires, and value systems that inevitably create conflicts, contests, and bruising politics in various organizational settings (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Glynn, 2000). This study illuminates the role of mindfulness and develops the notion of Sunyata in reframing the nature of conflicts people face in day-to-day organizational life. By exploring Buddhist monks' worldview, it suggests that rethinking linguistic separations manifested in our daily language use helps us remove cognitive boundaries that are deeply built in our minds and thereby eliminate the opposing elements of conflicts.

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