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

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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.

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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.

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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