Ocean of Suffering, Ocean of Compassion: Person, Environment, Self, and World in Social Work and Zen Buddhism

Siddhesh Mukerji

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Buddhist mythology includes tales of travelers who, in their hour of need, encounter bodhisattvas who share their compassionate wisdom in acts of kindness. When I reflect on my own journey, it is striking to me how many beings have enriched my life with their generosity and warmth. This project is a fruit of their benevolence.

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During the public defense of this dissertation, an audience member asked, “What advice do you have for other students who wish to pursue an original topic?” My response, now, after reflection: Find an exceptional committee! I am inexpressibly grateful to Katherine Tyson McCrea, whose fathomless encouragement, patience, and brilliance enabled my inchoate notion to grow into a real study. I am likewise grateful to Jim Marley, whose steady, affirming way of being serves as an example to me both in academia and in the living of life. Finally, it has been an honor and a joy to learn from Christopher Ives, whose work is such a source of inspiration to me.
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For you, the reader.
May you, I, and all beings ever grow together in wisdom and compassion.
— Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Ocean Within*
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ABSTRACT

The person-in-environment perspective (PIE) is a foundational element of social work, and the way in which we interpret the person-environment relationship profoundly shapes our understanding of social work practice. However, a lack of research that systematically explores how unique worldviews interpret the person-environment relationship limits the field’s ability to grow from humanity’s manifold ways of being and knowing. This study helps fill this gap by illuminating: (1) How Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world; (2) How this understanding of relationship guides their work, and; (3) How this understanding of relationship alters social work’s conceptualization of “person-in-environment” and “practice.” Buddhist perspectives can help expand social work’s philosophical diversity and provide fresh insights for the field because, while both social work and Buddhism are frameworks for responding to suffering, they often approach this goal from radically different worldviews. To illuminate this topic, I conducted standardized, open-ended interviews with a purposive sample of 35 Zen teachers in the United States. This research was guided by Baert’s (2005) neo-pragmatist paradigm, employed a thematic analysis approach to interpreting interview data, and culminates in three theoretical propositions: bodyheartmindworld, oceanic compassion, and being-action. Bodyheartmindworld is a vision of the self-world relationship in which all beings are unique, yet inseparable, manifestations of a dynamic, whole reality. Oceanic compassion describes the impulse to serve others that arises from a recognition that all beings are
manifestations of the same reality and, thus, are intertwined in existence and fate. Being-action describes a mode of responding to suffering in which one’s own being is a vital conduit for the skills and knowledge that one attempts to offer in service.
CHAPTER ONE

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This chapter describes the study’s background, the problem in social work to which it responds, and its potential contributions. First, I review the definition and historical development of the person-in-environment perspective (PIE). I raise the issue that, although there is no agreed-upon interpretation of person-in-environment, the way in which we interpret the person-environment relationship profoundly shapes our understanding of social work practice. I illustrate this point using the examples of ecosocial work and breath of life theory. Relatedly, I state the problem to which this study responds: Social work’s inattention to diverse interpretations of the person-environment relationship has failed to harness the richness of humanity’s many ways of being, thus impoverishing theory and practice. I propose that the significance of this study is that it illuminates perspectives on the person-environment relationship that are informed by Zen Buddhism. My claim is that exploring Buddhist thought and practice holds promise because, like social work, Buddhism is a framework for understanding and responding to suffering. However, Buddhist perspectives are grounded in a unique understanding of the self-world relationship, and so such an exploration may yield a new interpretation of person-in-environment. I conclude by noting this study’s theoretical framework and research questions.
The Person-in-Environment Perspective: Definition and Historical Development

The daily efforts of social workers, who number more than 713,000 in USA alone (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020, p. 1), focus on responding to issues such as poverty, homelessness, substance addiction, psychological trauma, domestic and community violence, sociopolitical oppression, and manifold other forms of human suffering. Social work activities, while varying greatly and ranging in scope from individual psychotherapy to federal policy change, find a common ethos in the field’s foundational person-in-environment perspective (PIE). Rather than functioning as a “perspective among perspectives” in social work, PIE is widely accepted as a hallmark of social work practice and one of the features that helps distinguish the field among the helping professions (Hare, 2004). The Encyclopedia of Social Work defines PIE as “a practice-guiding principle that highlights the importance of understanding an individual and his or her [sic, throughout] behavior in light of the various environmental contexts in which that person lives and acts” (Kondrat, 2013, p. 1). In other words, individuals’ strengths and struggles simultaneously shape and are shaped by interpersonal relationships, culture, economics, history, governmental policies, and myriad other aspects of extra-personal reality, or “the environment.”

Historical Development

The dual focus on addressing personal and environmental issues has been a feature of social work since the field’s inception and was an important element of the pioneering efforts of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. Addams, an eminent figure in the work of Hull House and the settlement movement, collaborated with an interdisciplinary team of volunteers and professionals to provide direct relief to people facing poverty and, simultaneously, to improve
political protections against child labor, workforce exploitation, inadequate public health services, and a variety of other “environmental” issues facing urban populations (Addams, 1910; Villadsen, 2018). Richmond’s pioneering approach to social casework conceptualized the human mind as the sum total of relational experiences, positing that individuals suffer to the extent that their relational experiences are undermining and harmful. Richmond’s work with the Charity Organization Society, while focusing on the struggles of individuals and families, related these struggles to the psychological, economic, and relational impacts of urbanization. Correspondingly, Richmond’s approach to “social diagnosis” prompted caseworkers to consider not only clients’ “internal resources,” but also assets within the household, the neighborhood and wider social network, and local and civil agencies (Agnew, 2004; Richmond, 1908, 1917; Zorita, 2011).

Although the dual personal-environmental focus has characterized social work practice since the field’s beginnings, details regarding the intentional formulation of PIE into a practice-guiding perspective vary across accounts. While the works and writings of Addams and Richmond demonstrate the ethos of person-in-environment, a 1955 working group tasked with defining social work practice formulated the earliest purposive articulation of PIE. The report created by this group concluded that social work facilitates change: “1) within the individual in relation to his [sic, throughout] social environment; 2) of the social environment in its effect upon the individual; 3) of both the individual and the social environment in their interaction” (Bartlett, 2003, p. 269). Considering this event the birth of PIE logically implies that PIE “is not the same as the various ecosystem models with which it is commonly identified, and which it predates in the literature and in practice” (Kondrat, 2013, p. 1).
Dybizc (2009), on the other hand, claims that PIE is “derived from ecological systems theory” (p. 166). And despite the strong commonalities between PIE and early social work constructs such as Ada Sheffield’s (1931) total situation in which person and environment are interrelated, Payne (2002) describes PIE as “an adaptation of person-in-situation, a major element of psychoanalytically influenced social work of the 1950s” (p. 278). Thus, varying accounts within social work scholarship sometimes frame PIE as a perspective grounded in psychoanalytic and psychodynamic thought and sometimes as predating “more psychological approaches to case work [in order to emphasize] the importance of the social, economic, political, and cultural environments… in defining strategies to improve the lives of individuals and families” (Kondrat, 2013, p. 2).

The Person-Environment Relationship: Ambiguity and Interpretation

PIE’s historical and enduring importance in social work discourse may suggest the existence of an exact and agreed-upon definition of person-in-environment. This is not the case. Rather, a variety of interpretations have advanced heterogeneous visions of what the perspective should include and emphasize.

Some of the influential formulations of PIE integrated general systems theory and ecological theory (e.g., Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Meyer, 1983), situating individuals as actors within increasingly broad life domains (e.g., families, communities, polities). Other, more clinically-oriented interpretations sought to operationalize PIE in ways that facilitate problem solving in direct practice situations (e.g., Karls & Wandrei, 1994). However, the irony of such formulations is their potential for placing responsibility on individuals to adapt to or cope with social conditions. At best, individualistic interpretations seem puzzlingly incongruent with the
basic premise of person-in-environment, which Green and McDermott (2010) frame beautifully as

[beginning] from a position that recognizes the interdependence of phenomena in affecting, changing and sustaining human life… with an understanding of the world and human action within it that is evolving and adapting, asymmetrical, contingent and unpredictable, as well as ordered and predictable. (pp. 2416-2417)

At worst, individualistic interpretations may function to maintain oppressive situations by distracting from contextual contributors and responses to human suffering (Nichols & Cooper, 2011; Payne, 2015).

Rather than perceiving the environment as the context that envelops individuals, Weick (1981) articulated environment as a “multidimensional field that includes both internal and external factors… [that comprise] four possible environments: the internal-social, the external-social, the internal-physical, and the external-physical environments” (p. 141). Also in contrast to dichotomous interpretations, Kondrat’s (2002) constructivist approach illustrates the person-environment relationship with the metaphor of a game or dance that does not exist without the performance of players or dancers. In other words, the environment is an emergent phenomenon that is ontologically dependent on the elements that comprise it.

**Problem Statement**

We may consider the person-in-environment perspective enormously influential considering its guiding role in the efforts of almost one million social workers. Despite the perspective’s influence and the fact that social work adamantly affirms its commitment to understanding and celebrating diversity (NASW, 2017), research has not systematically explored how unique worldviews interpret the person-environment relationship. With some exceptions (e.g., Abdullah, 2015; Bhagwan, 2012; Blackstock, 2011; Canda & Gomi, 2018), social work’s
approach to diversity has largely focused on the application of Eurocentric perspectives to various “diverse” populations, rather than on how distinctive ontologies and epistemologies might reinterpret or refute those very perspectives. At best, this lack of philosophical inclusivity has limited the field’s ability to grow from the insights offered by the humanity’s diverse ways of being and knowing. At worst, it has demonstrated social work’s potential to function as a “handmaiden of the status quo” (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 512) that imposes dominant values and perspectives in order to homogenize non-dominant groups (see Akinyela & Aldridge, 2003; Bennett & Zubrzycki, 2003; Chong, 2016; Hart, 2010; Wexler, 2011).

The field’s lack of philosophical diversity is especially problematic when considering PIE because varying interpretations of the person-environment relationship can yield radically different visions of social work practice. To further illustrate this point, the following sections use the examples of ecosocial work and breath of life theory to illustrate how examining the person-environment relationship from varying standpoints illuminates powerful responses to problems currently facing humanity.

**Ecosocial Work in the Context of Environmental Social Work**

The term *ecosocial work* signifies a growing corpus of scholarship positing that the health of the biosphere, ecosystems conservation, and other “natural environmental issues” are important concerns for social work practice because they are necessary conditions for human wellbeing. Coates and Gray (2012) point out that, while the field of social work has long employed the term “environment” to describe the economic, political, historical, psychological, and interpersonal aspects of human life, the first significant demands for an understanding of environment that concerns itself with non-human beings and the planet found voice in the 1980s
and 1990s. Since that time, scholarship on environmental social work has grown exponentially and taken a variety of forms. Ecosocial work scholarship exists under the umbrella of environmental social work, which encompasses multiple theoretical perspectives including green social work, eco-feminist social work, eco-spiritual social work, and sustainable social work (Krings et al., 2018; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). These perspectives demonstrate both overlap and divergence in their philosophical roots (e.g., deep ecology, eco-feminism, Indigenous worldviews) and priorities for social work practice (e.g., promoting environmentally sustainable ways of life, advocating for environmental justice).

One commonality that unifies environmental social work perspectives is their charge that the field, despite its “environmental” rhetoric, has tended to focus only on the social milieu within which humans live (Coates & Gray, 2012). Zapf (2008) points out a consistent pattern of “quickly and arbitrarily [reducing]… what began in the social work literature as a broad concept of environment… to the much narrower social environment, with no explanation or rationale offered to justify the limitation” (p. 174). Environmental social work asserts that this tendency limits the field’s ability to respond to the human impacts of global environmental breakdown. Although environmental social work literature most often leaves implicit its definition of the “natural environment,” context suggests that the terms refers to the physical aspects of the planet and its ecosystems that were not created by humans yet create the conditions on which human life and wellbeing depend.

**The Person-Environment Relationship in Environmental Social Work**

Among ecosocial work’s theoretical propositions is the concept of *ecological self*. Besthorn (2002) argues that Western philosophy—of which social work is largely a product—
commonly understands the person as “a self-contained, individualized and free-standing social unit” (p. 54). From this understanding of self, it is possible to conceive of a person’s wellbeing as existing independently from the wellbeing of others and the natural environment (Boetto, 2017). Drawing on ecofeminism and deep ecology, ecosocial work decries this notion in favor of an ecological self that “does not ignore identification with nonhuman beings and nature [but], rather, suggests that nature constitutes both the beginning and the ongoing essence of full human development and potential” (Besthorn, 2002, p. 68). The person, instead of existing as an enclosed entity in an “external” reality, is “permeable [and] interconnected not only with other human selves but also with all living beings and processes” (Barrows, 1995, p. 103; Norton, 2012).

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

Interpreting social work from a perspective that interweaves human thriving and the health of the environment has important implications for practice. Ecosocial and environmental social work literature endorse a variety of practice foci that expand the traditional scope of social work activities. These include promoting rural communities’ capacity for sustainable development (Nhapi & Mathende, 2017), contributing to federal policy for phasing out environmental pollutants (Lysack, 2015), expanding individuals’ and families’ access to outdoor spaces to improve physical and mental health, and raising awareness of the gender-specific impacts of environmental breakdown (Boetto, 2017). Shifting our perception of the person-environment relationship in this way redefines social work as a field that maintains its traditional mission of responding to human needs but, furthermore, aspires to “nurture the creation of social
structures which enable the self-unfolding of all its members in the context of a healthy Earth” (Coates, 2003, p. 73).

**Breath of Life Theory in the Context of Indigenous Social Work**

Several ecosocial and environmental social work thinkers draw inspiration from Indigenous belief systems (Coates et al., 2006; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Zapf, 2005). Indigenous social work, itself, is body of scholarship that encompasses multiple theories, perspectives of the person-environment relationship, and visions for social work practice (see Gray et al., 2008). A common thread that binds otherwise heterogeneous Indigenous social work perspectives is the criticism that mainstream social work is grounded in Eurocentric philosophical assumptions that neither represent nor acknowledge Indigenous worldviews. Or, more incisively, this movement denounces formulations of social work that act as a “Western philosophical hermeneutic conception imposed as universal knowledge to supplant Indigenous approaches and practice” (Chong, 2016, p. 232).

Among Indigenous social work theories, Blackstock’s (2011) breath of life (BOL) theory provides a compelling example of how our perspective on the person-environment relationship shapes the definition of social work practice. Blackstock (2011) describes BOL as “a bi-cultural theory founded in First Nations ontology and physics’ theory of everything” (p. 1). The primary aim of BOL is to illuminate alternative approaches to supporting the cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional wellness of First Nations children facing the structural impacts of Canadian colonization. Actualizing this goal requires us to reevaluate our fundamental understanding of the person-environment relationship.
The Person-Environment Relationship in Breath of Life Theory

One of BOL’s distinct characteristics is its emphasis on the temporal nature of environment. Blackstock (2011) writes, “First Nations believe in expansive concepts of time where the past, present, and future are mutually reinforcing” (p. 7). The perspective that past, present, and future co-construct each other implies that ancestral knowledge is a vital environmental consideration. The knowledge of past generations shapes how we understand reality, individuals’ place in the environment, and the environment’s power to nurture human life. Consequently, “First Nations often consider their actions [as] informed by the experience of the past seven generations and by considering the consequences for the seven generations to follow” (p. 7). The values of ancestral knowledge and generational learning define the community—as it exists now and also in the past and future—as the primary milieu within which humans learn of and experience their place in the world. From this standpoint, we may understand the environment as an extension of our being and a locus of ancestral connections, rather than as a collection of materials that exists for the convenience of present-day human consumption.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Emphasizing the temporal, generational, and communal aspects of the person-environment relationship yields an alternative vision of social work practice that prioritizes protecting community identity and ancestral knowledge. Blackstock (2011) highlights this divergence by contrasting how First Nations and the Public Health Agency of Canada define determinants of health. The governmental list, echoing neoliberal values, prioritizes individual factors (e.g., personal health practices; coping skills; one’s ability to contribute to the economy;
income and social status) (p. 12). The First Nations perspective exhibits a preference for factors related to the identity, cohesion, and wellness of the community (e.g., basic physical needs such as food, water, and housing; belonging; relationship; life purpose; self-actualization; community actualization) (p. 12).

Breath of life theory and ecosocial work reveal how interpreting the person-environment relationship from a variety of viewpoints reveals visions of social work practice that meaningfully respond to timely issues, such as global environmental breakdown and ongoing oppression of Indigenous Peoples’ ways of life. Such theorizing has amplified a much-needed critical voice in social work discourse. Systematic research that reinterprets the field’s foundational perspectives would further enrich its philosophical diversity and enable it to better integrate practices embedded in humanity’s many ways of being.

**Significance of Study**

This study helps address this gap by exploring how Zen Buddhist teachers whose lifework overlaps with social work understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world, and, in turn, how this understanding may alter our conceptualization of PIE and social work practice. A conversation between social work and Zen may prove fruitful for several reasons. While both Buddhism and social work are frameworks for responding to suffering, they have developed resources for responding to different but interrelated dimensions of suffering. Furthermore, Buddhism—particularly Zen—envisions a distinctive perspective of the relationship between self and world that, while extending beyond the purview of social work, may provide the means for a unique reinterpretation of PIE. The fact that some Zen Buddhists engage in activities that overlap with social work makes it possible to explore how Zen
perspectives may converge with or diverge from current conceptualizations of social work theory and practice.

**Responding to Suffering**

Social work and Buddhism have developed resources for responding to different, but arguably interrelated, dimensions of suffering. Since the field’s formal beginnings in the early 20th century, social work practitioners and scholars have striven to respond to myriad forms of suffering, including social and economic oppression, material deprivation, and psychological and relational distress. Thus, social work’s accomplishments include developing theories, research, and practice methods that respond to questions such as, “How do we help a child heal and thrive in the aftermath of abuse,” “How can non-profit organizations support the success of newly resettled refugees,” and, “Which services best enhance the physical and psychological health of older adults experiencing homelessness?”

Buddhism, historically, has focused mainly on understanding and unraveling the existential fear and dissatisfaction that underlie and give rise to other forms of suffering. Siderits (2015) writes that the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama “concern the quest for liberation from suffering [and, to that end,] centrally [involve] claims concerning the nature of persons, as well as how we acquire knowledge about the world and our place in it” (p. 1). The first of the “Noble Truths,” which are foundational to all subsets of Buddhism, proclaims, “Life is dukkha.” *Dukkha*, commonly translated as “suffering,” refers primarily to “existential suffering…, frustration, alienation and despair” (p. 3). Buddhism considers material, psychological, relational, social, and political suffering as manifestations of a deeper problem: an inaccurate understanding of the nature of reality. Herschock (2015) describes the Buddhist concept of
ignorance (avidyā) as “relational distortions marking the troubling inflection of interdependence” (p. 1). In other words, the human tendency to treat phenomena as unrelated entities is what gives rise to aggression that bursts forth in acts of violence, greed that fuels exploitation, and fear that breeds bigotry and oppression. From this starting point, Buddhism has aimed to respond to questions such as, “How do we relate to our suffering in ways that do not prolong it for ourselves or inflict it on others,” “How do we see through the illusion that our fate is separate from others”, and “How do we give rise to heartfelt compassion for other beings?”

These dilemmas are different, yet inseparable, from the issues that social work addresses. Nishitani (1982) writes, “People are inclined to think that to transform society is one thing and to transform man [sic, throughout] is another, and that the former takes precedence over the latter. In reality, however, these two aspects cannot be separated so simply” (p. 24). Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which we will meaningfully resolve poverty, oppression, and violence without considering the human tendency to unthinkingly dichotomize self and other and mine and yours. It seems similarly questionable whether current realities of ubiquitous exploitation and trauma provide fertile soil for the liberation of all beings—the soteriological goal of Mahayana Buddhism. These conditions, however, do reveal the potential value of a conversation between social work and Buddhism.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study’s goal of illuminating a unique perspective implies the inappropriateness of using a pre-established theory (e.g., systems theory, ecological theory, etc.) to interpret the data. This would, in effect, force unique material into a conventional mold rather than seeking to understand it on its own terms. However, this does not imply that this research is atheoretical.
Rather, the concepts that guided my interpretation were those that related most directly to the study’s research questions: person-in-environment and non-duality. PIE, which I describe earlier in this chapter, was a guiding principle for this study in that I interpreted data with the assumption that there is, indeed, a meaningful relationship between individuals and their external world. Non-duality, which I describe in the following chapter, is the perspective that perceiving subjects do not exist in separation from the objects that they perceive. This perspective is foundational to Zen Buddhism and, thus, a critical consideration for this study. The Review of the Literature chapter elaborates on non-duality and its central importance to Zen.

**Research Questions**

Consistent with this framework, this dissertation explored three interrelated questions:

1) How do Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world?

2) How does this understanding of relationship guide their work?

3) How might this understanding of relationship alter social work’s conceptualization of “person-in-environment” and “practice?”
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews literature relevant to this study’s exploration of the self-world relationship in Zen Buddhism and its potential implications for the person-in-environment perspective in social work. This literature review is organized into four main sections. First, I offer context for this study by discussing social work’s treatment of topics that it commonly describes using the term “spirituality.” Second, I provide an overview of current social work scholarship related to Buddhism—and, more specifically, Zen—and point out a critical gap in this scholarship. Third, I introduce concepts that illustrate how Zen understand the self-world relationship, which is of key importance to the given study. Finally, I briefly discuss engaged Buddhism and related considerations for this study.

Spirituality in Social Work Scholarship

A variety of terms may describe the focus of this study, which explores Zen Buddhism’s implications for social work, including existential, ontological, and spiritual. Social work scholarship has favored the term “spirituality” when speaking of individuals’ perspectives of their relationship to other beings and reality. Social work scholars have advanced multiple definitions of “spirituality” (e.g., Canda, 2003, 2012; Canda & Furman, 2009; Crisp, 2008, 2016; Furness, 2016; Gardner, 2011; Hodge, 2015). Furman et al. (2005), for example, define spirituality as a “search for meaning, purpose and morally fulfilling relations with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality however a person understands it” (p.
Hodge (2015) explicitly avoids endorsing a specific formulation of spirituality but makes the claim that “there are sound philosophical and biological reasons for believing that spirituality may be a universal phenomenon of human experience” (p. 223).

Spirituality, including how it exists in relation to religion, is a relevant consideration for social work, not least because the field’s roots are readily traceable to religious social action (Addams, 1910; Faherty, 2006; Siedenburg, 1922). However, in the course of its development, the field has, at times, favored perspectives that devalue the topics of religion and spirituality. Since its inception, social work has struggled to clarify its identity (Abramovitz, 1998; Gibelman, 1999; Samson, 2015). In this process, the field has tended to pursue a scientific basis that would help provide it with direction, establish the efficacy of its approaches, and bolster its legitimacy among the social sciences. Few would argue that adopting scientific standards and approaches has not yielded benefits for social work. However, in its trend toward professionalization and scientification, social work has frequently downplayed the dimensions of the human experience that we may describe as spiritual or existential (Fortune et al., 2010). This devaluation was largely a consequence of restrictive philosophical claims that good science is free of metaphysical bias, concerned only with material ontologies and epistemologies that enable quantification (Gergen, 1985; Tyson, 1995). The resultant hierarchy of knowledge established a preference for “objective, scientific” information and, simultaneously, a devaluation of experiential ways of knowing and diverse perspectives of being (Coates et al., 2006). Referring to this trend, Edward Canda (1999) noted at the turn of the millennium that social work was “in the process of recovering from collective soul loss” (p. 1).
The past two decades, however, have brought considerable advances in social work’s treatment of spirituality. In the aftermath of the “paradigm wars,” a growing acceptance of constructionist, interpretivist, and pragmatist perspectives of knowledge has created opportunities for scholars to demand and create greater philosophical pluralism in social work. This, in turn, has sparked an increase of literature on spirituality (Canda et al., 2003; Carrington, 2010). Although debates continue over which philosophies of science are most appropriate for social work research (see Brady et al., 2017; Caputo et al., 2015; Caputo et al., 2017), there is now undoubtedly more space in social work scholarship than in the past for topics that we may describe as spiritual, metaphysical, or existential (Graham & Shier, 2009).

**Buddhism in Social Work Scholarship**

The rise of spirituality as a theme in social work scholarship has coincided with advances in cognitive neuroscience research and growing attention in the West to the therapeutic benefits of meditation. These interrelated events have contributed to an increase in social work scholarship related to Buddhism. The work of researchers including Davidson, Harrington, Goleman, and Siegel became influential by identifying relationships between meditation, neurobiology, cognition, and emotional states (Davidson & Harrington, 2002; Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Siegel, 2010). This trend in neuroscience corresponded with the burgeoning popularity of psychotherapies that include meditative techniques either derived from or similar to those practiced in Buddhism (see Hayes, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Linehan, 2020).

Buddhist-derived practices and perspectives are increasingly finding a place in social work practice (see Fulton, 2014; Northcut, 2017). Current disciplinary literature points to a variety of interpretations and applications of Buddhism within the field of social work. An
abstract search of the databases Social Work Abstracts and Social Service Abstracts using the search string *Buddh* AND “social work” yields 51 peer-reviewed articles. The majority of the identified articles focus on either integrating meditation or general concepts found in Buddhism (e.g., compassion, awareness) with social work direct practice (e.g., Baehr, 2009; Gehart & McCollum, 2007) or culturally competent practice with Buddhist clients (e.g., Amodeo et al., 2004; Han et al., 2012).

Additionally, several articles include a discussion of how Buddhist thought may inform social work practice. For example, Warren et al. (2011) cite Buddhism in affirming an approach to social work advocacy grounded in the concepts of community and awareness. Hayashi-Smith (2011) uses the case of the Sri Lankan people’s movement Sarvodaya Shramadana to argue for the importance of collective awareness and community solidarity for beneficial societal transformation and sustainable peace.

**Zen in Social Work Scholarship**

While current literature includes various discussions of Buddhism and its potential relevance to social work thought and practice, the focus of this study is Zen Buddhist perspectives of the self-world relationship. At the time of writing this dissertation, only a few texts in social work’s body of literature focus specifically on Zen.

Brandon’s (1976) *Zen in the Art of Helping* is an early presentation of how one might apply Zen practice and concepts to direct practice social work. Drawing on his own interpretations of Zen Buddhism, Brandon discusses five themes in relation to human service. The term “hindering” describes how, when confronted with challenging clients and situations, social workers can preference the situation, as it is, over their preconceived notions of how
things and people should be. This engenders compassion that affirms people as they are, in contrast with forms of kindness that are contingent on clients changing their actions to meet our expectations. Hindering and compassion depend on our ability to stay in contact with the present moment, which Brandon calls “nowness.” These three components create the possibility for a “taoistic change” of individuals and society, which Brandon describes as an organic and spontaneous development that occurs on its own terms, rather than conforming to pre-defined measures of progress. Brandon states that the “fruit” of his vision of spiritual practice and Zen-informed social work is: “to aid oneself and others in pursuit of the good life; to discover and uncover new vigour and freshness in the art of living; to uncover the primal ability to love” (p. 98).

A comparable set of ideas is found in Bein’s (2008) *The Zen of Helping*, which focuses specifically on clinical, psychotherapeutic social work practice. Bein cites an assortment of well-known texts to illustrate a Zen-informed approach to micro-practice that emphasizes moment-to-moment awareness, acceptance, compassion, and embracing difficult and paradoxical clinical realities. These considerations overlap with the categories that Brenner (1998) claims are central to Zen-informed social work. Brenner’s qualitative study of ten social workers who practice Zen Buddhism is (with the exception of the current study) the only example of disciplinary research related to Zen. The study concludes that the most salient aspects of Zen-informed clinical social work are awareness, acceptance, and responsibility (Brenner, 2009; Brenner & Homonoff, 2004).

Departing from a clinical focus, Canda and Gomi (2018) explore potential developmental implications of Zen’s “ox herding pictures.” Canda and Gomi’s article demonstrates significant progress in social work’s treatment of Zen in several ways. The authors, rather than weaving
various excerpts into a narrative that supports their claims, center their interpretation on a specific and influential item from the Zen canon, the ox herding pictures. Furthermore, the authors provide historical and cultural context for understanding the pictures and their role in guiding Zen practice. Rather than relying solely on the authors’ interpretations, the article thoroughly integrates the perspectives of Zen Buddhist leaders from a variety of cultural and denominational backgrounds. The authors also caution against reducing Zen to a therapeutic intervention, which ignores its soteriological aims, ethical precepts, rituals, emphasis on community, and other important considerations. By integrating such details into their discussion of Zen, Canda and Gomi’s piece represents a sizable step forward in social work’s treatment of Buddhism.

**A Critical Gap: The Zen Perspective of Self and World**

The aforementioned texts may demonstrate the potential benefits of a conversation between social work and Zen Buddhism. However, current social work scholarship omits an essential point: Zen’s reason for being is not to bring about an improved life experience while maintaining a dichotomized sense of self and world, but in fact to challenge and dismantle such a perspective of reality. Abe (1997) articulates the crucial question of Buddhism as “What is the Self?” (p. 67). To interpret this “self” in the conventional sense of an individual functioning in an external world is to misapprehend Zen Buddhism. Rather, Zen values an erosion of ego-centrism that clears the way for a mode of existence in which one does not live apart from other beings or the world, but rather as an aspect of a whole reality that comes into being as all phenomena (Abe, 1997). This perspective, which is absent from current social work scholarship, may alter our understanding of person-in-environment and social work practice. The following section draws
on canonical and scholarly sources to illustrate this vision of self and world from several standpoints.

**Self and World in Zen Buddhism**

Before illustrating Zen perspectives of self and world, I offer a brief history of Zen Buddhism’s development. I then discuss key aspects of the self-world relationship in Zen by describing the interrelated topics of direct experience, zazen, emptiness, interrelational arising, non-duality, *dukkha*, and the bodhisattva ideal.

**A Brief History of Zen Buddhism**

The facts of Zen Buddhism’s development are inseparable from anecdotes and narratives that, over centuries, have been adopted as truth or embellished into legend (Heine, 2007; McRae, 2003). Rather than focusing on possible historical scenarios, this section offers a brief account of the cultural exchanges that have shaped Zen Buddhism. The following section adds context to our exploration of Zen by focusing on its distinct features, especially as they concern the self-world relationship.

Scholars posit that the historical *Buddha* (i.e., awakened one), Siddhartha Gautama, lived and taught in northern India in either the fifth or sixth century BCE. (Siderits, 2015). In approximately the same period, the Taoist verses of Laozi emerged in China (Chan, 2018). According to the account that Heine (2007) calls the “traditional Zen narrative” (p. 6), the Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma’s arrival to China in the fifth century CE initiated the intermingling of Buddhist practice and Chinese thought (especially Taoism) that would become *Chan* (the Chinese rendering of Zen). Over the next three centuries, Chan blossomed into a distinct tradition with the teachings of early masters (e.g., Huineng, Shitou, Matsu) in the seventh
and eighth centuries, during which it also spread to Vietnam and Korea (App, 2018). Chan continued to flourish in the monasteries of iconic masters (e.g., Nanchuan, Zhaozhou, Dongshan, Linji, Yunmen) of the ninth and 10th centuries (Foster & Shoemaker, 1996). The 11th and 12th centuries marked Chan’s migration to Japan when the Japanese monks Eisai and Dōgen imported the teachings of the Rinzai (Ch., Linji) and Sōtō (Ch., Caodong) schools of Chan (Ives, 1992). These continued as the two main branches of Zen in Japan and, now, maintain that status worldwide. Zen Buddhism—first its Japanese form and then in its Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean forms—became established in the West during the 20th century.

This basic overview of Zen’s history omits countless details that would help one understand the tradition and its development through the centuries. For readers who seek greater depth, this dissertation’s bibliography includes texts that expand on these topics. Attempting to offer a more thorough historical account would risk straying beyond this study’s purview, and so I focus, instead, on the features of Zen that are especially important for understanding the tradition’s perspective of the self-world relationship.

Direct Experience of Self and World

One of the best-known characterizations of Zen is the “four maxims,” which Shibayama (1972) translates as:

Transmission outside the scriptures
Not relying on letters
Pointing directly to one’s Mind
Attainment of Buddhahood by seeing into one’s Nature (pp. 19-20)

The practice of Zen Buddhism is to actualize a mode of experiencing self and world that precedes concepts about reality. This pre-conceptual mode of experience is “not reliant” on verbal interpretations of the world—including Buddhist scriptures—for the simple reason that
the act of interpreting utilizes intellectual constructs. While concepts are an essential part of human social life, Zen maintains that attempting to understand the nature of oneself and the world by intellectual means is akin to “trying to scratch an itchy spot through your shoe” (Bankei, 1984, p. 15). In other words, believing that one’s concepts of self and world are reality, itself, is an act of “mistaking the map for the territory” (i.e., avidyā, or ignorance) that perpetuates a constant state of existential confusion and dissatisfaction (i.e., dukkha).

While it is not possible to fully know (i.e., intellectually) oneself and reality, the following examples illustrate the Taoist and Zen assertion that one may experience this reality:

Look, and it can’t be seen.
Listen, and it can’t be heard.
Reach, and it can’t be grasped…
Approach it and there is no beginning;
Follow it and there is no end.
You can’t know it, but you can be it… (Laozi, 1988, p. 14)

The meaning is not in the words,
yet one pivotal instant can reveal it…
To depict it with complex words
is to defile it. (Dongshan, in Tanahashi, 2015, p. 90)

From this standpoint, it is possible to understand Zen practice as a constant setting aside of concepts in order to realize an experience of reality that slips away with the slightest attempt to “understand” it intellectually. We may appreciate Linji’s (fl. 850 CE) revelation that “the whole universe is sheer darkness” (in Shibayama, 1975, p. 28) by considering how, while we may fully experience darkness (i.e., the unknowable nature of self and world), we immediately dispel that darkness if we turn on the light (i.e., the intellect) in hopes of “getting a better look.” Rather, Zen practice invites one to dwell in the “pure experience” (Nishida, 1992) of reality in its “thusness” (Skt. tathātā).
Zazen

The Zen practice repertoire includes several emphases that involve setting aside ideas about reality to allow for a conceptually-unadorned experience of self and world. Zen practices include, but are not limited to, work practice (J., samu), walking meditation (J., kinhin), chanting scripture, and koan practice. In most presentations of Zen, these practices are intertwined with sitting meditation (J., zazen). The 18th-century Japanese master Hakuin speaks to the primacy of sitting meditation in his *Song of Zazen*:

Oh, the zazen of the Mahayana!
To this the highest praise!
Devotion, repentance, training,
The many [practices of perfection]—
All have their source in zazen. (Hakuin, in Aitken, 2015, p. 12)

In rudimentary terms, sitting meditation in Zen involves assuming an upright posture and allowing one’s awareness to rest on the basic experience of the present moment. Zen teachers throughout the centuries have offered myriad elaborations of this practice. Zazen—as traditionally conceptualized in the Rinzai School—aims at unlocking the meditator’s potential to see into the nature of self and reality (J., kensho). The dramatic kensho experience of the modern Zen master Koun Yamada provides a well-known example:

I was riding home on the train [while] reading a book on Zen [and] ran across this line [by Dōgen]: ‘I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.’ I had read this before, but this time it impressed itself upon me so vividly that I was startled. I said to myself: ‘After seven or eight years of zazen I have finally perceived the essence of this statement,’ and couldn’t suppress the tears that began to well up…

At midnight I abruptly awakened. At first, my mind was foggy, then suddenly that quotation flashed into my consciousness: ‘I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.’ And I repeated it. Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. (Yamada, in Samy, 2005, p. 104)
While Rinzai Zen has tended to value such instances of “sudden” awakening, Sōtō Zen typically emphasizes moment-to-moment actualization of the non-duality of self and world. The modern Japanese Zen master Kodo Sawaki describes zazen as

the way we tune in to the whole universe. [Meditative concentration] is practicing each and every thing with the entire universe moment by moment. [Awakening] is not going to a special place that is difficult to reach, but simply being natural… Since all things are included within the self, we should conduct ourselves carefully, considering everyone’s feelings. (Sawaki, in Uchiyama & Okumura, 2014, pp. 182-183)

Emptiness, Interrelational Arising and Non-Duality

To consider zazen the meditative effort of a person “in” the world is an incomplete understanding that must be complemented with a perspective of zazen as “the crystallization of the creative possibilities of emptiness,” as Kim (2004, p. 58) beautifully articulates. Mahayana Buddhism employs the term emptiness (Skt. śūnyatā) to describe reality as it exists prior to intellectual interpretations. Emptiness in Buddhism is not a lifeless nilhil, but functions “constructively, as does the hollowness that enables a temple bell to ring or a gourd to function as a water vessel” (Ives, 1989, p. 114). Thus, it may be helpful to understand śūnyatā as potential; the potential of undifferentiated existence in its constant flux to give rise to everything and every experience. It may also be helpful to understand emptiness as an alternative expression for impermanence (Skt. anitya), another foundational concept in Buddhism. The Buddhist belief that all things arise in a constant process of change implies the impossibility that any phenomenon may exist essentially (i.e., permanently, statically, in separation from other phenomena). Regarding śūnyatā in this way, as a quality of reality, reduces the risk of mistakenly associating the term with something that “exists” separately from the world as we conventionally perceive it or—in another error—as something apart from our own nature.
For, in Buddhism, terms such as emptiness, impermanence, and thusness are expressions of our own nature and the nature of the world. Every phenomenon is “empty” of a separate, self-standing essence and, therefore, is permeated with and co-creates other phenomena. The perspective that every phenomenon’s existence arises in the context of all other phenomena is the basic proposition of *pratītyasamutpāda*, the theory that Boisvert (2004) notes “could well be considered the common denominator of all Buddhist traditions throughout the world” (p. 669). *Pratītyasamutpāda* has received a variety of translations, including interrelational arising (Ives, 2008), mutual causality (Macy, 1991), and, literally, as “arising on the ground of a preceding cause” (Boisvert, 2004, p. 669).

This perspective, which implies that every being is ontologically and existentially inseparable from other beings and all of reality, is expressed in the classical Zen metaphor of the ocean and the waves. Hisamatsu (2011) writes,

Waves are not something which come from outside the water and are reflected in the water. Waves are produced by the water but are never separated from the water… The waves are the movement of the water… The assertions of the Sixth Patriarch [sic], Huineng, that ‘self-nature, in its origin constant and without commotion, produces the ten thousand things’ and that ‘all things are never separated from self-nature’…express just this… (pp. 225-226)

Each wave (i.e., being) experiences its own existence and, simultaneously, never exists in separation from the ocean (i.e., the world/reality *in toto*) and other waves (i.e., other beings). From this perspective of the self-world relationship, the world is not only the context in which individual selves exist, but is their very substance and shared lifeblood. Just as waves are the dynamic functioning of the ocean, human individuals’ actions are the mobilization and expression of the universe itself.
To further concretize and humanize this vision, we may consider the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the human experience. Human bodies are composed of elements that originate from cosmic explosions, nebulosity, and stars (MIT Haystack, n.d.). In this way, one’s body is inalienably inter-existent with the cosmos. One’s cognitions and sense of self are shaped by innumerable factors, including conversations with other people, books read, and the deeply perspective-shaping impact of languages that have developed over thousands of years in multiple civilizations and cultures (Hayes et al., 2001). Thoughts and sense of self, far from existing only in one’s head, are the culmination of time, space, and consciousness. One’s emotions encompass the joy of spending time with loved ones and the sadness of winter’s cloudy days and diminished sunlight hours. Emotions are not only personal but are relational and inseparable even from the nature of the atmosphere and solar system. Such considerations imply that a human is not a discrete entity looking upon an external existence. Rather, each being is reality, itself, seeing itself.

We may describe Zen’s perspective of the self-world relationship as non-dualistic because phenomena are simultaneously unique and inseparable; not two and not one (Loy, 1988). As Nishitani (in Heisig, 1990) states, “self-awareness is not the awareness of a self-set up in opposition to another, but of a true self in which self and other are no longer two” (p. 59). Zen has used a variety of expressions in reference to the vision of all-encompassing reality that manifests in particular forms. Huineng (fl. 700 CE), the eminent “Sixth Ancestor” of Zen, challenges the monk Ming to identify his “primal” or “original” face, referring not to any particular form but to the entirety of reality. Linji expresses the same quality of reality as “One True Person without Rank who is always going in and out of the face of everyone one of you”
(in Hisamatsu, 2002, p. 29). This “true person” is not a person in the conventional sense, but rather the dynamic, total reality that takes form and motion as Linji, the monks whom he admonishes, and indeed all beings. The “person” is “without rank” because, as all-pervading reality (i.e., emptiness), there is nothing outside of it against which it can be compared.

**Suffering, Dukkha, and the Bodhisattva Ideal**

It seems reasonable to theorize that the realization that all beings are interrelated manifestations of a living reality is associated, somehow, with an existential imperative to respond to suffering. The term “suffering,” which this study mentions extensively, offers both benefits and limitations for understanding Buddhism. The English word “suffering” is the most common English translation for the Pali word *dukkha*, a term central to Buddhism that signifies a state of psychological-emotional unease. “Suffering,” in English, has a broader range of connotations (e.g., emotional suffering, economic/material privation, social isolation, physical pain, etc.) than the Pali word dukkha. Proponents of engaged Buddhism posit that salvation from individual dukkha relies on ameliorating other forms of suffering (e.g., political oppression, environmental degradation) (Loy, 2003; Macy, 2007).

In Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva ideal is the classic illustration of responding to suffering from a recognition of the non-duality of all beings. A bodhisattva is an archetypal figure that personifies beneficial qualities such as compassion and wisdom. A defining feature of the bodhisattva’s path is the vow to strive tirelessly for as many lifetimes as is necessary to lead all beings to liberation from suffering. Buddhist literature contains innumerable depictions of this ideal. The *Jataka Tales*, early parables about the past lives of Siddhartha Gautama, relate stories such as the Buddha-to-be voluntarily sacrificing his life to relieve the starvation of a tigress and
her cubs. Mahayana literature portrays the Bodhisattva Jizo (Skt. Kṣitigarbha) entering hell realms to relieve the suffering of tortured beings (Leighton, 2012). The last of Zen’s “ox herding pictures” shows a master who, after seeing deeply into the emptiness of self and world, enters the “marketplace” of mundane human affairs with bliss-bestowing hands (Shibayama, 1972).

**Ideals and Actualities**

While the bodhisattva archetype continues to serve as a source of inspiration for many Buddhists, the historical actualities of Zen have not always kept pace with Mahayana ideals. Despite the “ancient law” chronicled in the Dhammapada—that love alone dispels hate—Buddhists have engaged in a range of oppressive and violent actions (see Human Rights Watch, 2017; Tambiah, 1992; Tikhonov & Brekke, 2012). Specifically to Zen, influential Japanese teachers have interpreted Buddhist doctrines in ways that justified aggression and war (see Ives, 2009; Victoria, 2006). In the United States, Zen teachers have used their status for financial exploitation and sexual coercion (Bivins, 2007; Foster & Shoemaker, 2010). Such facts dispel any idealized notions of Buddhism exceptionalism.

**Engaged Buddhism**

Although the aforementioned examples clarify that Buddhist doctrine and practice cannot guarantee compassionate action, countless Buddhists have found inspiration in the bodhisattva ideal to respond to suffering in manifold ways. The sampling frame for this study includes Zen teachers who respond to the intrapersonal, relational, social, political, and environmental dimensions of suffering. The activities of these teachers constitute part of what is sometimes referred to as engaged Buddhism. However, I hasten to clarify that, by using the terms engaged Buddhism and engaged Buddhists in this text, I do not mean to imply that every participant in
this study identifies with those labels. The line between engaged Buddhism and Buddhism-in-general is not always clear and, depending on one’s perspective, may be arbitrary or non-existent. In other words, some Buddhists who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work may identify as “engaged Buddhists,” and some may simply identify as “Buddhists.”

Nevertheless, engaged Buddhism is a helpful idea for those examining Buddhist responses to suffering. While the history of Buddhism includes numerous examples of responding to suffering, the 20th century marked the beginning of large-scale, organized social and political action based on Buddhist ideals in several Asian countries (Queen & King, 1996). These “Buddhist liberation movements” included the peacework of Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam and Maha Ghosananda in Cambodia (Chappell, 1999), the anti-caste activism of B. R. Ambedkar in India (Zelliot, 2013, 2016), and A.T. Ariyaratne’s Sarvodaya Shramadana self-governance movement in Sri Lanka (Bond, 2003; Macy, 1985).

The blossoming of these movements coincided chronologically with Buddhism’s popularization in the West, creating the context for engaged Buddhist action in the United States. Groups such as the Order of Interbeing, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and Zen Peacemakers Order introduced approaches to social and political action grounded in Buddhist doctrine and practices. The Order of Interbeing, which is guided by the work and teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh, includes fourteen precepts based on the Buddhist “perfections” (Skt. paramitas) of generosity, ethical behavior, forbearance, diligence, awareness, and wisdom (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2012). The Zen Peacemakers Order espouses the three tenets of not knowing, bearing witness, and taking action. These tenets echo Zen Buddhist principles, such as the importance of suspending pre-conceived
notions about reality, and also derive inspiration from Judaism, Christianity, and a variety of other sources (Glassman, 2013).

**The Meeting of Influences: Considerations for Studying Engaged Buddhism**

Indeed, the Zen teachers who participated in interviews for this study are a group of thinkers whose worldviews integrate diverse influences. While citing the perspectives of contemporary Buddhist leaders, it is important to consider that they may find inspiration not only in sources such as Dōgen Kigen and the Kyoto School of Philosophy, but also in Christian liberation theology, the Civil Rights Movement, feminist theorists, and so on. This complexity means that this study does not claim to offer a “pure” Zen Buddhist perspective. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that Buddhism, like any religion, has never taken a monolithic form (Mukerji, 2020).

Critiques of engaged Buddhism have included the claim that it stops short of the actual Buddhist soteriological goal of liberating all beings from existential/metaphysical suffering by perceiving societal improvement as an end in itself (Deitrick, 2003). At times it may also be unclear whether the claims of contemporary engaged Buddhists are consonant with the original intentions of Buddhist doctrine or whether modern thinkers have creatively interpreted Buddhism in order to justify their stances. In reference to contemporary Zen writing that applies Buddhist thought to environmental action, Ives (2018) points out that:

…historical Buddhist doctrines and practices are not as ecological as these Zen writers have made them out to be, that these writers are engaging in acts of eisegesis by looking selectively in Buddhist sources to support the environmental ethic they brought to their practice of Zen in the first place, or simply that they are distorting those sources as they apply them to problems like the climate crisis. (p. 243)
Considering such complexities, research that explores engaged Buddhism must acknowledge that presentations of religion are culturally and temporally situated. Thus, while this study cannot (and intentionally does not) make claims about the entirety of Zen Buddhism, it may illuminate a specific and compelling vision of Zen.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design to explore its three research questions:

1) How do Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world?

2) How does this understanding of relationship guide their work?

3) How might this understanding of relationship alter social work’s conceptualization of “person-in-environment” and “practice?”

Nkwi et al. (2001) define qualitative research as “any research that uses data that do not indicate ordinal values” (p. 1), which applies to the topic of Zen Buddhist perspectives on the self-world relationship. Further, Polkinghorne (2005) defines the focus of qualitative research as understanding the subjective experience of persons involved in the topic under study.

Considering the non-quantifiable, subjective nature of this study, the suitability of qualitative methods was clear when crafting the research design. In the following sections, I describe several key methodological aspects of this study: metatheoretical assumptions, sampling, instrumentation, data analysis, and strategies employed to strengthen validity. I conclude by discussing the study’s assumptions, limitations, scope, and ethical considerations.
Metatheoretical Assumptions

Baert’s (2005) neo-pragmatist paradigm provided the metatheoretical basis for this research. Drawing inspiration from neo-pragmatist thinkers —especially Richard Rorty—Baert’s formulation of a pragmatist philosophy of social science posits the following six points:

1. methodological diversity characterizes science;
2. the social sciences gain from methodological pluralism;
3. the spectator theory of knowledge is inappropriate for social research;
4. social research is [grounded in] a conversation;
5. knowledge is action, and;
6. self-understanding opens up alternative scenarios. (pp. 147-156).

Methodological Diversity

Baert (2005) references Latour’s (1987) Science in Action when pointing out the messiness of the scientific endeavor. Researchers have always operated in a world of subjectivity and piecemeal decision making, even when taking pains to claim “objectivity,” “rigor,” and so forth. Oft-cited methodological approaches may provide guidance for research activities, but they may also serve as “props or rhetorical devices to persuade others” (Baert, 2005, p. 148). Given this reality, a neo-pragmatist paradigm encourages the creative and intentional use of the broad spectrum of research methods, rather than forcing inquiry into methodological molds that have value only insofar as they facilitate exploring the questions under study. In Rorty’s (1982) words, pragmatism

— is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers. (p. 165)

In this spirit, this study took a methodologically diverse approach by combining a variety of methods in order to meaningfully address its research questions. Rather than adopting the
methodological prescriptions of one of the major qualitative approaches (i.e., phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, etc.), I chose methods based on their appropriateness in relation to the research questions. For example, I used thematic analysis as a data interpretation method because it provides practicable guidelines for examining relevant themes (e.g., participants’ understanding of suffering and the self-world relationship). A methodologically diverse study design also included the flexibility to ask interview questions that were interpretive, descriptive, and phenomenological in nature, all of which helped illuminate the research questions. Additionally, it circumvented having to use methods that are associated with one of the major approaches, but that were unnecessary in the context of this study (e.g., theoretical sampling in grounded theory). The resultant design included methods that are compatible with each other (e.g., purposive sampling and standardized open-ended interviews) and that made it possible to meaningfully and efficiently address the study’s research questions.

**Away from a Spectator Theory of Knowledge**

Both neo-pragmatism and classical pragmatism reject the “spectator theory of knowledge,” which views knowledge as “mainly, if not exclusively, representing the intrinsic nature of an external world” (Baert, 2005, pp. 151-152). From a pragmatist standpoint, it is not possible to liken knowledge to a conceptual “map” that accurately represents a mind-independent, external world. Instead, research is an interpretive activity that is always influenced by time, place, and researchers’ presuppositions. Instead of claiming a “view from nowhere” or “God’s eye view” that is free from assumptions, pragmatist research considers “presuppositions as *sine qua non* to any form of inquiry… [which implies that] researchers must reflect on the nature of their presuppositions” (p. 152).
This means that I, the researcher, am not able to claim a neutral, value-free perspective on
the topic of inquiry. My interpretations are undoubtedly shaped by time, place, and my own
presuppositions. Thus, the task in this neo-pragmatist study is not to eliminate or deny these
influences, but to acknowledge them, reflect on ways in which they may potentially shape my
interpretations, and take steps to maintain the fidelity of participants’ perspectives to as great an
extent as possible. These considerations relate to the previous discussion of my theoretical
framework for this study in the Purpose and Significance of Study chapter. I add to this
discussion in later sections of this chapter that describe my assumptions in this study and the
strategies that I employed to strengthen validity.

**Knowledge as Action**

It is important to note that pragmatism, while refuting the spectator theory of knowledge,
does not necessarily deny the existence of a mind-independent reality. Pragmatism does not
advance any position on questions such as whether the world “exists apart from our
understanding of it” (i.e., a post-positivist perspective) or “is created by our conceptions of it”
(i.e., a constructivist perspective) (Morgan, 2014, p. 4). Instead of concerning itself with such
debates, which it sees as philosophical dead ends, pragmatism simply asserts that social
researchers can only interact with reality—however it exists—through an interpretive process
involving assumptions embedded in temporal, cultural, and relational contexts.

In moving away from traditional epistemological questions, pragmatism shifts the focus
to consequences of knowledge that are evident in real-world actions. Examining the work of
Dewey, Morgan (2014) illustrates pragmatist *inquiry* as a cycle between “reflecting on actions to
choose beliefs” and “reflecting on beliefs to choose actions” (p. 4). Franke and Hellmann (2017)
clarify that inquiry, in the pragmatist sense, means understanding beliefs as “rules for action” (p. 1). The way that theories fit into this model is “as fruits of experience-based ‘creative intelligence’ (Dewey, 1917, p. 64) for coping with the contingencies of daily life” (Franke & Hellmann, 2017, p. 5).

This pragmatist study demonstrates how the beliefs of specific Zen teachers (i.e., whose lifework overlaps with social work activities) serve as rules for action in a particular context (i.e., the present-day United States). The study, which focused on the interplay between Zen Buddhist perspectives and actions taken in response to suffering, only treats Zen thought and ritual insofar as they relate to the contingencies of social and environmental problems. The goal of this inquiry is to yield a rearticulation of person-in-environment that is the fruit of these teachers’ experiences and creative intelligence and that may support helping professionals to cope with the daily contingencies of their work.

**Conversation, Encounter, and Self-Knowledge in Social Research**

Baert (2005) calls for approaching social research as a conversation that “encourages the participants to think differently… [and uses the] academic conversation to enhance our imaginative faculties” (p. 154). Rather than taking an adversarial stance against other perspectives or bodies of knowledge, productive social research harnesses the insight and innovation that arise in encounters between diverse ways of thinking. In such encounters, “we rely upon our cultural presuppositions to gain access to what is being studied, and, [then], articulate and rearticulate the very same presuppositions” (p. 155). In learning about a dissimilar other, we come to understand ourselves more clearly and, through this clarity, grow in creative ways. Such conversations are not only an antidote to academic tribalism, but also help us better
conceptualize ourselves and our disciplines, emancipate ourselves from stagnant and unquestioned ways of thinking, and imagine alternative futures and courses of action.

This research was an encounter between social work and Zen Buddhism—specifically, socially engaged Zen Buddhism in the 21st-century United States. The aim of this dialog was not to create a fixed set of ideas and practices that we might call “Zen social work” or by any other similar name. Such a project would be problematic in many ways, including potentially slipping into the “foundationalism” against which Baert (2005, p. 153) cautions. Instead, the aim of this dialog was to yield insights that may help both discussants to better understand themselves and to approach their goals with flexibility and creativity.

**Sampling**

The sample for this study included 35 Zen Buddhist teachers whose lifework overlaps with social work activities. The sampling strategy involved: (1) expert sampling based on pre-established inclusion criteria; and (2) referral sampling to identify additional potential participants. Initially, based on qualitative research sampling recommendations (Creswell, 2013), I aimed to interview 20 Zen teachers for this study. However, after interviewing 20 participants, I chose to expand the sample because new insights and themes continued to arise throughout the process of interviewing. Increasing the sample to 35 participants yielded sufficient information to convincingly arrive at theoretical saturation, “the point at which gathering more data about [theoretical categories] reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 345).
**Expert Sampling Based on Pre-Established Inclusion Criteria**

The first component of this study’s sampling strategy was expert sampling. Patton (2018) describes expert sampling as “identifying key informants who can inform an inquiry through their knowledge, experience, and expertise [in order to] provide valuable insights into the root of problems” (p. 2). The sampling frame of the study was bounded by the following inclusion criteria: (1) each participant must be a Zen teacher; (2) each participant must respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities, and; (3) each participant must live in the United States.

**Inclusion Criterion: Zen Teacher**

Referring to expert sampling, Patton (2018) points out, “The challenge is identifying and gaining the cooperation of genuinely knowledgeable experts [because the] credibility and utility of… results depend on the credibility and depth of knowledge of the experts surveyed, interviewed, and/or observed” (p. 2). Thus, I chose to focus on Zen teachers, rather than Zen practitioners at large, because limiting the sample to “exemplars of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2014, p. 266) increased the likelihood of collecting rich, credible data. Teachers, by definition, have practiced intensively over a period of many years and must demonstrate a thorough familiarity with Zen in order to receive permission to teach from a recognized lineage. For the purposes of this study, a Zen teacher was defined as an individual who provides leadership to a *sangha* (i.e., Buddhist community) and expounds the teachings of Zen Buddhism in affiliation with a recognized Zen lineage. While the ritual of “dharma transmission” is often a prerequisite to using the title “Zen teacher” (Bodiford, 2000), this study also included individuals
who had not received transmission, but who had extensive practice and teaching experience in connection with a recognized lineage.

**Inclusion Criterion: Social Work Activities**

The second inclusion criterion was based on the International Federation of Social Workers’ list of 15 “social work activities” that, together, represent the breadth of the field:

1. psychotherapy/clinical social work;
2. family therapy;
3. social group work;
4. social pedagogy;
5. empowerment/anti-oppressive practice;
6. case management;
7. brokering;
8. social casework;
9. agency administration;
10. community [organizing];
11. advocacy/social action;
12. **conscientization**;
13. political action;
14. policy practice;
15. social development. (Hare, 2004, p. 412)

The final list of social work activities used in this study’s codebook (see Appendix A) included minor revisions to the IFSW formulation. The activities of case management, brokering, and social casework are highly related and difficult to separate in practice. Therefore, for data coding purposes, I combined these three activities into one item. Also, this study included in the scope of “social work activities” actions that are aimed at preventing and alleviating human suffering as a result of the ecological crisis. The rapidly growing body of scholarship that focuses on social work’s role in responding to global environmental breakdown justified this inclusion (see Krings et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2017; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Therefore, participants’ actions related to the “social work activities” criterion included offering
meditation instruction and emotional support to incarcerated people, providing material relief to refugees, engaging in social- or environmental-justice activism, raising consciousness about the human impacts of the ecological crisis, and so forth.

Inclusion Criterion: Living in the United States

Due to practical constraints (i.e., time, cost, language barriers, etc.), this research only included interviews with Zen Buddhist teachers who live in the United States. I discuss limitations and advantages related to this inclusion criterion in other sections of the current and preceding chapters.

Creating an Initial Sampling Frame: Database Search and Reference Checking

In order to establish an initial sampling frame of potential participants, I searched academic databases (Academic Search Complete, Social Work Abstracts, Social Service Abstracts, Religious and Theological Abstracts, JSTOR, Book Review Index, and Google Scholar) and non-academic sources (WorldCat and Google) using the terms Zen, Buddh*, engaged, psycholog*, soc*, environment*, and ecolog*. The search results (and citations within those results) identified 31 potential study participants who met the aforementioned inclusion criteria. Of those 31 individuals, 20 consented to participate in this study, eight did not reply to the recruitment invitation (see Appendix B), and three declined participation. A list of participants who took part in this study is found in Appendix C.

Referral Sampling

This study also used a referral sampling approach of requesting interviewees for referrals to other potential participants. Trotter (2012) explains that referral sampling “starts with an index individual who is identified as having the key characteristics required by the research design and
asking that individual to nominate others with similar characteristics[, who] constitute a second wave of data collection” (p. 400). Requesting referrals from participants allowed this study to include Zen teachers who were not identified by the aforementioned database search and expanded the sampling frame of experts who met the study’s inclusion criteria. Referral sampling enabled the recruitment of an additional 15 participants, for a total of 35 participants.

**Instrumentation**

This study used standardized open-ended interviews, in which researchers ask predefined questions but also have the flexibility to ask additional questions to further illuminate participants’ perspectives and experiences (Turner, 2010). Three pilot interviews with Zen priests helped strengthen these questions prior to formal interviewing. After each participant provided consent to take part in the interview (see Appendix D), I arranged either an in-person or online interview that followed the protocol found in Appendix E. The interview questions focused on participants’ understanding of the relationship between self, beings, and world, specifically in the context of responding to suffering. The questions also focused on the actions that participants consider most foundational when responding to suffering and the Buddhist concepts and practices that provide the motivation or framework for these actions. The questions in the interview protocol attempted to elicit a multifaceted account of participants’ experiences through the use of interpretive, descriptive, and phenomenological language. Also, this study intentionally avoided defining terms such as self, world, and suffering in order to maximize participants' freedom to interpret them based on their own perspectives and, consequently, to create a data-grounded interpretation of these concepts (Guest et al., 2012).
In total, I conducted 18 interviews in person, 16 via video, and one via phone. I also conducted seven follow-up interviews via video in order to ask further questions after the initial interviews. Immediately after each interview, I wrote a memo that recorded my reflections and potentially important thematic points from the conversation. The purpose of these memos was to guide my attention back to important aspects of the conversation during data analysis (Guest et al., 2012) and to allow interviewees to confirm my initial impressions (i.e., member checking). Shortly after each interview, I transcribed the audio recording into a text file and included the memos at the end of each respective transcript.

Data Analysis

This study interpreted interview data using the thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is an appropriate approach when a study’s primary goal is “to describe and understand how people feel, think, and behave within a particular context relative to a specific research question” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 13), and also when a study may benefit from combining several coding methods.

This analysis was exploratory and empathic in nature. Guest et al. (2012) clarify that exploratory analysis is a “content-driven, inductive approach [in which] the emphasis is on what emerges from the interaction between researcher and respondent. The content of that interaction drives the development of codes and the identification of themes” (p. 36). This study’s analysis was exploratory in that, although I used codes derived from the research questions (i.e., structural coding) as a starting point for coding, I elaborated on this initial coding through an inductive process of identifying and categorizing important themes that arose in the interviews (i.e., domain and taxonomic coding).
This study’s analysis was empathic in that its goal was to “elaborate and amplify the meaning which is contained within the material” (Willig, 2014, p. 138). Willig explains that a researcher using an empathic approach to analysis

…stays with (rather than digs below) what presents itself and focuses on what is manifest (as opposed to that which is hidden). The interpreter attempts to illuminate that which presents itself by paying special attention to its features and qualities, by making connections between them and by noticing patterns and relationships… The aim is to amplify meaning rather than to explain what something “is really about.” “Empathic” interpretations do not set out to explain why something occurs or to identify a causal mechanism underpinning the phenomenon. (pp. 138-139)

Correspondingly, this study sought to illuminate its participants’ beliefs and the web of relationships in which they exist, rather than to evaluate them or to explain the factors that might have brought them about.

**Analysis Goal and Objectives**

The goal of analysis in this study was to locate meaning in the interview data and to relate that meaning to the research questions. Guest et al. (2012) specify that, in a study with more than one research objective, researchers “should translate each of those objectives into an analysis objective and then outline the steps necessary to achieve that objective” (p. 29). The objective for research question one was to use structural coding and domain and taxonomic coding to clarify how interviewees experience the relationship between self, other beings, and world. The objective for research question two was to use structural coding and domain and taxonomic coding to clarify how interviewees’ perspectives of relationship (between self, other beings, and world) influence the ways in which they respond to suffering. The objective for research question three was to generate theoretical propositions that relate the study data to the
person-in-environment perspective and social work practice. I outline the steps for achieving these objectives in the following description of this study’s coding design.

**Data Coding**

Data analysis in this study was a three-phase process that followed Guest et al.’s (2012) and Saldaña’s (2016) guidelines for structural coding, domain and taxonomic coding, and theory development. Throughout the coding process, I used NVivo 12 Pro software by QSR International to help organize information.

**Structural Coding**

The first phase in analyzing the transcribed interviews was structural coding, which involves using a codebook based on interview questions to identify and group important segments of data (Guest et al., 2012). I began with structural coding in order to identify the data that were most pertinent to the study’s research questions. This, in turn, helped focus the analysis by reducing the potential for straying into topics that were interesting but less germane to the study.

Guest et al. (2012) specify that a “text segment… includes the response of the participant to the question and any subsequent probes and dialogue about the question” (p. 55). I conducted structural coding by using a pre-established codebook (see Appendix A) based on the interview questions to highlight and label relevant segments (i.e., words, sentences, and chunks in the interview transcripts). Before formally beginning the coding process, I honed and clarified this codebook based on pilot analyses of four interview transcripts. Co-coding four interviews with an external reviewer and member checking also helped establish the inter-rater reliability and
validity of this codebook. I discuss these steps in the following section on strategies for strengthening validity.

**Domain and Taxonomic Coding**

The second phase in analysis was domain and taxonomic coding, which Saldaña (2016) describes as “an ethnographic method for discovering the cultural knowledge people use to organize their behaviors and interpret their experiences” (p. 181). I chose to use domain and taxonomic coding because its emphasis on the interplay of knowledge and behaviors is particularly congruent with the neo-pragmatist paradigm and the focus of this study (i.e., the relationship between Zen Buddhist perspectives and actions taken in response to suffering). Also, the interview data included a rich variety of concepts, and domain and taxonomic coding provided a method for clearly organizing concepts in a hierarchy that showed their relationship to each other.

Domain and taxonomic coding involved reviewing each interview transcript again, focusing on the text segments that I had identified as particularly important during the previous phase of structural coding. During this review, I highlighted concepts that the interviewee emphasized or that were especially relevant to the interview and research questions. Concurrently, I assigned more specific, thematically relevant codes (e.g., *suffering* as “a doorway to compassion and non-duality”) to the identified text segments. After reviewing all of the interview transcripts in this way, I reviewed each transcript once more to code any information that I may have initially missed. During this phase of coding, I iteratively organized coded concepts into a hierarchy of domains and categories (see Appendix F). Domains are broad groupings of similar concepts (e.g., Zen practices), and categories are the discreet concepts that
constitute a domain (e.g., sitting meditation, walking meditation, chanting sutras) (Saldaña, 2016).

Importantly, domain and taxonomic coding is a two-step process that also provides a typology of semantic relationships for clarifying the connections between salient concepts in the data. Saldaña (2016) lists Spradley’s (1979) nine semantic relationships, which include types such as rationale (i.e., “X is a reason for doing Y”) and attribution (i.e., “X is [a characteristic] of Y”) (pp. 181-182). The semantic relationships between concepts in this study are displayed and examined in relation to theoretical propositions in the Discussion chapter.

**Similarity matrices.** As part of the process of discerning which relationships exist between concepts in the data, I conducted a matrix analysis using NVivo software. Guest et al., (2012) state that similarity matrices can increase the efficiency and transparency of data analysis by graphically displaying code frequencies and, importantly, overlap between codes. During analysis, it became clear that similarity matrices, while helpful for visualizing the connections between codes, are not an adequate standalone tool for establishing semantic relationships between concepts. In several cases, overreliance on the similarity matrix would have led to an inaccurate interpretation of the data. For example, study participants sometimes emphasized a concept (e.g., non-duality) strongly, but did not mention that idea frequently through the interview. In such cases, the emphasized concept may have shown a lower coding “count” than other ideas that the interviewee mentioned often but did not emphasize. In other words, an uncritical interpretation of the similarity matrix would have underestimated or overestimated the importance of certain concepts in the data. Keeping such limitations in mind, using the matrix analysis as an adjunct to the subjective, interpretive approach of domain and taxonomic coding
helped to clarify the relationships between concepts and proved a valuable intermediary step between coding and theorizing.

Theory Development

The concepts and semantic relationships that I identified in the previous phases of coding served as the basis for theory development. Objectivist definitions of theory, which emphasize prediction and control, were inappropriate to this study’s goal of understanding the interaction between beliefs and actions. Rather, this study adopted Charmaz’s (2014) articulation of theory as an attempt to “conceptualize the studied phenomenon to understand it in abstract terms [and] offer an imaginative theoretical interpretation that makes sense of the studied phenomenon” (p. 231). Therefore, theory development in this study involved examining the semantic relationships between salient concepts in the data, interpreting their relationships to the research questions, and elucidating these relationships through relevant visualizations and a written narrative that sets forth theoretical propositions.

Strategies Used to Strengthen Validity and Reliability

This study used several strategies to strengthen the validity and reliability of its results. A qualitative study can claim validity when it “accurately… represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124) and when responses to interviews effectively address the research questions (Guest et al., 2012). To this end, this study incorporated the strategies of: (1) conducting pilot interviews; (2) conducting pilot transcript analyses during codebook development; (3) including a co-coder to establish inter-rater reliability; (4) member checking; and (5) peer debriefing. This study’s design also
integrated the strategies of triangulation, researcher reflexivity, and searching for disconfirming evidence.

**Pilot Interviews**

In order to gauge whether the interview questions, themselves, were valid (i.e., whether they evoked relevant responses that help illuminate the research questions), I conducted pilot interviews with three Zen Buddhist priests whose lifework overlaps with social work activities. These conversations enabled me to refine the wording of interview questions and to confirm that they elicit rich and relevant information.

**Pilot Transcript Analyses during Codebook Development**

As part of developing the codebook for the structural coding phase of data analysis, I did pilot analyses of four interview transcripts. I developed an initial codebook based on the study’s interview questions and analyzed four randomly selected transcripts. This process helped clarify which codes were unclear or superfluous and also provided ideas for new codes. After revising the codes on my own, I also met twice with a co-coder who provided feedback that helped to refine the codebook into its final form (see Appendix A).

**Including a Co-Coder to Establish Inter-Rater Reliability**

This co-coder independently analyzed four de-identified interviews using the finalized codebook. This made it possible to measure inter-rater reliability—or the degree of agreement between both coders—specifically for the process of structural coding. Although the utility of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research is contested (see Armstrong et al., 1997; Barbour, 2014), taking this additional step helped confirm that the codebook was a useful tool beyond the
mind of the primary investigator. Using NVivo software to compare the four co-coded interviews revealed a 91.08 percent agreement.

**Member Checking**

This study also invited interviewees to take part in member checking. Creswell and Miller (2000) explain that member checking involves “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (p. 127). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) in qualitative research. Consequently, this study invited every participant to take part in two stages of member checking (see Appendix G for the member checking recruitment script).

First, participants could review their interview transcript and the corresponding memo that recorded my initial impressions of the themes that stood out from our conversation. Second, participants could review their coded transcripts, which included codes from phases one (structural coding) and two (domain and taxonomic coding) of analysis, along with the codebook that I used for analysis (see Appendix A) and the corresponding memo. In total, 19 participants consented to participate in member checking. In two instances, participants offered minor clarifications on the themes in my memos. Apart from these cases, participants confirmed the information and perspectives shared in the transcripts, memos, coding, and codebook.

**Peer Debriefing**

As part of this research, I also engaged in peer debriefing, which Creswell and Miller (2000) describe as “the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored” (p. 129). The three members of my doctoral
committee, whose expertise spans social work, philosophy, ethics, and religious studies, provided feedback throughout the process of this study. Additionally, two more scholars with academic backgrounds in religious studies and philosophy of religion provided valuable input during the early stages of conceptualizing this study. Finally, a conference presentation on the proposed methodology for this study at the 19th Global Partnership for Transformative Social Work elicited critique that helped improve the study design prior to data collection.

Other Strategies

This study also integrated other strategies for strengthening validity (see Creswell & Miller, 2000). Since it included multiple interviews, triangulation was an inherent feature of this research. This proved essential because participants’ accounts demonstrated much overlap, but also variations in perspective that increased the richness and complexity of the data. Similarly, the process of memo writing facilitated researcher reflexivity. Taking this step helped me reflect on my own assumptions during data collection and also enabled participants to challenge or confirm those assumptions during member checking. Finally, as part of the coding process, I searched for disconfirming evidence or negative case examples in the data that would challenge my assumptions and hypotheses. While I did not find any instances in which participants clearly opposed my perspectives or other participants’ accounts, taking this step was nevertheless helpful in that it required me to remain vigilant for exceptional cases that I would need to account for in the study’s findings.
Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope of Study

This study’s inquiry rested on a few foundational assumptions. Its scope was also bounded by a few key limitations. This section briefly summarizes these considerations, which are discussed in further detail in parts of the current and preceding chapters.

First, this study was grounded in the assumption that the Zen Buddhist teachers who comprised the sample understand the self-world relationship in ways that significantly differ from most perspectives found in social work, which tend toward subject-object dualism. Relatedly, I assumed that the interviewees are able to illuminate non-dualistic perspectives of the self-world relationship in ways that have potential value for social work theory and practice. I also assumed that the interviewees’ perspectives are shaped by the cultural, philosophical, social, and political realities of the 21st-century United States. In the same way, I assumed that my own understanding of the research topic and interpretation of the study data are inseparable from the time period in which I live and the innumerable contextual factors that have molded my ways of being, knowing, and seeing. In other words, the elements of this study—including its findings—were undoubtedly shaped by my own identities as a social worker, a Zen practitioner, and many other factors.

This study’s scope was defined by key limitations. Due to practical constraints (i.e., time, financial cost, language barriers, etc.), this research only included interviews with Zen Buddhist teachers who live in the United States. This means that the interviews did not capture the perspectives of Zen teachers in Asia and other parts of the world. One step that I took toward offsetting this limitation is integrating perspectives from international Zen literature throughout the text of this dissertation. Also, this limitation helped define the scope of this study as an
exploration of 21st-century Zen Buddhism in the United States. However, this study is limited in that it only included a sample—and not the entire population—of Zen Buddhist teachers whose lifework overlaps with social work. Inevitably, some voices were left out of the conversation due to the practical constraints described above.

Relatedly, a potential limitation of this study design is that it did not include a demographic questionnaire. Several factors supported the decision to eschew this questionnaire. First, it was clear from the beginning of this study that the interviewees are people with multiple important commitments (e.g., serving as religious guides, community leaders, working professionals, activists, parents, etc.). Therefore, I was cautious to avoid imposing any additional expectations on their time beyond the initial and, in some cases, follow-up interviews. Second, because the interview protocol elicited information based on a shared religious orientation and were largely unrelated to more specific demographic considerations, I suspected that participants may have questioned the relevance of a demographic questionnaire and perceived it as an avoidable burden on their time. The pilot interviews with three Zen priests, who each expressed a preference not to complete a demographic questionnaire, validated this assumption. Finally, each of the participants consented to be identified by name in this study (see Appendix D). As this study did not aim for anonymity, the demographic information that is often used to describe anonymous samples seemed superfluous.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research did not expose participants to risks beyond those experienced in their daily lives. However, I took steps to ensure the safety of participants throughout the study in accordance with standards for ethical research required by Loyola University Chicago’s
Institutional Review Board (IRB). A copy of the letter confirming IRB approval of this study is found in Appendix H.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter describes salient themes from this study’s interviews in terms of categories and domains. Interview excerpts serve to illustrate and breathe life into the ideas that I discuss. Because the concepts in this chapter are closely interrelated, the provided interview excerpts, rather than narrowly speaking to discreet concepts, often illuminate multiple categories and domains from this study. These categories and domains contextualize the next chapter’s discussion, which focuses on three theoretical propositions related to this study’s research questions.

Description of Categories and Domains

This section describes the categories and domains used in this study to classify salient concepts and themes in the data. As noted in the discussion of domain and taxonomic coding in the Research Methods chapter, categories are specific codes that label thematically relevant text segments, and domains are the overarching classifications that group together similar categories. A list of this study’s domains and categories (including frequency counts) is found in Appendix F.

The data analysis described in the Research Methods chapter identified four domains that most meaningfully relate to the study’s research questions: (1) participants’ social work activities; (2) the self-world relationship; (3) suffering as…; and (4) important aspects of responding to suffering. The sections below describe each of these domains and the categories
that populate them. To increase clarity and avoid redundancy, concepts that express similar ideas are discussed together instead of treated individually. This discussion also makes connections to important practices, concepts, doctrines, and influences that participants mentioned, which comprise a fifth domain in Appendix F. Instead of occupying its own section, this fifth domain is discussed throughout the chapter to more clearly demonstrate how participants connected Zen practices and concepts to perspectives on suffering and responding to suffering.

Interviewees often mentioned aspects of Zen practice such as *zazen* (i.e., seated meditation) and chanting and, in some cases, cited specific doctrines and texts (e.g., the doctrine of the two truths, the Avatamsaka Sutra). A description of Zen’s canon and practice methodology is outside of this study’s scope, and the following sections include only basic details to provide context. The focus, instead, is how participants articulated Zen practice and concepts in relation to non-duality, suffering, and responding to suffering. For readers who seek greater detail, this dissertation’s bibliography includes many texts that provide a more thorough treatment of these topics.

**Domain: Participants’ Social Work Activities**

As discussed in the preceding chapter, one of the inclusion criteria for this study was that participants must respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities. As is often the case with social workers, every participant in this study reported engaging in multiple, interrelated social work activities. The most commonly reported social work activities were political action, psychotherapy and clinical social work, conscientization, community organizing, and group work. Less frequently mentioned social work activities included agency administration, empowerment and antioppressive practice, advocacy and social action, case
management and related practices, policy practice, social development, and family therapy. Specific definitions and examples of these activities are found in the codebook in Appendix A.

**Political Action**

In the context of this study, the category *political action* describes activism aimed at changing practices and policies that promote suffering. Twenty (57%) of the Zen teachers interviewed in this study reported engaging in a broad range of activist efforts. These efforts included, but were not limited to, protesting violations of Indigenous Peoples’ rights, protesting US invasions of other nations, lobbying against nuclear proliferation, protesting the US government’s inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, participating in international peace marches, and collaborating with organizations focused on the global ecological crisis.

**Psychotherapy and Clinical Social Work**

Twenty interviewees (57%) mentioned working in ways that overlap with psychotherapeutic/clinical social work. These interviewees represented a variety of helping professions (for lack of a better term), including social work, psychology, chaplaincy, and nursing. Of these participants, seven specifically mentioned providing psychotherapy. The remaining 13 reported engaging in work that draws on qualities accepted as helpful in clinical social work (e.g., empathy, listening, humility, etc.) but without necessarily adhering to a specific psychotherapeutic modality. Participants shared experiences of working with a variety of populations, including people with terminal illnesses, people in hospice care, veterans, children with unique social-emotional and learning needs, and members of the participants’ respective spiritual communities experiencing grief, anxiety, depression, and other forms of emotional distress.
Conscientization

The comments of 19 participants (54%) demonstrated a strong emphasis on conscientization, or raising consciousness about timely social and environmental issues. This social work activity typically occurred in tandem with participants’ political actions and community organizing. In other words, interviewees who reported engaging in political actions related to a specific issue (e.g., racial justice, the ecological crisis) also spoke about their efforts to raise consciousness about these issues, especially among their respective spiritual communities. Participants mentioned taking several approaches to conscientization, including creating subgroups within their spiritual communities to learn about and discuss social and environmental issues, giving dharma talks (i.e., instructional/inspirational talks directed at practitioners of Buddhism) and lectures that focus on social-environmental problems, and publishing books and articles aimed at raising awareness.

Community Organizing

Fourteen (40%) of the interviewed Zen teachers spoke about their role in organizing the social and environmental actions of their respective spiritual communities. These community organizing efforts often dovetailed with the teachers’ political actions and conscientization. Specific examples of community organizing included training Zen practitioners to provide meditation courses in prisons, gathering members of the spiritual community to protest the US government’s inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and creating infrastructure for Zen centers to provide services to people experiencing homelessness.
**Group Work**

Additionally, 14 (40%) of the interviewed Zen teachers reported personally facilitating groups, often integrating aspects of meditation and Buddhism. Most commonly, interviewees had facilitated meditation groups for incarcerated people. Other examples of group work included support groups for military veterans, skills training groups for people seeking employment while experiencing homelessness, and self-care and mutual aid groups for activists at risk of burnout.

**Other Social Work Activities**

Apart from the social work activities described above, participants also mentioned engaging in agency administration, empowerment and antioppressive practice, advocacy and social action, case management and related practices, policy practice, social development, and family therapy. Examples of these activities included creating programs that provide alternatives to hospitalization for people experiencing mental illness, taking leadership roles in agencies that provide services to people with HIV/AIDS, providing case management services in local governmental offices, and developing meditation curricula for school systems. While few participants explicitly described their efforts as antioppressive, it is important to note, as indicated above, that many of the reported activities included elements of antioppressive practice, which Dominelli (2012) describes as

>a form of social work practice which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with people whether they be users (‘clients’) or workers and which aims to provide more appropriate and sensitive services which respond to people’s needs regardless of their social status. (p. 331)

**Environmental Focus**

Of the interviewed Zen teachers, five (14%) indicated a strong focus on the global ecological crisis in their work. In all of these cases, the interviewees reported engaging in one or
more of the aforementioned social work activities, but with an emphasis on environmental issues. For example, one participant spoke about facilitating groups to help environmental activists manage ecological grief and burnout, and another participant organized a political action to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline’s threat to environmental conditions and Indigenous People’s land rights.

**Domain: The Self-World Relationship as…**

When asked how they understand their relationship to other beings and the world, the participants of this study responded with a variety of expressions that relate to non-duality; the worldview/realization that is the basis of Zen Buddhism. Non-duality is of primary concern to this study in that it profoundly influences how Zen views one’s relationship to other beings and the world. Although the previous chapters offer background on this topic, it is worth repeating that non-duality, in Zen Buddhism, refers specifically to the non-separability of the perceiving subject and the object perceived. As noted earlier, one classic metaphor in Zen Buddhism for non-duality is that of the ocean and the waves. Each wave (i.e., each being/phenomenon exists as a distinct entity, but cannot exist apart from the ocean (i.e., the totality of reality) and other waves (other beings/phenomena). The Zen canon is rich with symbols and metaphors for non-duality, and Zen teachers have historically expressed their realizations of non-duality using idiosyncratic, and sometimes poetic, words and actions. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the teachers interviewed in this study also described the self-world relationship in myriad ways.

**Interconnectedness and Related Expressions**

Most often, participants spoke about the self-world relationship as the interconnected nature of all phenomena. From this perspective, each phenomenon is its own distinct expression
of reality. Simultaneously, all phenomena influence each other’s existence in ways both apparent and imperceptible. One interviewee described interconnectedness as

the disappearance of the sense of separation, of the veil where you feel that somehow there’s a “you” inside—maybe behind the eyes or between the ears—looking out at a world that’s separate from you. And instead of that, it’s much more of a sense that everything—including, very much, me—is a way in which all of this is manifesting. All of us, all of these things, we’re interdependent, we’re connected with each other. So, it’s not as though there’s a “me” that’s separate from the world, but I am simply one of the many ways in which the world is manifesting, along with the cups, the books, and the photos and so on that we can see here in my office. (David Loy)

Participants also expressed this perspective using the Buddhist concepts of Indra’s Net and pratītyasamutpāda. The Indra’s Net metaphor appears prominently in the Avatāṃsaka Sūtra of the Chinese Huayan tradition of Buddhism, whose doctrine is foundational to Zen. Poceski (2004) narrates,

[In] the heaven of the god Indra there is a vast net that extends infinitely in all directions. Each knot of the net holds a gleaming jewel, and because the net is limitless in size it contains an infinite number of jewels. As the multifaceted surface of each jewel reflects all other jewels in the net, each of the reflected jewels also contains the reflections of all other jewels; thus there is an unending process of infinite reflections. (p. 347)

Interviewees voiced the perspective that they, other beings, and the world are expressions of a dynamic, wholeness that—through and as its numberless phenomena—constantly co-creates itself. Or, put differently, they expressed that, rather than seeing themselves as living in the world, they understand themselves as aspects or manifestations of the world.

Participants also employed the term interbeing in reference to this perspective of reality. Interbeing is a term coined by the Vietnamese Zen teacher and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh (2012), who comments,

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist… Looking even
more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also, so we can say that everything… coexists with this sheet of paper. To be is to inter-be. (p. 413)

Participants who articulated their views in terms of interbeing tended to emphasize that our vast relational web extends not only through space but also through time. In other words, our existence is non-dual with the beings and world of the past and future, connected to phenomena throughout time and space. In the words of one participant,

I often say that, when people are sitting, everybody in their whole life is there in some way. Each of us is a product of, of course, family, friends, loved ones, teachers… But also people that we’ve never even heard of who might have shaped our history, and history, in general… Many beings. (Taigen Dan Leighton)

Emptiness and Related Expressions

While terms such as interconnectedness and interbeing are positive (i.e., they posit a certain vision of reality), Zen often describes the nature of self, other, and world in negative terms (i.e., that negate). In Mahayana Buddhism, the negative term most commonly used to refer to the nature of reality is śūnyatā, which has typically been translated from Sanskrit to English as “emptiness.”Śūnyatā does not have a nihilistic connotation but, rather, refers specifically to each phenomenon’s lack of a permanent, isolated self. One of the oldest Buddhist texts states, “sabbe dhammā anattā” [All things are not-self] (Dhammapada, 279). Such negation, in fact, often functions as affirmation via negativa. Because a phenomenon is not merely a “self” (i.e., an enclosed, static entity), it is actually a manifestation of ever-changing total reality. We may appreciate how closely related are the concepts śūnyatā and pratītyasamutpāda (interrelational arising) considering that “śūnyatā indicates both the lack of any independent essence or self in things and the interrelational dynamism that constitutes things” (Ives, 1992, p. 21). In other
words, because a being has no personal, enduring essence (i.e., it is “empty of self”), it exists in a state of interrelationship with all of reality (i.e., interrelational arising). We see this vision in the following comment by one of the interviewees:

The Buddhist concept of emptiness, as we know, is not nihilism. It’s not nothing. It’s the openness of the fullness of life. So that actually what’s happening is that, in this open space of what we might call “not-knowing,” there is all this possibility of the universal energy—which is happening all the time anyway—flowing through us. And that universal energy is the interconnection. The interconnection with ourselves, with the trees, with the birds, with the sky... So, everything is intersecting, right? We’re in relationship to what’s happening. We’re not cut off. And from that, there is the possibility of really experiencing the vast depth of this interconnection, which some people call “oneness.” And I feel that... people don’t understand it. “Oneness: It’s easy. I’m one with everything.” Okay: Then what are you going to do? If you’re one with everything, you feel that suffering. So, we go outside, then, and we respond to this suffering in a way that’s not coming from our egocentricity. Yes, we are human, and we’ll always be egocentric. But the less of “me” there is in my relationship to the world, the more the world comes into me. (Onryu Laura Kennedy)

World as Self, Self as World

Terms such as interconnectedness, interbeing, and emptiness point to a worldview that, when followed to its conclusion, implies that each being is, in a certain way, the world. Not to be confused with solipsism, which is predicated on the notion that an individual self exists, a non-dualistic perspective of the self-world relationship sees every being as an intrinsic facet of a boundless reality. As one participant voiced,

I don’t believe I’m a thing walking around in an external world. No. The world is me. Everyone I’m with… Right now, you are more me than any idea of “me” that I’m having. The ideas of “me” are not me. And so, whatever’s arising at any given time simply is me. The world is living me. And everybody else is living me. (Kosen Greg Snyder)

Another participant, citing the 13th-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen Zenji, expressed how understanding world as self allows for equanimity in the face of suffering:

Well, I think of the Gaia hypothesis idea, that the whole planet is a living organism and all beings are part of it. And beyond the planet, too… the stars, and nebulae, and
everything. Dōgen helps with that viewpoint. The mountains and the rivers are born with each person… The universe is looking out for me, taking care of me. I think that gives me some measure of equanimity as I’m responding to suffering. Even if I’m not thinking about the stars at that particular moment, the fact that I’m just part of this hugeness, and I will be tomorrow… whether I’m alive or dead, I will be… whatever I do. It just makes me feel calmer. (Susan Moon)

**The Self-World Relationship and Responding to Suffering**

As the excerpts above illustrate, the realization that all beings and the world are one’s self gives rise to a sense of responsibility to act in ways that reduce suffering. This is unsurprising considering that, from a non-dualistic perspective, every suffering being is, in a way, one’s own self. Participants used a variety of expressions to refer to this implication of the self-world relationship, such as “others’ suffering is my suffering,” “mutuality of care,” “kinship,” and “belonging.” Using the term kinship, one participant commented,

> When you see every being as kin, and not somebody “out there” whom you are related to in some way or other, but precisely as your very own flesh and blood, as your very own kin, then there’s no thinking twice about what we need to do to address suffering. It’s your own suffering. It’s my own body that is being affected. (Ruben Habito)

Another participant, whose professional background includes hospital chaplaincy, expressed a similar vision of the self-world relationship in the context of working with a suffering person:

> When I see myself in others’ situation and I don’t see much division between “I”—the self—and other beings, then I really have empathy with their suffering. So, I would try to respond to their suffering as much as I can, willingly and unconditionally. I don’t know why, but when they are sharing their situation with me, I feel something like absorbing. I don’t know how to describe this… but I am their suffering. So, their emotional distress or their other difficulties, I wholeheartedly listen to them without any dichotomization. And my practice, my daily practice, helps me to be attentive, kind, and respectful to them. And this, in turn, helps them feel at ease and also at peace afterwards. (Tenku Ruff)

That a non-dualistic understanding of the self-world relationship compels one to respond to suffering is one of the most pervasive themes in this study’s interviews. Therefore, it is examined
in greater detail in relation to one of the theoretical propositions discussed later in the next chapter, *oceanic compassion*.

**Domain: Suffering as...**

In order to appreciate the specific vision of compassion in this study’s interviews, we must first explore the variety of ways in which participants interpreted the word *suffering*. As stated in the Review of the Literature chapter, the Pali word *dukkha*, which refers to psychological-emotional unease, has a narrower range of connotations than the English word “suffering.” One of the claims of engaged Buddhism is that liberation from dukkha is tied to addressing other forms of suffering, such as socio-political oppression. Critiques include that this broadened interpretation departs from the original message of Buddhism (Deitrick, 2003). The current study, rather than engaging in this debate, focuses on how the participating Zen teachers understand suffering and how this understanding guides their actions.

*Suffering as a Doorway to Compassion and Non-Duality*

Interestingly, the aspect of suffering that participants most frequently emphasized is its ability to serve as a doorway to compassion and non-duality. Participants described suffering as an opening to connect with other beings and the world and as a valuable source of growth and wisdom. However, it is important to clarify that, while identifying the beneficial outgrowths of suffering, participants were not making light of the struggles of suffering beings by trivializing or glamorizing experiences of oppression, poverty, fear, hopelessness, grief, despair, and so on. Rather, the perspective that frequently arose in the interviews is that, by cultivating a certain relationship with the suffering that inescapably confronts us as humans, we are able to relate to other beings and the world with greater compassion and intimacy. Bearing witness to our and
others’ suffering familiarizes us with universal aspects of the human experience, such as feeling lost, afraid, and misunderstood. Using the term bodhicitta, a word that is often translated as the “mind of awakening” (Powers, 2012, p. 1) and that signifies a spirit of compassionate action, one participant shared,

One of my favorite things [is] bodhicitta. And the feeling (or at least the feeling I had) is that bodhicitta must be this happiness and joy… which I think it is, but it’s not the way the way, I think, we think it is. I remember [Chögyam Trungpa] naming bodhicitta as the “genuine heart of sadness.” And that, to me, was like, “Oh… This grief and this sadness are not aberrant or wrong.” This is our job. Our job is to let our hearts break. We can do that. We can let our hearts break. It’s appropriate. And the amazing thing is that, out of it, comes great joy. That’s the amazing thing. Who knew? (Hoka Chris Fortin)

Another participant related his experience of providing hospice care to a greater sense of openness to the world:

What happened for me every time—literally every time, I think—I stepped out of my five hours of hospice [was that] the world was transformed from me. I would step out of the door and there was a tree right in front of me, and the street, and so forth. And it was just like [being] born anew… or I was given my life again. All the worries and sorrows and so forth that I had five hours before or the previous day were just gone somehow. And I don’t want to really explain it, but I think part of it may be that having that experience of having been in the presence of people so close to letting go, or forced to let go, was just setting all my stuff completely into perspective, I guess. Not that there was any reflection on my part while I was doing that. But it was just striking, stepping through the door… I mean: Wow. I could hear the birds, and the sunshine and everything was just much more alive. I think that has happened for me particularly when I’m maybe sharing empathy or sharing vulnerability with people. There’s an aliveness in me, and in the world, and in between. Just a connectedness… (Olaf Strelcyk)

**Suffering as a Basic Fact of Reality and Universal Experience**

Participants also echoed the core Buddhist assertion that suffering is a basic fact of reality and a universal experience. According to Buddhism, suffering “marks” all beings in one way or another. In addition to the universal travails of birth, illness, old age, and death, the broad set of causes for suffering in Buddhism includes beliefs and tendencies that are typically referred to as
delusion/ignorance (Skt. avidyā) and thirst/desire (Skt. tanhā) (Gomez, 2004; Jackson, 2003b).

Avidyā and tanhā most commonly refer to the belief in an abiding self, the belief that things will stay the same, wanting things to be different than they are, and clinging to or running from things (Anderson, 2004). Considering that such beliefs and tendencies likely afflict every being, participants were apt to identify suffering Buddhism’s raison d’être. However, they were also quick to add that the Buddhist belief in the universality of suffering does not deny the rich spectrum of human experiences. As one participant whose background includes extensive service to people with HIV/AIDS voiced,

> You know, suffering is… You know, it’s not like I can say anything more powerful than what Shakyamuni Buddha said, or that we ascribe to him: Suffering is the basic truth. It is the basic truth. And, for me, as we talked about earlier, it was the AIDS epidemic that made that really clear. Just, in my body, I could see that. It’s everywhere. The trick, for people who are touched by it, is for us to be strong and say, “Yes there is suffering, and there is also joy. There is also love.” And the love we feel for someone that is suffering is a beautiful thing. And it gives us strength and it gives us power and it gives us a sense of humor. Because really, otherwise, what is there? We can’t just be sobbing and lamenting. We have to do something. (Enkyo O’Hara)

**Running from Suffering Exacerbates It**

Related to the universality and inevitability of suffering, participants also expressed that our attempts to escape suffering are often, themselves, a source of great suffering. This does not amount to an argument against efforts to reduce suffering, which would be nonsensical considering that all of the participants in this study have devoted themselves to ameliorating social and environmental problems. The point, rather, is that the human impulse to evade suffering can bring about actions that cause more anguish than the condition that one initially wished to avoid. Or, as one participant voiced,

> I think that, especially as privileged Westerners, there is something in our culture—I’m speaking specifically about sort of American culture… not even necessarily European
culture, but American culture—that rests on the delusion that life should be free of suffering, that there is a mistake if there is suffering. And I think it actually makes us tremendously vulnerable... just tremendously. Like, very little capacity for facing life when it inevitably turns towards difficulty. (Zenshin Florence Caplow)

Echoing this point, another participant commented that, when we attempt to avoid inevitable forms of suffering, we miss opportunities to use suffering as a doorway to compassion and wisdom and, furthermore, risk exacerbating our own and others’ suffering:

In a certain way, we have to stop running away from some suffering. We really have to accept it as part of life. Actually, in a certain way, it’s necessary. The ideal of, “We want to get rid of this in order to get that...” away from suffering or to be happy... it’s just an ideal. And it is suffering that generates wisdom. It is suffering that generates compassion. You know? Actually, in order for a person to authentically be herself or himself, there is going to suffering. This person would unintentionally extend suffering to those around her [if she were to avoid this]. (Guo Gu [Jimmy Yu])

**Suffering as the Illusion of Separateness**

Another aspect of suffering that participants tended to emphasize is that it often results from the delusion that one exists in a state of separation from other beings and the world.

According to this perspective, the erroneous view that we are “apart from” other beings and the world is what gives rise to anxiety, isolation, aggression, exploitation, and other phenomena that hinge on a perceived division between self and other. This is consonant with the traditional Buddhist view that “belief in selves leads to endless craving (Skt. tanha) which is unsatisfiable, because it is a longing by one illusory entity (the personal self) to permanently possess other equally illusory things” (Van Norden & Jones, 2019, p. 1). One participant contrasted the realization of non-duality with the illusion of separateness:

Well, in English translation, we are still struggling to find that terminology. “Emptiness” isn’t quite it, “dependent co-arising,” and so on. But you know: the essential connectedness of all things and impact of all things. And, in relation to that, maybe the way I understand suffering best is the delusion of separate self. That belief in separate self is the foundation of creating suffering. And that is the Second Noble Truth. And this
isn’t something theoretical. At times, there are difficult situations or difficult circumstances. That, itself, is not inherently suffering. When that turns into suffering is when there’s the clinging to a sense of things being separate. So that can be self, that can be anticipated outcomes, that can be ideas of how things should be. That’s where I think the suffering really... blooms! (Sarah Dojin Emerson)

**Suffering as Multidimensional, Perpetuated through Systems of Oppression**

As noted, the delusion of separateness is the root not only of one’s own experience of suffering, but also of the suffering that beings inflict on each other. Participants who raised this point often alluded to the “three poisons” (Skt. *triviṣa*) of greed, hatred, and delusion (Buswell & Lopez Jr., 2013). One’s perception of separation from other beings and the world leads to acts of self-elevation at the expense of others, including violence, exploitation, and complacency.

Interviewees frequently related the delusion of separateness and the three poisons to systems of oppression that function as institutionalized forms of greed, hatred, and ignorance (for an exploration of this topic, see Loy, 2003). Consequently, several participants emphasized the importance of awareness regarding the role that systems of oppression play in perpetuating suffering. In the words of one participant,

> I think that in our relationship to anything—other beings, or other nations, or nature—we interact through a social system. And if the social system is dysfunctional, our relationship with all other things—with nature and anything else—is kind of destructive. So, we have to really think of the fundamental cause of the problems in the world. The problem can be an excessive, huge military budget, such an excessive income gap, environmental destruction, population explosion, war, systematic violence, that democracy is corrupted, that big corporations and rich people use so much money for political donations and lobbying… So, the important thing is that, first, we should realize that there is a big problem. And next, we should really realize that there is no situation that is impossible to change. And so, we all have a responsibility to reverse the problems. (Kazuaki Tanahashi)

Making a similar point, another participant noted how the line between systemic oppression and personal suffering is, itself, a conceptual division:
So, that structural violence, it’s also direct violence. And it’s also an opportunity for us to take a stand morally and to understand that we are part of the system. That system is engined by our education system, but also by the corporate world and by greed, hatred, and delusion. So, you know, you see things in bigger context vis-à-vis structural violence, but that’s also direct violence against people. (Joan Halifax)

From a historical standpoint, the emphasis on the systemic nature of suffering that pervaded many of the interviews is interesting in that it highlights a debate central to engaged Buddhism: Does considering socio-political oppression indicate a logical extension of, or a departure from, the original purpose of Buddhism? This debate raises questions about the significance of dukkha in Buddhism, what it means to gain liberation from suffering, and the responsibilities implicit to identifying with the Buddhist path. Indeed, multiple participants were quick to affirm that Buddhists, especially those in the United States, must respond more vigorously to systemic manifestations of social and environmental problems, lest the religion function as an individualistic self-help program or an avenue for escapism. Other participants specifically voiced the need for Buddhism to expand its focus in order to retain relevance in the current era. The following quote from an interviewee summarizes this stance succinctly and powerfully:

Buddha did not look at systemic issues, right? In India, to this day, women are not given opportunity to study. And it’s one thing to say, “Okay, don’t get attached to getting higher education. You can be very complete and satisfied just meditating 12 hours a day.” But to consider a woman less than human, less than a male: that’s patriarchy. The Buddha never questioned these systems of oppression. And systems of oppression, it has to do with patriarchy, it has to do with sexism, it has to do with racism. In some ways, all axial age religions do that, and it’s not a big surprise. But I think that ties to how Buddhism, itself, needs to change if it has to be of significance at the time of the kind of climate crisis we are facing. (Kritee Kanko)

Either explicitly or implicitly, all participants spoke of the multidimensional nature of suffering—the fact that suffering is rooted and replicated on the individual and collective levels,
psychologically, socially, politically, environmentally, and so on. Multiple participants made the case that Buddhism and activist traditions are complementary in that they address different, yet interrelated, dimensions of suffering. These participants stressed the importance of addressing suffering as it manifests both in individuals’ hearts and minds and in oppressive systems. As one participant voiced,

I think if we don’t understand suffering with that kind of complexity, we’re not really addressing suffering. I think when Buddhists talk about suffering—the grasping of the five aggregates, and greed, hate, and delusion, and all of that—and we don’t look at institutions and the real world, we are not doing anyone a service. I think if we go in the other direction and we think that we have to just move the chess pieces around and put different people in charge, we are not doing anybody a service. So, yeah, it is important to understand [these dimensions of] suffering together and understand how they are deeply inter-twined and related. (Kosen Greg Snyder)

**Suffering as Something that we all Perpetuate in Ways**

Importantly, interviewees pointed out the danger of seeing suffering and oppression as “something out there,” caused solely by others who are separate from oneself. Rather, we are all co-responsible for creating and perpetuating suffering. Acknowledging the ways in which we contribute to suffering weakens the tendency to demonize others, and it also provides a starting point for changing actions that adversely impact other beings and the world. As one participant expressed,

One of the things that is compelling to me, and difficult, is to try to look at the ways in which I participate in systems of suffering. And I think that it’s extremely important to recognize one’s own suffering, to also recognize that other people experience their own other manifestations of suffering, and that we may actually be participating in the creation of that suffering... and to really look at our impact on the world as individuals, and also as members of a [society]. So, it’s all very complex. It’s not a simple question, you know? …So, the root question here was what’s the most important thing to know about suffering. I think: to understand one’s own participation in the system of suffering, and to allow that to provide the ground for compassion to arise. The other thing that comes to mind just really immediately is to cultivate religious practices, whether they’re Buddhists or other, that allow you not to turn away from that suffering. Because it can be
ugly. It can be unpleasant. It can be contagious. So, how do we learn to stand our own ground in the face of that? Because if we can’t do that, we can’t be of any help to anyone, nor to ourselves. (Hozan Alan Senauke)

Domain: Important aspects of responding to suffering

Beyond defining suffering, interviewees offered myriad ideas for how we may respond to suffering. The following sections describe these aspects of responding to suffering, which are of central importance to the theoretical propositions posited in the Discussion chapter.

Being Here Fully

Participants most frequently identified quality of being as the most essential aspect of responding to suffering. Interviewees spoke to the importance of putting aside preoccupations and wholeheartedly attending to the person and situation unfolding in one’s presence. Such quality of presence establishes the ground out of which fruitful effort may arise. In other words, without fully being here, it is unlikely that one will be able to meaningfully serve another being. The knowledge, skills, and solutions that we may be able to offer lose power when they are not based in a sensitive, responsive connection with those in our presence. Conversely, when we wholeheartedly share our presence and care, our quality of being serves as a conduit for our other contributions, such as skills and knowledge. This is to say that skills and knowledge are especially useful to those whom we serve when they arise in the context of wholehearted connection. This is evident in one participant’s response to the interview question, “Which actions do you consider most fundamental for responding to suffering:”

*Being there*… being with the person who’s suffering. That’s what we want most. We know that your friend can’t solve your marital problems right away. We even know that your physician may not be able to help with the difficulties. But we all need people to be proximate to us. This is a human need… holding one another’s hands. I’ve seen how seasoned practitioners have dealt with the ill, and a lot of it’s touching and just being present. Some enjoy very gentle chanting. Some enjoy guided meditations or *metta*
meditations, even if a person is comatose. One of the worst forms of human suffering is feeling alone. We have that need to be with somebody. (Jack Lawlor)

Being here fully is fundamental, also, to other key aspects of responding to suffering described in the following sections, such as opening to suffering and not-knowing.

**Opening to Suffering**

Maintaining wholehearted awareness necessarily includes an openness to our and others’ emotional experiences. Participants frequently voiced the importance of a receptive attitude toward the entire spectrum of human emotion, from joy and love to sadness and anger. This study’s analysis identified several interrelated outcomes that arise from developing intimacy with our and others’ experiences, including suffering.

First, suffering is a bridge that connects us with others. As noted earlier, the universality of suffering creates a common ground between humans. Developing intimacy with our own suffering deepens our intimacy with other beings and, similarly, opening to others’ struggles allows us to more fully affirm our own humanity. As one participant stated,

[From one perspective], there is no particular difference between my suffering and other beings’ suffering. Right? I mean, we’re in it together. There is no “helper” or “helped” when I am with somebody who’s suffering. I don’t have the illusion that I am going to make it better for them. What I have is the capacity to be present with it in exactly the same way that I’m present with my own. So, one of my longtime Zen teachers, who was also a director of hospice, always says, “The greatest gift we can give another person is the quality of our heart-mind.” So, in a way, that is the opposite of doing anything or helping in any way... but: *How present can I be?* [This] is directly related to how willing I have been able to be with my own suffering. The degree that I am not willing, have not been willing, or am not willing at that moment to be with what I’m experiencing directly affects how present I can be with the person that I am face to face with. (Zenshin Florence Caplow)
Another interviewee expressed how, in addition to establishing connection, opening to another person’s suffering can be liberating and energizing and, paradoxically, feel less depleting than trying to close oneself off to suffering:

I think one reason I enjoy psychotherapy and I’m very relaxed with it after all these years, or in my work as a Zen practitioner and Zen priest and teacher in a variety of situations… I feel that when I feel separation, it’s draining. And I know that. But I also know that when the sense of wholeness is there, it’s effortless. So, I always know that I’m off if I’m feeling depleted because it means that I’m setting up something dualistic. And I’m not in touch with the fact that we are mutually supporting each other. So even if someone is in a difficult situation… Like, I am working in psychotherapy with someone who had a recurrence of a very lethal form of cancer. And we’ve been working together for years when things have been going well, almost as if this specter of death and suffering didn’t exist. But now it’s there, and it’s a very painful thing to come to terms with. But I find that, still, I feel honored to be part of that process and to feel, with someone, what’s going on. So, some people are like, “Ugh, I don’t want to hear that. That’s depressing.” For me, this is just one more opportunity to connect. All suffering is just this opportunity. But when I’m turning away, it takes a kind of energy or depletion to turn away, at this point, for me. So, I see a deep connection. (Hogetsu Laurie Belzer)

This quote highlights the point that opening to the experience of suffering changes our relationship to it in ways that allow us to live with greater freedom and compassion. Some participants expressed this point in terms of fear and fearlessness. When we are afraid of suffering and approach interactions in ways that attempt to avoid it, we also reduce our exposure to the beauty and richness of ourselves, other beings, and the world. In other words, fear of suffering diminishes our sense of connectedness. Conversely, acknowledging and looking more deeply into our suffering increases our sense of connectedness with ourselves, other beings, and the world. Participants often referred to this process of opening to suffering as bearing witness. This term was popularized by the contemporary Zen teacher Bernie Glassman, who, along with his community, pioneered “bearing witness retreats” that are held in places of immense suffering, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Glassman, 2013).
Also in consonance with the ethos of bearing witness, participants shared that opening to suffering is a catalyst for action. Interestingly, interviewees noted that allowing ourselves to experience suffering is not deadening or crushing in the way that we may imagine but, on the contrary, can be a tremendous source of energy and creativity as we respond to problems in the world. One participant shared a moving account of how a great personal loss became the catalyst for compassionate action:

Well, from my own life, I can just say that when I was 40 years old and my brother was 30 years old, he committed suicide. He was in a locked ward in a regional treatment center and he hung himself from a sheet. And I felt guilty, overwhelmed, inadequate, mad... And I just came here [to the Zen center] and sat in the mornings. And I just kept feeling those things. But, out of that, I got energy because I just sat with it. I was just with it. I got energy to imagine different options so that people wouldn’t get locked up like that... wouldn’t kill themselves. So, because I was able just to be with it and just sit with it, morning after morning, not knowing anything, with don’t-know mind but with a broken heart, I was able then to gradually and in an osmotic way, rather than conscious mind—well, and not kicking out the conscious mind—was able to think, “Oh, I really want to work on figuring out a way to do this differently here.” And so that propelled me to go to the legislature and try to develop programs so that people wouldn’t get locked up. There’d be crisis residences, homelike environments... So, all that came out of my own suffering. And then I was able to create them in Minnesota... If he hadn’t committed suicide, there would not be all these crisis residences in the Twin Cities now. And if I had not had zazen practice to deal with his suicide, that would not have happened either. Zazen practice opened me up... But I had to go through agony, through grief, through confusion. But I just stayed with it. That’s zazen. We just stay with it. (Tim Zentetsu Burkett)

**Not-Knowing**

Presence and openness to suffering are related to another quality, which, in Zen, is often called not-knowing. Not-knowing, in Zen, is not the same as ignorance. Rather, it is a quality of curiosity, wonder, and openness to experiences as they unfold. It is also the willingness to put aside preconceived notions in order to experience things on their own terms instead of relying exclusively on conceptual interpretations. As one participant explained,
You know... We [as human-service professionals] have some framework, such as a mental health framework, or the DSM-5, or social work theories, or all these theories we have. And how do we hold that loosely and let the individual, let the moment reveal itself? ‘Who is this being?’ You know? (Keiryu Liên Shutt)

In order to appreciate not-knowing, we may consider a metaphor in which a map is a symbol of conceptual knowledge. Clearly, a map is a helpful tool for understanding and navigating our surroundings. However, continuously holding a map to one’s face obscures the actual landscape. Not-knowing involves putting down (without throwing out or diminishing the value of) the “map” of conceptual knowledge in order to experience the world as it is. As another participant expressed, this openness also involves active curiosity and questioning:

I always approach with curiosity, you know? And I try never to lose my curiosity. I don’t come to conclusions about people. We know everything’s changing all the time, and I don’t know their world. Even my students, I don’t know their world, you know? So, I’m just curious and I’m asking a lot of questions and checking things out and asking if I’m hearing you correctly… I might repeat: “This is what I’m hearing. Does that resonate with you?” Because I don’t assume I know, right? Because we have very different experiences, right? So that’s kind of how I work. I’m just curious. I ask a lot of questions. I try to stay connected energetically. (Wendy Egyoku Nakao)

Humility

As the preceding excerpt demonstrates, participants emphasized that the unknowability of each being and situation inherently gives rise to a sense of humility. Because we cannot know what is best for any person or in any situation, we may only try our best to be of service, all the while acknowledging that our actions may be flawed and incomplete. As one interviewee described,

There’s a final step, which is: don’t get committed to a fixed outcome. Stay loose. Because you really can’t know what the consequences are to every action because there are so many factors at play that you don’t have control over. So, have a kind of humility in front of what you’re doing, and a kind of curiosity with you, and to see every action and reaction to that action as an opportunity to take another step deeper, correct course, whatever needs to be done. And that takes a kind of egolessness. Because sometimes we
are very, very committed to being right, or to being seen in a certain way by others, or to proving our own worth and value to ourselves. And all that clouds our view. (Joshin Byrnes)

The egolessness mentioned above also implies deference to the capability and autonomy of each being. Rather than assuming that helping professionals possess superior knowledge and skills, not-knowing demands an acknowledgement of each being’s wisdom and ability to contribute solutions. From this perspective, the spirit of service-oriented actions would naturally be collaborative and mutually-supportive. This attitude toward service contrasts models of helping grounded in authoritarian, top-down, or saviorist mentalities. As one participant shared,

Well, you know it’s very dangerous to come from on high, to come from a place of holiness and to interact with anyone. I mean particularly, I know in our prison work: Yes, this guy did some terrible things. And he still needs a hug and needs to be talked to, needs to be loved. I think that as long as we are moving out of reactivity and judgment, we’re unable to really heal. I mean, I saw that in the late 80s and early 90s with some of the religious people working with people with AIDS. Because they were so judgmental that it was not healing for them to even be with a person. Because all they wanted to do was kind of push them away, and you can just feel that in a human-to-human connection. Not to mention how it is when you speak to others or you’re setting up a service organization or something like that, where you need to really let people know: These people are in need, and you’re there to serve them, not to lecture them, but to serve them and to find the best way to serve them. (Enkyo O’Hara)

**Particularity: Other as Other in Non-Duality**

This excerpt relates to another crucial point that participants emphasized: that, in nonduality, the other is both non-other and, concurrently, fully other. Interviewees often illustrated this point by citing what Buddhism calls the doctrine of the two truths, which posits the simultaneity of ultimate reality and conventional reality (Thakchoe, 2016). From the ultimate perspective (Skt. paramārtha-satya), which is often referred to using the term śūnyatā or “emptiness,” it is not possible to conceive of reality in terms of self and other. However, this perspective does not invalidate the conventional perspective (Skt. saṁvṛti-satya), in which
distinct beings have their own, particular experience of reality. The following excerpt from a
participant speaks to this viewpoint and its importance:

So, both of those things are going on… It’s very important to acknowledge that there is a
separation between me and a cat, or me and a person whose suffering I read about in the
newspaper, or me and you. It is very harmful for me to make assumptions that, because I
get a feeling, that I understand that it is also your feeling. I shouldn’t make assumptions
that it is also your experience, or the experience of that other mammal, dog or cat, or that
bird, or that tree. That, I think, is a real delusion and it leads to oppression, to
colonization, to feeling we know what is good for other beings when we don’t. And
sometimes we can understand it if they talk, and we can ask them and they feel safe
enough to answer. So that’s a whole field of inquiry, which is I think really important
probably for social workers to observe. And certainly, as a Buddhist practitioner, I feel
that to be true. (Mushim Ikeda)

As this interviewee noted, the recognition of particularity (i.e., conventional reality) is of vital
importance to helping professionals, who are ever at risk of imposing their own ideas on others
and homogenizing others’ experiences and needs. Returning to the metaphor of the oceans and
the waves: It is perilous to only see the underlying ocean, forgetting that each wave experiences
reality in its own way.

**Strengths**

In the service relationship, the recognition of particularity and a weakened role of ego
correspond with a greater affirmation of the strengths and humanity of those involved.
Participants often related the importance of recognizing and leveraging people’s strengths to the
Buddhist concept of *upāya*, which is most often translated as “skillful means.” As Jackson
(2003a) points out, *upāya* originally described actions taken to efficaciously bring about the
enlightenment of beings. However, in Mahayana Buddhism, *upāya* is frequently related to the
activity of Bodhisattvas, archetypal beings who use skillful (i.e., effective, resourceful, creative)
means to relieve suffering (Leighton, 2012). Understanding *upāya* as the broad and creative use
of strengths when responding to suffering logically implies the preciousness and power of each individual’s unique capacities. As shown in the following example, participants noted that this ability to contribute to solutions is a universal quality:

It’s amazing because you see people—especially in the last few weeks with the coronavirus pandemic—you see medical professionals and others, and it’s just so obvious that they’re so clear and they’re so compassionate. I mean, they’re solid because they do have a vow and direction… people who are just focusing on what they do… And so, we all have our gifts… And it can be anything. It can be anything. You hear these great stories of someone who collects trash. They can become great bodhisattvas, you know? If that’s what they’re good at, there’s nothing wrong. Somebody has to collect the trash. And if that’s what relaxes them, if that’s what they’re into, then they can do all kinds of good things with that. And the wages that they make can help their family, their community. (Soeng Hyang [Barbara Rhodes])

**Intuitive-Experiential Responding**

Also in consonance with the ethos of upāya and not-knowing, participants often described a mode of responding to suffering that is sensitive to the uniqueness of each situation, that holds methods and expectations lightly, and that is informed simultaneously by intuition and experience. As described earlier, not-knowing involves encountering each being and situation with an attitude of openness and freshness. Since it is impossible for a situation to exactly replicate what happened in the past, we cannot assume that our pre-conceived notions and knowledge apply to the reality in front of us. At the same time, as mentioned before, this attitude does not mean disregarding conceptual frameworks and potentially helpful knowledge. Rather, it involves holding them lightly so that they do not obscure our ability to see beings and situations on their own terms and to respond intuitively and creatively. One interviewee, sharing her experiences of working with people with HIV/AIDS, recited a pithy mantra that she created and has relied on for years when responding to suffering:
Stop, watch, listen, listen, remove the ‘I,’ and you’ll know what to do. (Myoshin Tricia Teater)

In other words, when we privilege listening, sensitivity, and openness over pre-conceived ideas, potential solutions arise on their own as a function of our intuition. In this way, our actions are guided by both intuition and experience, which includes acquired knowledge. Another participant described this intuitive-experiential mode of responding in the context of our interview and in his practice as a clinical social worker with children:

You’re sharing you with me, so that’s what I’m responding to. The children also share themselves with me, and each other, and the teachers, and the teacher [shares] with me, and the flow of the classroom [is shared by] all of us. So, I live in the middle of that. And my experience is that people are able to perceive other people’s distress. It’s a little bit like a voice calling to you. Like, “Hey, Siddhesh: My foot is caught in the door.” If you hang around really small children, particularly once they’re able to move, they’ll respond to other people’s distress. We’re wired for it. (…If they, themselves, aren’t in distress.) To me, that’s a natural human capacity, inherently… And so, in that kind of way, that’s the mind I bring to my clinical work. (Jok Um [Ken Kessel])

**Responding from Self-Awareness and Stillness**

This type of situationally informed, intuitive-experiential action arises from a mindset of self-awareness and inner stillness. It may seem contradictory to describe a state of mind as both engaged and still. Yet, Zen adepts have long praised clear, responsive mind:

Stillness and motion return to stillness.
Stillness turns into motion.
If you are caught in either,
how can you know they are inseparable? (Jianzhi Sengcan, in Tanahashi, 2015, p. 68)

Participants framed self-awareness as attentiveness to one’s own mental and physiological experience in the process of responding to suffering. One interviewee noted that her interactions take on a more immediate and vivacious quality when she is grounded in moment-to-moment self-awareness:
Again, it’s that ironic thing of, if I can factor in myself so that I have a sense of my own embodied physical sensation... It’s so curious... because we would think, “Oh, if I’m attending to myself, then I’m not listening. I’m not fully with you and what you’re saying.” But my experience is that it’s totally the opposite. If I allow myself... If there’s some awareness, I can feel my feet, I can feel the tensions I am carrying from what happened earlier... The more I can do that and actually make it really physical, and not the story of what happened earlier, but like, “Oh yeah, there’s a little whirling in my belly...”—just let it be one of the ingredients—then I can actually hear people better, and what’s happening is fuller. (Sarah Dojin Emerson)

Self-awareness and inner stillness coexist and, in fact, seem to arise in a mutually supportive process. Moment-to-moment physiological-mental-perceptual awareness requires and, concurrently, nourishes a stillness in which superfluous thoughts do not disappear, but come and go without distracting from the moment at hand. Correspondingly, a state of inner stillness enables a relaxed, receptive attention in which responses to suffering seem to arise on their own.

As one interviewee expressed,

*Usually, I practice relaxed and clear mind. And with that practice, I can have deep listening to people and have empathy for their sufferings. And from that clear mind, I usually can do something to help them without planning previously, pre-planning. Only when I’m contacted with them, I would know what I should do for them. That comes from my heart and my clear mind. And I think that ability comes from my daily practice.*

(Ni Su Thuận Tuệ)

Interviewees also pointed out that developing inner stillness is an important component of *responding* to beings and situations as they unfold in the present, rather than *reacting* based on emotional habits and prior experiences. When making this distinction, interviewees often articulated their views in terms of *karma*. Karma is a term that, in popular use, is often confused with a cosmic law of moral retribution (i.e., “What goes around comes around.”). Rather, karma, which translates literally to English as “action” (Bronkhorst, 2004), connotes that every action creates a result. When understood as an endless sequence of co-creating causes and effects, it becomes clear that karma is associated with the concept of interrelational arising (Skt.
pratītyasamutpāda) discussed earlier. Specifically, participants voiced the need to develop an awareness of our individual karma and to work toward transforming harmful tendencies that influence how we respond to suffering. For example:

Occasionally, I’ll have a student or kind of a student who wants to go off and march on the Capitol or something. And I say, “You can do that. But you might want to spend some time looking at your own aggression.” A metaphor I often use is that, sometimes when the humidity is just right and we hit the big drum in the zendo, one of the windows will instantly rattle. It’s just that resonant. If you take this unexamined aggression out there, and you think you’re all peaceful, and you get into an environment that’s extremely violent, you can find that resonating with you. And suddenly you turn into what you’ve been fighting, what you’ve been opposing. It’s so easy to do that. First, find out who this is [points to own body]. I wish I had a better, easier answer. But we have to find out who we are. (Sokuzan Bob Brown)

Another participant shared her personal experience of precisely the process mentioned in the excerpt above:

So, when I take action... and I had to learn how to do this because, before, I took action from my rage, and from anger, and from the despair. And so, as I continued to practice over the years—and I didn’t decide I was going to do this… This just came as I practiced… It came into my life, into my world—I noticed that the more I was still, and the more silence in my life, I began to notice that my actions were changing… Zazen offers that experience. And so, when I say, “I’m practicing,” I’m not practicing to be kind or to be compassionate. I am practicing silence and stillness. And what I say comes through that silence. (Zenju Earthlyn Manuel)

**Standing up and Speaking out**

Participants’ descriptions of inner silence should not be confused with passivity. Interviewees were consistent in framing inner silence as the ground from which action arises, and not as an alternative to action. As the following interview excerpt demonstrates, a mind of self-awareness and stillness may serve as a source of determination to speak against injustices and take direct action:

There’s an awareness that, as imperfect and limited as it is, I continue to try to work on remembering, especially when we’re out there in the politics and all that: The way that
you are able to stand for things is to recognize that that’s where you’re supposed to be. This is where you are in the world. You stand up, and if there’s somebody there to shoot you down, you still stand. You still walk, maybe with fear—we’re human beings and all feel fear—but just know that you belong there, that this is your place. Whether it seems dangerous or right or wrong or whatever, you stand in that place. (Chimyo Atkinson)

Engaged Buddhists have, in many ways, argued against the notion that the religion is inherently or unalterably quietistic (for example, see Ikeda et al., 2012) or promotes a fatalistic acceptance of suffering as part of the natural order of things. As the following participant’s words demonstrate, we may understand anger, outrage, and actions against injustice as naturally occurring phenomena:

I fully understand that [the immense societal suffering] happening right now is “natural.” And my inability to accept it is also natural. I saw a bumper sticker [while I was] going to the ICE detention [center to meet with asylum seekers] the other day that said, “I’m done with accepting the things I cannot change…” You know, like the Serenity Prayer. The bumper sticker says, “I’m done with accepting the things I cannot change. I’m going to start changing the things I cannot accept.” And that’s natural, too. They’re both natural. (Myozen Joan Amaral)

Avoiding Demonization

While participants made it clear that fierce action is often an appropriate response to suffering and oppression, they also cautioned against slipping into demonization. From a non-dualistic standpoint, each being is shaped by forces that span space and time. Therefore, any view that reduces a being to a single characteristic is inherently dualistic in that it imagines a discreet, static “self.” Demonization, therefore, is at odds with the perspective of the self-world relationship described in this chapter. One interviewee related this consideration to his own work:

I would say that when I was an AIDS activist and working in the world in that way, I always divided the world up into the good guys and the bad guys, and the victims and the perpetrators. And I always imagined myself as the rescuer in that situation… “We’re with these victims these poor people with HIV, or heroin addicted,” and so on. And then there
were the perpetrators, the awful government, people who were holding back on funding or creating regressive policies. I just divided up the world in that way. And then I would feel like I was riding in on my white horse, rescuing the situation, condemning the perpetrator. I came to realize in some way that I was perpetuating the very violence that I was protesting by viewing the world in that way, and I needed to step out of that triangle. The notions of good guys and bad guys, we make it up. It’s a made-up narrative. It’s a made-up story. That’s not to say that bad things and good things don’t happen. They do, and definitely cause harm, and we can cause healing. But nobody is just one thing. And it’s a disservice to the dharma, actually, to commit oneself as seeing people as just one thing. (Joshin Byrnes)

The Importance of Self-Care

It is important to add that, while interviewees promoted resistance to injustice, they concurrently emphasized the need to care for one’s own wellness. Throughout the interviews, self-care appeared as a multivalent concept that participants expressed from a variety of standpoints.

One consideration that interviewees frequently noted is the need to safeguard one’s own wellness in order to be able to sustainably respond to suffering. Without an intentional and practicable approach to self-care, one risks burnout and a diminished capacity to serve other beings. Relatedly, if we do not take time and energy to tend to our own needs, we may unwittingly transmit our suffering to others. As one participant articulated,

Because whatever you got, you give. Right? Whatever it is. So, to be aware what you’re bringing into the patient’s room, to the community meeting, to the invitation for conversation to have tea with somebody… Your own presence, the quality of your own presence, for me, is what the practice is about. Because we’re not just words, we’re not just thought. We’re energy. Our energy impacts the energy of other people. I’m still talking about interbeing. One of the things I try to help other people who are social activists to understand is that energy is beyond doing. Energy is about being. So, you can do a lot of things, but the quality of energy you put into that doing will influence that doing. If you are bitter, and that’s why you’re doing social work, then bitterness is what you transmit… or sadness, or grief, if you haven’t been able to work with that yourself. This, for me, is all about interbeing. (Larry Ward)
Echoing this point, another participant added that caring for oneself does not precede or follow caring for others. Rather, they constitute a constant, iterative growth process:

We have to help ourselves, and we have to help other people. It’s not “help ourselves first, then help other people.” It’s in the midst of helping other people—those around us—that we learn to help ourselves and we help all beings. So that’s the kind of spirit behind it… The need to be seen, need to be heard, need to be cared for, to feel loved. If we can’t offer that, we probably don’t feel it ourselves. So, being in tune with oneself, practicing relaxing, practicing being in tune with the undercurrent tone… seeing yourself, hearing what your heart is saying, caring for yourself… That’s foundational, like I said. So, we practice this, and then we’ll be able to translate [it to caring for others]. That is healing. That’s the foundation. (Guo Gu [Jimmy Yu])

This presentation of self-care may help to circumvent feelings of guilt among helping professionals as they think about and act on their own needs. Namely, it undoes the dichotomy between nourishing one’s own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others; a dichotomy that implies that these two goals might be at odds with each other. Instead, our ability to experience joy, love, and stability is of direct benefit to those whom we serve. It follows that, from this perspective, cultivating our own wellness and *joie de vivre* is of paramount importance because the qualities that we, ourselves, experience are precisely what we contribute to the world.

Participants often connected self-care to community, or *sangha*. Buddhists have interpreted the term *sangha* in a variety of ways, referring specifically to the community of ordained monastic practitioners and, more contemporarily, to communities of practitioners and likeminded individuals, in general (Sparham, 2003). In this study, participants framed sangha as a vehicle for collaboration and learning as well as a source of support and nourishment on the path of responding to suffering. One participant shared,

Particularly in these times, in the last two years when I have definitely seen an acceleration in views of distress and feelings of distress… I really try to emphasize [the importance of community] in everything. It’s the sangha treasure, and how we can support each other, and support each other across differences… or maybe *especially*
across differences. I really try to unpack that for people. So, if it’s work on racism, if its work on sexism, if it’s going to an action for children who are detained… just really bringing that in… the truth of interconnectedness, and how we are all one Buddha body. (Tenku Ruff)

**Mutuality of Individual and Societal Transformation**

The understanding of self-found in the excerpts above points to another key theme in the interviews: the mutuality of individual and societal transformation. Participants voiced that, considering the non-duality of self and world, efforts toward societal change must be met with practices aimed at individual self-transformation. And, conversely, creating compassionate and just societal conditions frees individuals to pursue self-transformation. As one participant stated,

> From my point of view and experience, without the transformation of consciousness at a really deep level, social change doesn’t end up being social change. Social change ends up being a replication of what was already there. Or if I’ve been traumatized as a group and, now, I’m not in a low-power position and I have power, then I traumatize the next group… unless we get deeper into our own human nature—and I think Zen has a tremendous doorway here, if people understand Zen beyond the head. So, I see no way to have a society that’s wholesome without us being able to be ourselves in our whole being, instead of—going to psychology—the shadows we’ve suppressed that freeze us from change, that have us imprisoned in our own minds, in our own hearts, in the smallest possible way. (Larry Ward)

Interviewees frequently spoke of zazen—and contemplation, in general—as an aspect of societal change. If society is comprised of individuals, then each person’s wellbeing, stability, and action are of great importance for realizing global, systemic transformation. As one participant poignantly stated,

> The most fundamental thing is returning home to oneself, when one is able to come back to that place where one is truly at home and at peace with oneself. Now, “at peace with oneself” does not mean smug and protected in a little haven of comfort and peace, but really at home with the fact of one’s oneness with all that there is. Then, out of that place of peace and out of that place of inner belonging, one opens one’s home to all in hospitality because they also belong to that home. So, if you are at home with yourself, then you are able to truly give yourself as a gift to the world and open that home so that others may also find that they have a place in it. In that regard, if someone asks me,
“What is the best thing any individual can do or give to the world,” I can only respond by saying, “A person who is at home with oneself, who is content with one’s being, who has found one’s own peace is the best gift that you can give.” Because that peace you have found for yourself is what the world needs now. And so, it’s precisely your way of giving yourself to the world as a person of peace that can be like a candle that lights another in the dark. And that inner peace can really spread around, and hopefully everyone will get the point and we will all be lighted candles together, shining in brilliance. And so, that inner peace that comes from our practice is what we can offer to the world, and, in that way, then, that’s our key to changing the world that is now in turmoil. (Ruben Habito)

**Body as a Locus for Transforming Suffering**

Participants often associated the mutuality of individual and societal transformation to the embodied nature of Zen practice and, relatedly, described the body as a locus for transforming suffering. This observation often pertained to zazen, which we may understand both as a practice of seated meditation and also as a “posture” toward life. As the following interview excerpt expresses, our physical posture shapes our way of being:

When I’m sitting zazen... One thing that happened to me is I used to always sit facing the wall... And without really being conscious about it, there came a time when I wanted to turn around and look at the world... And one day, I just opened my eyes like that, and I looked straight out. And then the mudra, it felt like it was sort of curled around on myself... I thought, “What if I loosen that up? What if I make my body more vulnerable? What if I just put my hands out here on my lap, and this would open up the front of me? I would be exposed.” So now I don’t face the wall. I’m facing the room and, in this sense, facing the world... And the front of me is unguarded. I’m not folding into myself. And so that’s what I do now. I sit here looking out and I open the front of me. And that’s it. And it’s related to the feeling of not being guarded and not being private. (Lin Jensen)

This comment illustrates the relationship between physicality and emotional/intellectual qualities that drive how we respond to suffering, such as openness and vulnerability. Indeed, participants’ comments often blurred or erased lines between the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of the human experience. For example, one interviewee spoke to the body’s role in alleviating emotional suffering and eroding unhelpful self-narratives:
Neurologically, we get locked into a certain idea about who we are, and who we’ve been, and who we should be. And that lock creates anxiety, creates depression, creates heaviness, creates distraction from just being. And there’s a muscular component, too. We tend to carry our projections in our body. Our bodies embody our karmic past… things that happened to us when we were little kids, memories of interactions with our parents. So, it’s a neurological lock, but it’s also muscular because we carry all of this stuff in our bodies. And Buddhist practice is a lot about emancipation of the body—not just the mind, but the body—because the mind picks up on projections in the body and turns them into cognitions. But then it locks it down. So, it’s a bodily lock, and also a neurological lock. So, bodily practice means that, in my meditation, when something comes up that seems to be worrying me, then I’m checking in with my body. I’m checking: “Where’s the tension? Oh! There is a place of tension right here. What’s it like? Can I experience it broadening? Can I experience it becoming denser, breaking out, moving, tingling?” And if I can be with the sensation, then the thought unlocks itself. (Tim Zentetsu Burkett)

Taking this theme further, participants emphasized that physicality shapes not only one’s emotional-intellectual experience, but also the surrounding environment. As another interviewee expressed:

We breathe, and we are breath, and we are breathing everything. This is a physical practice… And I so much trust zazen and zazen body, the physicality of it, and sangha, and doing ritual together. There’s a million different ways. But for me, because I enter a lot through the physical and visceral, it’s breath and body. If I get off, I can come back. I know it. It’s palpable. I remember my first Buddhist teacher saying that if one person walks through a square with intention and presence, it changes everything. And I thought: We can all be that person. That’s our responsibility, and we do affect. Clearly, we are co-creating the world together. (Hoka Chris Fortin)

The final comment in this excerpt draws our attention to a critical point. According to this study’s interviews, body and mind are not only a reflection of the individual’s environment—they actively create it. The creative function of body and mind is, itself, an aspect of non-duality. Because each phenomenon actively creates other phenomena, we cannot consider any phenomenon as “separate” from others, as the following interview excerpt demonstrates:

There are open moments when there is no separation, when [the world] is not external to me. And of course, you know, in our studies... we do a lot of study on the Mind-Only School. And the closer you look, the more you see that what you see as “external” is
shaped by mind. And that can be abstract, but sometimes it’s not abstract. Sometimes it’s really powerful and piercing... One of the things that’s very powerful to me is a version of the Bodhisattva vows that you find in the Platform Sutra. Where the Sixth Ancestor, instead of the usual kind of, “Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them,” he says, “Sentient beings in my mind are numberless, I vow to save them all.” That’s really powerful to me... And, to me, “sentient beings in my mind” implies the internal dimension. But it’s also, right now you’re a sentient being in my mind, and I’m a sentient being in your mind. It’s not just bounded by this bag of skin [i.e., body]. It’s also my mind... He’s talking about “big mind” as well. (Hozan Alan Senauke)

Participants described this co-creative process in two main ways, both of which hold implications for responding to suffering. First, embodied practices influence one’s experience of the world. Second, embodied practices influence the nature of the world. The following interview excerpt demonstrates the first principle—that embodied practices influence one’s experience of the world—while also speaking to the body as a locus for transforming emotional suffering:

Emotional bypassing is being disconnected from your own body’s messages. Your emotions come out of the body as information, and emotional bypassing is suppressing. Anger comes up, fear comes up, and instead of practicing with it, I suppress it. And if I think intellectually, I think it went away. But we now know from trauma research that it didn’t go away. It went to some other place in the body. So, in my view, most human being today in the world are walking around full of trauma. And unless that gets processed skillfully, which includes embracing our emotional existence, embracing our feelings, not running from our feelings... Once that starts to happen, in my own experience, my relationship to the natural world changes. So rose bushes become teachers, and trees become friends, and birds become allies. I mean, it’s a totally different experience of being on the planet. And when I have that consciousness in my body, I am more capable of non-cruelty in the natural world, and non-cruelty in my relationship to you, and non-cruelty among our relationships toward one another. (Larry Ward)

Considering this example, we may appreciate how violence and oppression are embodied phenomena, rather than things that occur in an outside world that is somehow apart from one’s self. And viewing these phenomena as embodied, rather than “external,” allows the body to serve as a locus for transforming them.
This point relates to the second principle mentioned earlier, that embodied practices influence the nature of the world. Participants frequently described body-centered practices, such as zazen, walking meditation (J. *kinhin*), and chanting, as having an influence on the surrounding environment. As one participant stated,

So, we’re chanting in appreciation of compassion, and it is said that that changes something. So sometimes when I chant, I think I’m chanting to the structure of the universe. You could say the Buddhas and ancestors, but I’m getting ready to change my dedication for the *Daihi Shin Dharani* to actually put the earth beings in there. I don’t see it clearly, but every time I chant the echo, which is most days, I put forests and trees and so forth in there, alongside of what you chant for people who are sick. But then, I thought I kind of want to chant to them as beings and creators, and not just as victims. (Shodo Spring)

From this standpoint, we may understand embodied practice as the exertion of world-changing influence.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The categories and domains discussed in the previous chapter serve as the basis for three theoretical propositions: bodyheartmindworld, oceanic compassion, and being-action. This chapter describes these three concepts and their implications for social work theory and practice. Although this discussion focuses on social work, the implications of this study are likely relevant to any discipline or endeavor focused on responding to suffering.

While the previous chapter is descriptive in nature, this chapter’s presentation of theoretical propositions is both descriptive and interpretive. These propositions are interpretive syntheses of the most salient concepts from this study’s interviews that seek not only to reflect, but also to express more than, the sum of their parts (i.e., the categories and domains described in the previous chapter). They build on the categories and domains discussed in the previous chapter to address this study’s research questions:

1) How do Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world?

2) How does this understanding of relationship guide their work?

3) How might this understanding of relationship alter social work’s conceptualization of “person-in-environment” and “practice?”

Each section that describes a theoretical proposition includes a graphic depiction of the semantic relationships that inform that proposition. As mentioned in the Research Methods
chapter, semantic relationships are part of the domain and taxonomic coding research method. Essentially, semantic relationships provide a way to clarify the conceptual connections between the categories and domains discussed in the Results chapter.

**Theoretical Proposition: Bodyheartmindworld**

I propose the term *bodyheartmindworld* to describe the perspective of relationship between self, other beings, and world that emerged from this study. This theoretical proposition is grounded in participants’ expressions of the non-duality of self, other, and world. The following graphic (see Figure 1) illustrates the semantic relationships that serve as the basis for bodyheartmindworld. Interview excerpts in the previous chapter demonstrated that Buddhism understands reality from two coexisting perspectives: the ultimate and the particular. Bodyheartmindworld emphasizes that aspects of what we often consider the individual self—such as our bodies, emotions, and cognitions—are particular expressions of ultimate reality; the ultimate reality that is the source and substance of other beings and the world. In other words, self, other beings, and world constitute a dynamic whole that experiences and influences itself through—or, better, *as*—its various facets.
Interconnectedness
The world is my self, all beings are my self
Other as non-other
Kinship, belonging to each other
Interbeing
One flow of being
All beings by nature are Buddha
One body
Co-creating reality
Indra’s Net
Non-self
Being of the world, a manifestation
Wholeness
Emptiness
“Non-duality”
Pratītyasamutpāda

Strict inclusion: x is a kind of y
(These are expressions of the non-dual self-world relationship.)

Co-creating reality
(These concepts imply each other.)

Indra’s Net

Non-self

Being of the world, a manifestation

Wholeness

Emptiness

“Non-duality”

Pratītyasamutpāda

Self beyond ideas, mystery, unknowability
Temporal, generational
Human-non-human non-duality

Attribution: x is an attribute of y
(These are attributes of the self-world relationship.)

Body as a locus for transforming suffering
Location for action: x is a place for doing y
(Body is a place for transforming self and world.)

[Suffering as] the illusion of separateness
Cause–effect: x is a cause of y
(Seeing the self-world relationship as separate results in suffering.)

Figure 1. Bodyheartmindworld: Semantic Relationships

Bodyheartmindworld is a newly coined term, but one that is derived from a prominent concept in Zen Buddhism. The Chinese word xin (J. shin, kokoro) is most often rendered in English as “heart-mind.” Okumura (2018) explains,

Originally, kokoro referred to the beat of the heart, which was considered to be the essential organ of life and the source of all activities. By extension, kokoro refers to all human activities affecting the outside world through intention, emotion, and intellect. (p. 1)

Furthermore, Zen consistently emphasizes the embodied nature of the volitional, emotional, and intellectual aspects of human experience. Kim (2004) speaks to the importance of body in his commentary on the eminent Zen master Dōgen Zenji,
The human body is the most primitive matrix from which the human mind evolves and with which the human mind cooperates. In Dōgen’s view, both body and mind shared fortunes with one another: “Because the body necessarily fills the mind and the mind necessarily fills the body, we call this the permeation of body and mind. That is to say, this is the entire world and all directions, the whole body and the whole mind.” (p. 101)

As Dōgen points out at the end of this excerpt, it would be mistaken to view this body-heart-mind as “one’s own.” Rather, it is “the entire world and all directions.” Dōgen’s statement reflects the Buddhist position that reality may be seen from two perspectives that imply, rather than contradict, each other: the particular and the ultimate.

From the standpoint of particularity, several of the concepts discussed in previous chapters, such as interconnectedness, interrelational arising, and Indra’s Net, convey that each phenomenon reflects other phenomena. This perspective allows us to consider individuals’ body (i.e., physical experience), heart (i.e., emotional experience), and mind (i.e., intellectual experience), and the world (i.e., reality, as a whole) as four loci that co-create and transform each other. A change in one locus inevitably brings about change in the other loci. For example, a change in one’s physical state impacts that person’s emotional experience, just as a shift in one’s emotions influences that person’s cognitions and physiology. Furthermore, any of these changes impacts the surrounding environment, just as changes in the surrounding environment have an effect on individuals’ physical, emotional, and intellectual states. This standpoint on bodyheartmindworld is “particular” in that it posits four discernible loci that influence each other.

From the ultimate standpoint, body, heart, mind, and world are facets of a dynamic whole. Life, itself, is influencing and interacting with itself. Participants spoke to this perspective using a variety of terms, including “the world is my self, all beings are my self,” “one flow of
being,” and “one body.” A canonical example of this vision is Master Linji’s (fl. 850 CE) “One True Person Without Rank,” on which the 20th-century Zen teacher and philosopher Shin’ichi Hisamatsu (2002) commented,

Linji means that the One True Person without Rank is right here in all of our body-mind, not that there is a True Person who vaguely exists “somewhere.” Rather, that single, unique True Person without Rank is clearly found in each and every one of us… Since it exists in this way, it isn’t a limited one: it is All and One, One and All… It is a One that cannot be called a “one…” We must see it all right here. Nothing is hidden… Disclosing itself in all its grandeur, the True Person actualizes itself in each and every one of us… It is the truly unrestricted, eternal Self. (pp. 30-32)

We may compare Linji’s “True Person” to the metaphor mentioned earlier of the ocean and the waves. The True Person, which encompasses the whole world (i.e., the ocean), comes to life as all phenomena (i.e., the endless cycle of unique waves). In other words, the world comes to life, sees itself, and responds to itself as the body, heart, and mind of each being.

As noted earlier, participants in this study also pointed out the vast temporal scale of this vision of the self-world relationship. Body, heart, mind, and world are a continuation of previous generations’ experiences, and they are also the foundation for the experiences of generations to come. In other words, they are loci of the past and future. For example, a person’s emotional response to stress is the result of learned behaviors that have been passed down from ancestors. And the world is a result of countless years of actions that have shaped it into its current form. Consequently, we may understand the interconnectedness of bodyheartmindworld as extending not only throughout space, but also throughout time.

Another important point worth emphasizing is that the all-inclusivity of bodyheartmindworld naturally encompasses all beings, and not only human beings. Participants frequently made mention of human/non-human non-duality; that human existence is woven into
and dependent upon the fabric of reality that includes non-human animals, plants, and ecosystems. Therefore, it would be a mistake to consider bodyheartmindworld as a type of human experience. Rather, this theoretical construct points to reality, in its wholeness, as it presents itself as the body of a cypress tree, the heart of a frog that jumps into a well, the mind that moves as a flag in the wind, and the world that extends in ten directions. Stated differently, 

With this serene snowfall
one billion worlds
arise.
In each,
flurries come floating down. (Ryōkan, 2012, p. 1)

How could we discuss
this and that
without knowing
the whole world is
reflected in a single pearl? (Ryōkan, 2012, p. 143)

Social Work Implications: Reenvisioning Person-in-Environment

Bodyheartmindworld presents us with a vision of the self-world relationship that, in some ways diverges from and in other ways overlaps with current social work theory. Most importantly, the key element that sets bodyheartmindworld apart from previous formulations of PIE is a non-dualistic understanding of the self-world relationship. Non-duality, as described earlier, signifies that perceiving subjects are not separate from that which is perceived. From this standpoint, beings are co-arising, co-creating manifestations of a dynamic, total reality. Stated differently, individual humans are not simply people “in” an environment. Rather, they are instances of that very environment coming to life, perceiving itself, and interacting with itself. In an important way, one is the person with whom one is interacting and the environment within which one lives.
Person and Environment as Co-Creating Aspects of Reality

This perspective views body (i.e., each being’s physical, embodied experience), heart (i.e., emotional experience), mind (i.e., cognitive experience), and the world (i.e., reality, as a whole) as loci that co-create and transform each other. A change in one locus inevitably brings about change in the other loci. Because they are aspects of the same reality, “environmental” phenomena (e.g., community health, societal norms, governmental policies, the ozone layer, ecosystems, etc.) manifest in individuals’ bodily, emotional, and cognitive experiences. Among the countless examples of this relationship are the well-documented impacts of community trauma on individuals’ physiological and emotional experience (O’Neill et al., 2018), the increasingly obvious relationship between environmental degradation and human health (see for example Falkenberg et al., 2020), and the benefits of green space for children’s wellbeing (McCormick, 2017). Conversely, individual experiences ripple outward to influence the world. We may consider Greta Thunberg and Temple Grandin, whose unique cognitive abilities have profoundly shaped the climate movement, animal ethics, and the neurodiversity movement, as two positive exemplars of this relationship (Grandin, 2014; Rourke, 2019).

To varying degrees, some of the conceptual frameworks that are prominent in social work discourse express the perspective that people and the environment are co-creating aspects of reality. Intersectionality, for example, is often cited when pointing out that individual identities emerge from complex combinations of environmental and personal factors, such as race, gender, and class (Baker et al., 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). Ideas from social constructionism, too, are relevant, such as its emphasis on “the centrality of discourse, in which language is viewed as a constitutive force and objects of the world are discursively produced” (Witkin, 2010, p. 14). This
assertion echoes the viewpoint that self and world are co-creating in the sense that humans, through the use of language and in the context of communities, are active architects of reality. Another notable example is the systems theory concept of *reciprocity*, which indicates that a change in one part of a system brings about changes in other parts of that system (Payne, 2015). Systems theory also examines how systems, including individuals, communities, and polities, exchange energy across their boundaries to influence each other, which seems compatible with the claim that body, heart, mind, and world are co-influencing loci. Indeed, other scholars have already noted the comparability of systems ideas and aspects of Buddhist thought, the most exhaustive exploration of which is Macy’s (1991) in-depth comparison of general systems theory and mutual causality (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*).

**A Broader Interpretation of “Environment”**

It is important to reiterate that the understanding of the self-world relationship expressed by the concept bodyheartmindworld encompasses not only human beings, but all beings. This is to say that individual persons exist in a state of interbeing with life in all its forms and, furthermore, with the conditions that create, sustain, and transform it. This point resembles current social work thought that challenges the field’s tendency to apply an exclusively social interpretation to *person-in-environment*. Bodyheartmindworld, as a construct that describes the person-environment relationship, overlaps most notably with the disciplinary literature that Ramsay and Boddy’s (2017) concept analysis describes as “ecological social work… eco-feminist social work, [and] spiritual and eco-spiritual social work” (p. 70). In general, this body of scholarship charges the field to adopt a perspective of person-in-environment that includes a greater emphasis on the interconnectedness of life and a deeper consideration of non-human
beings and ecosystems. Drawing on deep ecology, spiritual traditions, and pre-colonial worldviews, thinkers such as Zapf (2005, 2008) and Besthorn (2002, 2012) endorse a perspective of self that blurs the lines between the person and the environment. Zapf (2008), for example, writes,

> When we move toward a perspective of *person as environment*, we begin to see ourselves as dynamic components of a living system. Such transformation calls social work to look beyond interpersonal relationships to the very nature of our spiritual connection with the planet we inhabit—literally our "common ground"… I see this as a perspective of *person as environment*. There is no hierarchy as there was with "in," no collaborative partnership between equal but separate entities as there was with "with." Person and environment are one and the same, indivisible expressions of the same creation. (pp. 171-178)

Similarly, Besthorn (2002) uses the constructs of "ecological self" and "being with environment" to point to a perspective of the person-environment relationship in which "humanity is part of a complex totality of interconnected relationships, and that these connections among both humans and non-humans are the very essence of existence" (p. 61).

**A Key Difference: The Non-Duality of Self and World**

While the aforementioned perspectives from current social work thought are consonant with the findings of this study, they perhaps do not express non-dualism to the same extent as bodyheartmindworld. Bodyheartmindworld points to an understanding of reality in which self, other, and world are co-arising, co-creating aspects of the totality of time, space, and consciousness. Returning to the previously mentioned ocean and waves metaphor: The ocean (i.e., reality) comes to life in the form of its many waves (i.e., beings) and, in this way, experiences and interacts with itself. This implies that, while each being is thoroughly unique, each being shares a fundamental, vital aspect of its self with all other beings. Put differently, I am thoroughly myself, and you are thoroughly yourself, and, simultaneously, I am thoroughly
you, and you are thoroughly me. The person is the body, heart, and mind of the environment, and the environment is an expression that arises from all persons (or, more accurately, all beings). Self, other, and world are not merely interconnected. They inter-are. The following graphic illustrates this understanding of the self-world, person-environment relationship, presenting a new perspective for social work thought:

![Figure 2. Bodyheartmindworld](image)

Or, expressed poetically:

I’m in it everywhere
what a miracle trees lakes clouds even dust (Ikkyū, 2000, pp. 27)
nobody knows I’m a storm I’m
dawn on the mountain twilight on the town (Ikkyū, 2000, pp.73)

**Theoretical Proposition: Oceanic Compassion**

I propose the term *oceanic compassion* to describe the specific vision of compassion that arose from this study. In Zen, compassion is a multivalent concept that has received various
interpretations in different contexts. Ives (2005) traces some of the historical/canonical roots of Zen’s understandings of compassion, showing that various interpretations have led to actions that may challenge our understanding of the term. While this complexity is outside the scope of this study, Ives’ exploration of compassion provides important context for those who wish to understand how oceanic compassion may fit into the broader Zen landscape. The concepts that inform the specific presentation of compassion in this study are shown in the table below.

Oceanic compassion, as presented in this study, is the outgrowth of a non-dualistic perspective of reality. In other words, oceanic compassion arises from a recognition that one is not only an individual wave, but also the ocean that lies beneath. Clearly, this understanding involves holding two perspectives simultaneously. The first perspective is that all beings are one’s own self. The second perspective is that each being is completely unique and embodies a distinctive experience of life.

| Others’ suffering is my suffering, it is personal | Rationale: x is a reason for doing y (These insights evoke compassionate action.) |
| Kinship, belonging to each other |  |
| Non-duality of helper and helped |  |
| Intimacy, mutuality of care |  |
| Suffering creates responsibility (to respond) |  |
| Responding as a natural response to seeing our interconnectedness |  |
| [Suffering as] a doorway to compassion and non-duality |  |
| Mutuality of individual and societal transformation |  |
| Caring for self is caring for others, and vice versa |  |
| Caring for any being is caring for all beings |  |
| Other as other, uniqueness, not imposing beliefs |  |
| Opening to my experience opens me to your experience |  |
| Boundaries are important |  |
| Knowing our own limitations |  |
| Reconnect with yourself, the world, what you love | Attribution: x is an attribute of y (These are aspects of non-dualistic compassion.) |
| Self-care, stability in order to sustain our efforts |

Figure 3. Oceanic Compassion: Semantic Relationships
Other as Self


> You are me, and I am you.  
> Isn’t it obvious that we “inter-are”?  
> You cultivate the flower in yourself,  
> so that I will be beautiful.  
> I transform the garbage in myself,  
> so that you will not have to suffer. (p. 154)

We may appreciate the spirit of this poem by returning to the metaphor of the ocean and waves. Each wave (i.e., being) is a continuation of every other wave because all waves arise from the same ocean of reality. Because each being is an embodiment of the same reality, it follows that others are, in a way, one’s own self. Just as the entire ocean “crashes” when a wave breaks on the shore, all of reality suffers or rejoices when any being suffers or rejoices. The Zen writer and peace activist Lin Jensen (1999) illustrates this poignantly in his short story, *the Death of a Fawn*:

> If you look at a map of Oregon, you can pretty well pinpoint the exact stretch of road where the fawn was struck. You can see it in relationship to the rest of Oregon, and with a more general map, you can see it in relationship to all of North America… I tell you this because I want you to understand how Oregon spreads out from the place where the fawn died, out into Washington and Idaho and California and the Pacific Ocean. And I want you to see how none of these neighboring territories limits the extension of space, so that being, of its own nature, spreads itself across the face of the earth and beyond. Any astronomical chart will show you that the whole universe is contiguous to the exact spot where the fawn cried out, so that absolutely everything was gathered into that cry. The cry was voiced everywhere, heard everywhere, and not just at that time, not just at 5:30 P.M. on August 25, 1997, but at all times. (pp. 176-177)

> The perspective that each being is the embodiment of total reality profoundly influences our understanding of compassion. Namely, oceanic compassion contradicts the view that we may “help another” who is somehow apart from ourselves. Rather, each action that we take is tied to
our own fate and the fate of countless beings. Acts of kindness toward ourselves benefit the whole, and, correspondingly, acts of service for others nourish our own wellbeing. This standpoint problematizes the metaphor of “reaching out a hand to someone in need.” Instead, we may understand compassion as,

> When the left hand is injured, the right hand takes care of it right away. It doesn’t stop to say “I am taking care of you. You are benefiting from my compassion.” The right hand knows very well that the left hand is also the right hand. There is no distinction between them. (Hanh, 2012, p. 342)

Indeed, many participants in this study stated that responding to suffering is a natural result of appreciating our interconnectedness. Said differently, when we understand that another being is non-other to our self, a desire to respond to other beings’ suffering arises on its own.

It is important to add that interviewees did not claim that a single moment of realization engendered, in their experience, a sustained commitment to social action. Rather, they expressed that a non-dualistic view of self and other, and the resulting sense of compassion, are phenomena that arise during moment-to-moment engagement with other beings and the world. Specifically, they voiced that wholehearted, open-hearted interactions erode ego-created barriers between self and world, allowing one to experience “others” as aspects of one’s own being. Therefore, participants’ comments imply that realization, compassion, and actions in response to suffering do not occur in a linear sequence but, more accurately, co-arise and recede constantly during one’s moment-to-moment encounter with life.

**Self-compassion and its implications.** Interviewees emphasized that the sense of responsibility that arises with the experience of non-duality does not apply only to how we treat other beings and the world around us. Self-compassion, also, takes on new meaning and importance from the standpoint of bodyheartmindworld, in which others are non-other and the
world is an aspect of self. This is because, from a non-dual perspective of the self-world relationship, the implications of accepting and tending to one’s own suffering extend far beyond the individual self. One of the considerations that interviewees raised is the mutuality of individual and societal transformation; that changes in self-affect the world, and vice versa. The suffering that pervades human society manifests in beings’ body, heart, and mind. And, because each being’s body, heart, and mind are loci of the world, tending to one’s own experience changes the world in a way. Taking steps to care for oneself, then, impacts the world in the same way that cleaning a tributary strengthens the overall health of a river. From this perspective, while not diminishing the importance of outwardly focused actions in response to suffering, we may think of self-compassion as its own form of social action.

Additionally, the standpoint that each person is a locus of the past and future implies that self-compassion is a way of transforming the suffering of those who have preceded us in history as well as tending to the wellness of future generations. This is because each being’s suffering has its roots in the past. The fears, aggressions, traumas, and oppressions of the past are transmitted intergenerationally through heredity and socialization, manifesting present-day in each being’s body, heart, and mind. Therefore, self-compassion is a way to heal the wounds that have afflicted our ancestors and, collectively, our society. Similarly, because we transmit our experiences to future generations, self-directed compassion can help erode legacies of suffering, thereby creating favorable conditions for those who follow us in time.

Other as Other

The perspective that all beings are, in a way, one’s self does not negate the perspective that each being is completely unique. This “conventional” or “particular” viewpoint on reality
(Skt. saṁvṛti-satya) posits that each wave (i.e., being) in the ocean (i.e., the universe) embodies its own distinctive experience of life. The point that beings must be understood on their own terms—rather than reduced to some abstract “oneness”—is of vital importance for understanding the type of compassion described in this study’s interviews. As Sekida (2005) admonishes, “There is a Zen saying, ‘Equality without differentiation is bad equality; differentiation without equality is bad differentiation’” (p. 35).

Several interviewees clarified that, when we slip into the view that everything is “one,” we are primed to impose our own beliefs and values while ignoring others’ identity and history. In this form of dehumanization, people’s uniqueness, needs, and strengths are disregarded. In the words of the present-day Zen teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel (2015),

Being aware of the multiplicity in oneness requires that we recognize the collective nature of our lives. It is crucial that we see the variety of lived experiences within oneness in order to see who we really are as living beings. (p. 39)

Every being’s uniqueness means that there can be no single, universal approach to responding to suffering and that compassion necessarily involves a sensitivity to others’ differences. Importantly, the insight of difference compels us to craft compassionate actions based on the expressed needs of others, and not on our own notions of what is best for the world.

**Related considerations.** Interviewees raised considerations that relate to acknowledging others as other. First, several participants commented on the importance of maintaining recognizable boundaries with the people whom we serve. Non-duality, when misunderstood, creates the danger of over identifying with others and overestimating our understanding of their experiences. Additionally, we may overlay their experiences with our own, which contributes to potentially confusing and harmful interactions. For these reasons, participants stressed the
importance of knowing one’s role clearly, performing that role to the best of one’s ability, and then stepping back when needed.

This relates to another consideration that participants raised: the importance of knowing our own limitations. To overlook each being’s finitude is to misunderstand non-duality. Although each being is, in a way, the infinite ocean, each being is also a finite wave. This compels us to acknowledge that our knowledge—no matter how developed—is, at best, incomplete and provisional. Additionally, considering our limitations, our attempts at service can easily become obstacles to progress. Our ideas may be inaccurate, our vision may be clouded, our inclinations may be inappropriate, and our skills may be inadequate. This is why, in addition to knowing when to “step forward” in service, it is vital to know when to step back and allow other beings and influences to shape a situation.

Correspondingly, participants noted that our finitude means that it is necessary to care for ourselves as we respond to the suffering of others and the world. As limited beings, we must tend to our own needs if we are to sustain a practice of responding to suffering. In several cases, interviewees spoke about self-care in terms of reconnecting with ourselves, the world, and what we love. Self-care, from this perspective, does not entail avoidance of life’s stressors. (Although participants did mention the value of periodic retreats in order to regain one’s energy and balance.) Rather, self-care takes the form of intimacy with the activities, people, and places that bring meaning to one’s life. This resembles aspects of what Macy and Brown (2014) call “the work that reconnects”:

When we reconnect with life by choosing to bear our pain for it, the mind retrieves its natural clarity… The experience of reconnection with the Earth community arouses the urge to act on its behalf. As we experience bodhichitta, the desire for the welfare of all beings, Earth’s self-healing powers take hold within us. (pp. 66-67)
Thus, we encounter a specific vision of self-care that emphasizes connecting with ourselves in body, heart, and mind, connecting with others, and connecting with the world.

**Holding Two Truths Equally**

Oceanic compassion, then, does not involve negotiating a balance between other as self and other as other. Rather, it involves recognizing the equal validity and simultaneity of these two perspectives. At all times, all beings and the world are one’s self, and this insight creates an existential imperative to respond to suffering. And, at all times, all beings are fully other to one’s self, and one can never truly know the experience of another being. Therefore, actions that arise from oceanic compassion must be grounded in the understanding of the oneness of self, other, and world, while also demonstrating a recognition of differences. Or, as expressed in the first three vows of the Zen Peacemakers Order:

- I vow to be oneness.
- I vow to be diversity.
- I vow to be harmony. (Glassman, 2013, p. 19)

**Social Work Implications: The Simultaneity of Self- and Societal Transformation**

In addition to the powerful influence that one’s being may exert on others and the world, oceanic compassion and bodyheartmindworld view the individual experience of self as a locus for societal transformation. From the standpoint that self and world are two co-influencing aspects of the same reality, it is in individuals’ bodies, emotions, and thoughts that societal and intergenerational suffering manifests as living realities. Said differently, oppression and trauma do not vaguely exist “somewhere out there.” Rather, they come to being in individuals’ personal, visceral lived experience. One’s body, heart, and mind, then, are an important setting for transforming societal and intergenerational suffering.
This perspective enables us to view caring for individuals, including ourselves, as a powerful element of a systemic change agenda because tending to any being’s suffering is, in a way, responding to the suffering of the entire world. The fact that individuals inherit previous generations’ experiences of oppression—and may transmit this suffering to future generations—means that to respond to one being’s suffering may, in effect, address trauma and oppression on a vast timescale. And because societal traumas and oppressions, such as racism and sexism, manifest as individuals’ personal felt experience, we may understand caring for an individual as a type of localized systemic transformation.

Naturally, this extends to caring for oneself. Social work most often frames self-care as actions taken to enhance personal quality of life and manage stress levels (Glennon et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2011). Griffiths et al. (2019) point out the reality that social work practice, which often involves serving people who have experiencing trauma and other crises, “may invoke not only feelings of discomfort and unrest… Social workers experience threats to their emotional well-being and cannot simply shut off what they have seen, heard, and felt” (pp. 102-103). Indeed, the efforts of social workers expose them to the suffering of the world as it manifests both in the lives of the people whom they serve and in the systems of oppression that they work to erode. The high level of burnout in the field allows us to consider social workers as among those who suffer the results of widespread traumas and systemic oppression.

The non-dualistic vision of self and world expressed in this study implies that self-compassion and self-care, in addition to offering personal benefits, ripple outward to other beings and the environment. And as is the case with any being, the individual social worker is a manifestation of all time and space and, thus, is a locus for transforming suffering. As social
workers operate within and, at times, absorb the suffering of others and the world, self-compassion and self-care function to address that very suffering within the body, heart, and mind of the social worker. This standpoint means that taking meaningful steps to care for one’s own wellbeing while serving others is not merely an act of self-preservation, it is also an important element of addressing intergenerational and societal suffering.

Conversely, meaningfully responding to individual suffering requires addressing oppression that is perpetuated on the community and systemic levels. From the standpoint of bodyheartmindworld, individual experiences co-arise with large-scale realities, including oppression. This is a critical point because it prevents a serious misinterpretation: that ameliorating suffering on the individual level is a replacement for undoing systems of oppression. Just as neglecting beings’ bodies, hearts, and minds is tantamount to neglecting the world, to neglect the world is to neglect the individual. Certainly, the viewpoints represented in this research do not encourage individualistic approaches to addressing suffering, which social work thinkers have rightfully denounced as antithetical the field’s ethos (see Specht & Courtney, 1995 for an incisive and enduring critique). Rather, this study’s findings point to the profound inseparability, interaction, and co-creation of personal and systemic realities.

**Theoretical Proposition: Being-Action**

This study’s final theoretical proposition describes an approach to responding to suffering that I call being-action. Being-action is a concept derived from the semantic relationships shown in the following graphic (see Figure 4). While oceanic compassion is a specific vision of compassion, being-action is the enactment of that vision. Being-action indicates blurred lines between ways of being and ways of acting. In other words, this concept points to the stance
expressed in this study’s interviews that how we are is inseparable from the contributions that we make. I describe four interrelated themes that illustrate being-action: artless skillfulness, quality of being, bearing witness, and mutuality. Because these themes overlap, I present them not as discrete ideas but as various aspects of the same vision of being and acting.

Systemic, perpetuated through systems of oppression, multidimensional
[Suffering as] something that we all perpetuate in ways
[Suffering as] not confined to the classical Buddhist formulation
Not knowing, curiosity, wonder, openness
Openness, non-attachment to method and expectations
Intuitive-experiential responding; situational responding
Simple kindness
Being here fully, connecting wholeheartedly, quality of presence
Self-awareness while responding
Responding from silence, stillness
Responding vs. reacting
Responding with patience, care, thoroughness
Running from suffering exacerbates it
[Suffering as] an opening, invitation to connection, wholeness
Opening to suffering (of others)
Opening to suffering (our own)
Other as other, uniqueness, not imposing beliefs
Knowing our own limitations
Seeing others’ wisdom, everyone has something to contribute
Working with, connecting, solidarity, mutual support
Strengths, knowing them and using them
Responding as a community-collective
Responding with humility
Standing up, speaking out
Creativity, creating new solutions
Think long-term, generationally... not just short-term
Avoiding demonization

Figure 4. Being-Action: Semantic Relationships
Artless Skillfulness

I use the term *artless skillfulness* to describe an approach to responding to suffering that is grounded in not-knowing and, simultaneously, in knowledge and experience. Not-knowing, as described earlier in this chapter, refers to recognizing the ultimate unknowability of the world and putting aside preconceived ideas to experience reality in its raw immediacy. This diminishes attachment to methods and expectations when responding to suffering. Because reality and all beings are ultimately unknowable, we cannot decide with certainty which approaches and outcomes are truly helpful. This is not to say that we disregard ideas and approaches that seem promising or that have proven useful. Rather, we hold them lightly and with humility, knowing that each being and situation is unique. Reiterating a metaphor from earlier in this chapter: We use the map insofar as it is helpful, all the while remembering that the map is not the infinitely complex and ever-changing territory.

In this way, one cultivates a way of being and approach to situations that is “artless” in that the situation, rather than one’s accumulated expertise, informs the response. This mindset includes openness, curiosity, and trust in one’s intuition. Trust in intuition is not the same as impulsively reacting to situations based only on one’s “gut feeling.” Rather, it involves a faith that humans have an inherent wisdom that presents itself when one stills excess mental activity and listens deeply to a situation. This trust—that putting aside ego and unhelpful self-consciousness allows responses to arise of their own accord—is extolled in the Tao Te Ching:

> Can you deal with the most vital matters by letting events take their course?  
> Can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things?  
> Giving birth and nourishing, having without possessing,
acting with no expectations,
leading and not trying to control:
this is the supreme virtue. (Laozi, 1988, p. 10)

We may best conceptualize “artless” action not in terms of something added, but rather as the subtraction of rigid expectations, excessive self-consciousness, and ego-driven ideas about what is best for others and the world. Participants sometimes described this as simple kindness; simply and humbly responding to the beings and situations that present themselves over the course of one’s life. This does not mean that one should not consider large-scale problems, such as systems of oppression. Rather, it means that, during one’s journey of responding to suffering, no matter which form it takes, one can remember to act with kindness, patience, and humility with those in proximity—caring for those who are near you because life has put you in the position to do so.

In a seeming paradox, this study’s data frame artlessness as coexisting with informed, skillful responses to suffering. In several cases, interviewees related this point to the perspective that suffering is a multidimensional phenomenon that is perpetuated through systems of oppression and, consequently, our conceptualization of suffering should not remain limited to the traditional Buddhist formulation (i.e., dukkha). This position, which is explored earlier in this chapter and in previous chapters, implies that, given the complexity and enormity of suffering, equipping oneself with relevant knowledge is a critical aspect of responding to suffering. The manifestations of suffering to which the participants of this study respond are diverse and complex, including the ecological crisis, racial injustice, nuclear proliferation, and psychological trauma. Obviously, to respond to such multifaceted problems, one must acquire an understanding of the factors that influence these issues in addition to an applicable skillset. Indeed, this study’s participants are not only well-intentioned individuals, but also scholars, activists, and organizers.
Therefore, it is vital to understand that artlessness does not contradict skill and knowledge; it contextualizes them as tools to be held lightly, used sensitively, and set aside when the situation warrants.

**Quality of Being**

Interviewees also emphasized that, in addition to knowledge and skills, qualities such as wholehearted presence, openness, stillness of mind, and patience profoundly influence the process of responding to suffering. As stated earlier, this emphasis on quality of being does not downplay the importance of other contributions that one may offer, such as skills, potential solutions, and connections to resources. Rather, by allowing a deeper sense of connectedness to emerge between beings, quality of being serves as essential context for such contributions to have a meaningful impact. Furthermore, quality of being is a meaningful contribution in and of itself. Study participants frequently underscored that our simple presence and care are the most valuable gifts that we may offer to others and the world. While policy changes and action plans are vital for addressing the problems currently facing humanity, the simple actions that help other beings feel truly seen, heard, and cared for are also indispensable.

**Bearing Witness**

Bearing witness is another term that describes the way of being pointed to in this study’s interviews. The modern Zen teacher Bernie Glassman (2013), whose work helped popularize bearing witness as a practice, wrote,

> In my view, we can’t heal ourselves or other people unless we bear witness. In the Zen Peacemaker Order we stress bearing witness to the wholeness of life, to every aspect of the situation that arises… [In] Zen practice, when we do deep meditation, our identity and ego structure dissolve. Over time our minds become more transparent and therefore more spacious, with less attachment to any ideas and preconceptions about who we are. In that state we discover our oneness with life. We see that we are not just who we thought
previously, we’re the entire universe. Every creature, every person, every phenomenon is just another aspect of who we are… We are the victims, the perpetrators, and the people who stand indifferently by. We are the feelings and thoughts of all these people, who are nothing than aspects of ourselves. We are not attracted or repelled, for we are them. (pp. 76-77)

In this study, interviewees framed bearing witness as opening to suffering—both our own and others’. As noted earlier, participants voiced that attempts to avoid suffering can often exacerbate it. They added, however, that suffering can be an opening to connect more deeply with other beings and the world. Considered together, these ideas point to the possibility of a different relationship to suffering.

This relationship, in which one opens to one’s own suffering and the suffering of others without attempting to escape or force solutions, is an antidote to numbness and indifference. One’s way of being becomes increasingly receptive and tender toward suffering. Through practice and experience, one grows in the ability to be with beings’ suffering and, consequently, with their richness and joy. For this reason, interviewees shared that bearing witness corresponds with a deeper joy for life and sense of connectedness with the world. Bearing witness, therefore, both allows healing to occur on its own terms and also strengthens the connection between self, others, and the world through the profound shared experience of opening to reality, in its heights and depths, with patience, wholehearted presence, and mutuality.

**Mutuality**

I use the term *mutuality* to describe the emphasis throughout this study’s interviews on a spirit of reciprocity in the process of responding to suffering. Interviewees clarified that they see responding to suffering not as a hierarchical arrangement in which one being is “the helper” and the other “the helped,” but rather as a mutual exchange of time, presence, and care. The person,
non-human animal, plant, or environment that one cares for is also offering a precious contribution, such as the opportunity to be of service, the gift of connecting with another being, or the pleasure of deepening one’s intimacy with a place. Correspondingly, this relationship includes an acknowledgement of the wisdom and strengths of others. While one may temporarily find oneself in a position to provide service to another being, one must also keep in mind that every being has something to contribute and that roles are constantly shifting.

Participants often expressed the value of a collective approach to responding to suffering, which they often described in terms of sangha. As noted earlier, sangha has been interpreted in a variety of ways, and participants most often used the term to describe a community of practitioners and likeminded individuals. One of the stated advantages of responding to suffering as a community is that, since each being embodies a unique set of strengths, collaboration helps actualize the potential for powerful and creative responses. Acting from the spirit of mutuality involves harnessing diverse life experiences, vantage points, and skillsets in response to suffering. An additional advantage that participants mentioned is that, when responding to suffering as a collective, individuals can offer support to each other throughout the process. In other words, the community serves as a source of comfort and assistance on the journey of responding to suffering. In contrast with approaches to service that emphasize individual contributions, one instead takes refuge in community strengths and solidarity.

Mutuality also integrates the intergenerational consideration that interviewees emphasized. Namely, generations influence each other across time to support each other’s flourishing. The favorable conditions that beings in the present are able to enjoy are results of past beings’ compassionate actions. For this reason, we must consider the results of our actions
not only for beings in the present, but also for future generations. This seems highly consonant with the idea of “seven generations”, which Blackstock (2011) describes:

First Nations often consider their actions in terms of the impacts of the “seven generations.” This means that one’s actions are informed by the experience of the past seven generations and by considering the consequences for the seven generations to follow. (p. 7)

To use the language of this study, mutuality involves a recognition that our actions assuredly influence bodyheartmindworld throughout time and space.

Mutuality, as a concept in this study, includes not only those whose efforts we support, but also those whose actions we oppose. Several interviewees underscored the importance of taking a clear and strong stand against oppression. However, this stance integrates an acknowledgement of non-duality; that the one who opposes and the one opposed are not-two. While the repertoire of responses to suffering includes direct and firm actions, the understanding that informs these actions is that all beings are inseparably related, as waves are bound together by the ocean. This recognition serves as an antidote to demonization. The words of the revered Cambodian Buddhist leader and peacemaker Maha Ghosananda (1991) poignantly illustrate this way of being and acting:

Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love in all of our negotiations. It means that we see ourselves in the opponent - for what is the opponent but a being in ignorance, and we ourselves are also ignorant of many things. Therefore, only loving kindness and right mindfulness can free us. (p. 69)

Social Work Implications: Practice as Sharing One’s Being in Service

This study’s findings affirm that quality of being is among the most important contributions that one may make in the process of responding to suffering. The reason for this emphasis is simple. Rather than separating self from action (e.g., “I am me, and what I do is what
I do.”), the perspectives represented in this study blur the distinction between being and doing. Stated differently, one is what one does, and what one does is one’s self. There is no “I” apart from one’s actions. From this perspective, what one is is precisely what one can offer, and one cannot offer anything that one is not.

This perspective has a compelling implication for social work practice. Namely, one must intentionally cultivate in oneself the qualities that one considers beneficial to others and the world. It is not possible for social workers—acting either individually or as organizations—to think, speak, and act in ways that are detached, chaotic, and judgmental and then expect to meaningfully contribute to connectedness, peace, and understanding in the world. Instead, the work of promoting values such as social justice, human rights, and inclusivity compels us to actualize, in our own lives, the qualities that undergird them, such as universal respect, the compassionate use of power, conscientiousness in choosing and using resources, and so on.

This does not imply that one needs to become perfect by resolving every personal difficulty before responding to suffering. Rather, it implies that life-long self-transformation is an essential component in the career of a social work practitioner. This perspective enables a shift away from understanding social work practice as merely a process of learning and deploying theories and methods. Practice, instead, becomes a path of cultivating one’s beneficial qualities and ability to be helpful while sharing these with others and the world.

This path rests on moment-to-moment connectedness with oneself, the other beings in one’s presence, and the situation at hand. This, again, shifts our understanding of social work practice. Rather than viewing practice as limited to “providing services to clients,” we may understand it as cultivating an ever-deepening intimacy with ourselves, others, and the world,
and, from the ground of that intimacy, attempting to be useful in the ways that we are able. Thus, quality of being—in addition to serving, in and of itself, as a valuable contribution to the thriving of others and the world—acts as the conduit for the knowledge and skills that social workers acquire in order to be useful in a wider variety of ways.

**Social Work Implications: Holding Theories, Methods, and Agendas Lightly**

Being-action points to a specific way of relating to theories, methods, and agendas. Namely, one engaged in the process of responding to suffering must be ready at any moment to put aside preconceived notions to experience other beings and situations as they present themselves in their vivid immediacy. This preference for the direct experience of reality—rather than ideas about it—stems from the perspective that beings and the world are infinitely complex, ever-changing, and ultimately unknowable. This is not to say that theories, methods, and agendas are not useful. It is to say that they are useful in precisely the same way as a map—invaluable for orienting oneself, but misleading and deadening if it obscures the view of the landscape.

Much current social work scholarship focuses on which theories, methods, and action plans are most important, and it is difficult to find disciplinary literature that speaks directly to the value of being able to suspend concepts and agendas. Dore (2020), however, addresses this point incisively:

Yet, in social work, to attain good, rather than good enough, practice, not knowing requires realisation. This can only be achieved if there is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the limitations of existing conceptual constructs that, while integral to the mechanics of everyday life, work to create totality in a world where “our representations of persons are always inadequate” (Rossiter, 2011, p. 983)... In their current form, understandings of humanity and, therefore, of practice, are tied to blocks of knowledge, represented as totalities. Yet such totality is conditional, it is fluid and changeable, and the avoidance of flawed knowledge claims depends on this being remembered. (p. 9)
Dore’s point reflects the findings of this study by framing knowing and not-knowing as a dialectic. One aspect does not dispel or outweigh the other; both aspects depend on each other and constitute a functional whole. Gaiswinkler and Roessler (2009) express a similar viewpoint by framing not-knowing as a type of expertise that goes hand-in-hand with the expertise of knowing. They make the claim that, in conjunction with knowledge, the expertise of not-knowing helps “the practitioner… to enter the client’s frame of reference—that is, the very personal set of reasons for his/her values and actions” (p. 222).

These examples from current social work literature echo the spirit of artlessness and not-knowing described earlier. However, the findings of this study point to existential—not only intellectual—implications of holding knowledge lightly. Interviewees expressed that the ability to suspend ideas about reality may actualize awe at the mystery of life and a felt sense of the preciousness of each being. In moments when one is able to truly silence the clamor of conceptualization, other beings and the world may appear as fresh, miraculous, and astonishing in their unknowability, rather than the mundane objects to which habitual intellectualization often reduces them. This, in turn, enables a vision of social work practice that contrasts stultifying ideas of simply “providing services to clients.” Rather, singular manifestations of an unfathomable reality come forward to tend to each other as best as possible. Or, as expressed by the eighteenth-century Zen master Tōrei:

When I look at the real form of the universe, all is the never-failing manifestation of the mysterious truth of Tathāgata. In any event, in any moment, and in any place, none can be other than the marvelous revelation of its glorious light. This realization made our founding teachers and virtuous Zen leaders extend tender care, with the heart of worshipping, to animals and birds, and indeed to all beings. This realization teaches us that our daily food, drink, clothes, and protections of life are the warm flesh and blood, the merciful incarnation of Buddha.
Who can be ungrateful or not respectful to each and every thing, as well as to human beings! (n.d., p. 1)

**Social Work Implications: Humility as a Foundation of Responding to Suffering**

Each being’s ultimate unknowability may evoke humility, which is a vital aspect of oceanic compassion and being-action. Oceanic compassion includes not only the perspective that others are oneself, but also the assertion that others are fully other. Said differently, it is not possible to fully understand the experience of another being. Ideally, this realization engenders a humble approach in which social workers, rather than operating from the assumption that they truly know what a situation calls for, understand that their ideas are, at best, limited, and provisional. This, in turn, necessitates deep listening and prioritizing the perspectives of the people whom one serves while remaining ready to put aside one’s prescriptions and evaluations.

Relatedly, being-action points to an aspect of humility that involves an openness to the unfolding of situations. This is not an approval of passivity in the face of suffering. Rather, it means that social workers, while exerting themselves in service, must remain conscious that every event is new and unknowable and, furthermore, that one’s personal influence is but one of many variables shaping the situation. Put differently, the best that we can do is to move forward with the knowledge and skills that we have, all the while keeping in mind that we can neither fully understand a situation nor predict its outcome. All beings, including social workers, are limited in the scope of their knowledge and skills. In light of reality’s infinite complexity, any situation, when examined closely, involves details and dilemmas that extend beyond a social worker’s knowledge, and every event includes the possibility of making mistakes. One’s finiteness and fallibility needn’t evoke anxiety, self-deprecation, or resignation. Rather, these inevitabilities may give rise to curiosity and humility—remaining open to situations as they
unfold and respecting the skills and knowledge that others offer. By diminishing the strength of ego, social workers may enjoy greater freedom to work collectively, stepping forward when one is positioned to be useful and stepping back when it is time to allow the situation to unfold and to rely on the strengths of others.

These ideas are comparable to social work presentations of empowerment and the strengths perspective. Koenig et al. (2019) contrast empowerment with “a paternalistic, professional-as-expert stance toward clients…viewing them as victims, as sick and having pathologies and deficits, or their environments as needing liberation” (p. 345). Empowerment, on the other hand, is framed as taking steps to create a collaborative, horizontal power arrangement between social workers and those whom they serve with the goal of enhancing self-determination and access to resources. This attitude complements the strengths perspective, which views social workers and the people whom they serve as equally capable and upholds individuals’ ability to contribute powerfully toward their own thriving (Kim & Bolton, 2013). Social workers, instead of viewing themselves as somehow elevated, operate in synchrony with others by contributing their strengths and helping leverage the strengths of the people and communities they serve.

In addition to these connections with prominent social work perspectives, the mindset described in this section offer existential implications for our understanding of social work practice. A social worker, rather than donning the persona of “expert,” may simply inhabit the role of one of countless beings who may step forward with the desire to be useful. The perspective that all beings are capable of being useful reveals the designations of “helper” and “helped” as temporary positions that every being occupies at various times. This undercuts the
arrogant self-narrative that one is a crusader for social justice or savior of society. Rather, this perspective frames us as normal beings contributing what we can, and it defines the task of social workers as cultivating the qualities, knowledge, and skills to be useful when presented with the opportunity.

**Concluding Reflection**

This chapter and the ones that precede it aim to address this study’s three research questions:

1) How do Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world?
2) How does this understanding of relationship guide their work?
3) How might this understanding of relationship alter social work’s conceptualization of “person-in-environment” and “practice?”

After reflecting on the findings of this research, one may wonder what, exactly, are its implications for the doing of social work. Indeed, this exploration revealed little in the way of specific methods and interventions that would expand the social work practice repertoire.

The contribution of this study, to my mind, is a new way of understanding the meaning of social work. Seen from the light of its findings, we and the beings whom we serve are precious—unprecedented and unrepeatable—manifestations of a vast and mysterious reality that comes forth to meet itself, to respond to its very own suffering. We are born into—and as—this reality, and, upon choosing the path of social work, our journey becomes one of deepening our intimacy with other beings and the world, of cultivating the qualities that we believe are beneficial, and of offering these qualities with humility and the hope that we may help nudge the unfolding of the
world in a compassionate direction. With this understanding, we are relieved of the haughty,
exhausting, and quixotic task of repairing society as though it were a disassembled puzzle upon
which we look and act. Instead, we may look upon ourselves as the body, the heart, and the mind
of the world, meeting the suffering of the world—our own suffering—with compassion. Or, in
the words of Czesław Miłosz (2006):

    Love means to learn to look at yourself
    The way one looks at distant things
    For you are only one thing among many.
    And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
    Without knowing it, from various ills—
    A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

    Then he wants to use himself and things
    So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
    It doesn’t matter whether he knows what he serves:
    Who serves best doesn’t always understand. (pp. 26-27)
APPENDIX A

CODEBOOK FOR STRUCTURAL CODING
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of code</th>
<th>Code text</th>
<th>Use this code…</th>
<th>Example from data</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: psychotherapy/clinical social work</td>
<td>SW1</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) psychotherapy/clinical social work (e.g., providing psychotherapy, hospice work, chaplaincy)</td>
<td><em>I look at children with a very particular kind of developmental lens that focuses as much on preverbal development as anything else.</em></td>
<td><strong>For all “social work activity” codes:</strong> Only use these codes when participants mention activities that clearly correspond to a social work activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: family therapy</td>
<td>SW2</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) providing family therapy</td>
<td><em>So there are different groups right now... zazen groups... And one of them I’m going to is made up of all women right now. The thing that has come up a lot in that group, and the thing that I’ve structured my teachings around in that particular group is anger.</em></td>
<td><strong>Do not use these codes when</strong> participants make general statements that leave unclear the specific nature of their work (e.g., “I have typically worked with youth.”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: social group work</td>
<td>SW3</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) group work (e.g., support groups, self-reflection groups, meditation groups)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: social pedagogy</td>
<td>SW4</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) social pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: empowerment/anti-oppressive practice</td>
<td>SW5</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) empowerment/anti-oppressive practice (e.g., actions taken to counter inequalities in societal distributions of power and/or resources)</td>
<td>I started looking at what it would be like to look at racialization and internalized patriarchy and these things within a Soto Zen environment, and try to get underneath how we replicate these systems in ourselves.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: case management</td>
<td>SW6-8</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) case management</td>
<td>I used to be a Medicaid case manager, working individually on a case-by-case basis with clients to get them services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: brokering</td>
<td></td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) brokering (i.e., serving as a liaison between people and entities such as other helping professionals, governmental bodies, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: social casework</td>
<td></td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) social casework (i.e., taking on individual “cases” to help people access resources, resolve personal and family difficulties, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: agency administration</td>
<td>SW9</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) human service agency administration (including taking a leadership role in starting, planning, or implementing organizations or programs)</td>
<td>First I was a social worker myself, and then a psychologist, and then I became a CEO of a non-profit. My brother committed suicide and my sister has schizophrenia. I was really overwhelmed by their suffering, so I started creating programs so that people like them would not be dissed by society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: community organizing</td>
<td>SW10</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) community organizing and developing community resources</td>
<td>But what we did is that we started organizing an anti-gun violence project that ended up involving seven anti-gun violence community organizations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: advocacy/social action</td>
<td>SW11</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) advocacy (i.e., serving as a</td>
<td>And so I called up our alderman to tell him what</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: conscientization</td>
<td>SW12</td>
<td>I’d heard from the homeless people, to tell him what life is like in those tents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: political action</td>
<td>SW13</td>
<td>If we are not aware of systems of oppression and that layer of suffering, we’re gonna get sucked into status quo ways of living. Buddhist are not really at the forefront of action. Why? Because the analysis of systems of oppression is nonexistent or incomplete. One of the things that I do is bring this conversation into our sangha.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

...when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) conscientization (i.e., working to raise consciousness of a problem, such as the climate crisis)

...when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) political action and activism (i.e., actions aimed at changing practices and policies that perpetuate suffering, such as laws that advance racism and practices

I’m one of the founding members of Extinction Rebellion in my city. We were arrested a couple of months ago

Do not use this code for data that mention actually changing policy or creating new policy...
that promote the extinction of endangered species) and we’re working through the courts now. Our cases are coming up. instead, use the code for “policy practice” below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IFSW social work activity: policy practice</th>
<th>SW14</th>
<th>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) policy practice (i.e., revising governmental policies or creating new policy in response to human suffering or environmental problems)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFSW social work activity: social development</td>
<td>SW15</td>
<td>…when participants mention participating in activities that are (or are highly relevant to) social development (i.e., integrating economic and social policies in ways that are inclusive, sustainable, and bring benefits to all) But we also lived and worked and developed a community based project of socio-economic development. So again: housing reconstruction, starting preschools, working with young people, working with parents, starting small businesses, dry-cleaners, shopping centers, what the community decided it needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between self, beings, and world</td>
<td>relationship</td>
<td>…when participants’ comments relate to the ontological/existential/spiritual relationship between self, beings, and world (e.g., “In an important way, you are me and I am you.” “We are all parts of this living, breathing whole.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects of responding</td>
<td>responding</td>
<td>… when participants’ comments relate to aspects of responding to suffering that they consider important (e.g., “It’s vital to be aware of our emotions as we work to serve others.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist practice</td>
<td>Buddhist-prac</td>
<td>…when participants mention specific Buddhist practices (e.g., sitting meditation, walking meditation, chanting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist concept/doctrine</td>
<td>Buddh-doc</td>
<td>…when participants mention specific Buddhist concepts or doctrines (e.g., sangha, bodhisattva ideal, kalyanamitra,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interconnectedness, Indra’s net, non-duality) | suffering—a white supremacist, someone who believes women should never get an education—They are just mirrors constantly reflecting each other, and they are coming into being together. | comments about Buddhism, without mentioning specific doctrinal concepts. 

| Definition of key term (i.e., suffering, self, beings, world) | definition | ...for data that describes participants’ interpretations of key terms (suffering, self, beings, world) (e.g., what’s important to understand about suffering is that…) | Well, first of all, suffering is part and parcel of being human. To be human is to suffer. | Do not use this code when participants make general comments about key terms, without including specific information that clarifies their understanding of these terms. 

| Unclear data | unclear | ...when participants’ responses are difficult to understand and may need further clarification |  |

<p>| Follow up | follow-up | ...when participants’ responses seem highly relevant but not comprehensive, or when they | Using this code indicates that a follow-up |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Divergent case</th>
<th>divergent</th>
<th>…when participants’ responses diverge from expected responses or established patterns (e.g., “Other people’s problems are theirs to deal with.” “We shouldn’t concern ourselves with the natural environment.”)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potentially relevant data</td>
<td>relevant</td>
<td>…when participants offer relevant/enriching perspectives that may be relevant but are not represented by other codes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear (name of potential interviewee),

I hope this email finds you very well. I am a social work PhD student at Loyola University Chicago. My dissertation research focuses on the perspectives of Zen teachers who engage in social and environmental action. Given your background, I feel that your participation would be a tremendous boon to this project. Please let me know if you would be willing to contribute to this research by taking part in an in-person or phone/video interview that lasts approximately one hour and, potentially, brief follow-up communication. If so, I will be glad to send you further details regarding the nature/purpose of the study and the specific interview questions.

With gratitude,

Siddhesh Mukerji

Faculty Sponsor for Research: Katherine Tyson McCrea (ktyson@luc.edu)
APPENDIX C

STUDY PARTICIPANTS
1. Myozen Joan Amaral
2. Chimyo Atkinson
3. Hogetsu Laurie Belzer
4. Sokuzan Bob Brown
5. Tim Zentetsu Burkett
6. Joshin Byrnes
7. Zenshin Florence Caplow
8. Sarah Dojin Emerson
9. Hoka Chris Fortin
10. Ruben Habito
11. Joan Halifax
12. Mushim Ikeda
13. Lin Jensen
14. Kritee Kanko
15. Onryu Laura Kennedy
16. Jok Um (Ken Kessel)
17. Jack Lawlor
18. Taigen Dan Leighton
19. David Loy
20. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel
21. Susan Moon
22. Wendy Egyoku Nakao
23. Enkyo O'Hara
24. Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes)
25. Tenku Ruff
26. Hozan Alan Senauke
27. Keiryu Liên Shutt
28. Kosen Greg Snyder
29. Shodo Spring
30. Olaf Strelcyk
31. Kazuaki Tanahashi
32. Myoshin Tricia Teater
33. Ni Su Thuận Tuệ
34. Larry Ward
35. Guo Gu (Jimmy Yu)
APPENDIX D

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Project Title: A Single Pearl: Implications of the Self-World Relationship in Zen Buddhism for Social Work’s Person-in-Environment Perspective

Researcher: Siddhesh Mukerji

Loyola University Chicago Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Katherine Tyson McCrea

Introduction:
I, Siddhesh Mukerji, respectfully invite you to take part in a research study that I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Katherine Tyson McCrea in the School of Social Work at Loyola University Chicago. I request your participation because this study focuses on the perspectives of Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities. This includes but is not limited to activities such as providing emotional or material support to others, community organizing, raising consciousness of social and environmental issues, and engaging in activism or advocacy. Before deciding whether to participate in the study, please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore three questions:
1) How do Zen Buddhist teachers who respond to suffering in ways that overlap with social work activities understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world?;
2) How does this perspective of relationship guide their work? and;
3) How might this perspective of relationship alter social work’s person-in-environment perspective?

Procedures:
If you agree to take part in this study, your participation will involve taking part in an interview that lasts approximately one hour. While this interview will ideally take place in-person, a phone/video conversation is a potential alternative. After this interview, I may contact you to request one brief (approximately 5-20 minutes) phone or video conversation for the purpose of clarifying or elaborating the topics that we discussed during our initial interview.

With your permission, I will audio record our initial interview and the possible follow-up conversation. At your request, I will refrain from recording any part (or all) of our interview and follow-up communication. If you prefer that I do not use a recorder during our interview and follow-up communications, I ask your permission to describe the themes and insights elicited during our interactions in the form of hand-written notes.

Risks/Benefits:
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in the everyday life of Zen Buddhist teachers.

There are no direct benefits to participants of this study. Indirectly, participating in this study will contribute to theory that informs the practice of social workers, who number more than 650,000 in the USA alone. Additionally, since I intend to publish the results of this research,
your perspectives on responding to suffering have the potential to benefit readers who are practitioners of Zen Buddhism or simply interested in this topic.

Confidentiality:
I request your permission to give you credit, using your name, for your words in the publication(s) that result from this study. Therefore, this study does not aim for anonymity. However, before sharing or publishing any portion of our interview, I will share with you my transcription and/or notes and also my initial analysis of themes that arose during the interview. At that time, I will make revisions and omissions per your request until you approve of my account of our interview.

In addition to sharing the interview transcription and/or notes with you, the only other person who may access the interview prior to your final approval is a co-researcher with whom I will collaborate during the data analysis process. This person will read over my analyses of several interviews, which may include the transcript and/or notes of your interview. The purpose of this collaboration is to increase the fidelity with which I present your perspectives.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to end the interview at any time. Furthermore, during our interview or when you review the transcript and/or notes, if any information arises that you wish to keep confidential and off-the-record, I will remove this information from the transcription and/or notes and further analysis.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this project or interview, feel free to contact me at smukerji@luc.edu or my faculty sponsor, Dr. Katherine Tyson McCrea, at ktyson@luc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Thank you for reading this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. I will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your records.

I consent to audio recording during my interactions with the researcher. ______________________
I consent to the researcher taking notes during our interactions. ______________________

____________________________________________ __________________
Participant’s Signature                                                 Date

____________________________________________ ___________________
Researcher’s Signature                                                 Date
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Introductory Comments

Our interview is part of a study that explores how Zen teachers understand and experience their relationship to other beings and to the world, and how this perspective of relationship guides how they approach responding to suffering. Please feel free to respond to these questions in whichever way feels most meaningful to you, including sharing stories, metaphors, anecdotes, poems, or anything else that would help me understand your perspective.

Question 1

To begin with, it would be helpful to establish some context for our interview. Could you please share some background regarding the roles that you have taken in order to respond to suffering? Some examples could be providing material relief to people facing deprivation, providing guidance to people in emotional distress, working to protect green spaces, or engaging in activism or advocacy.

Question 2

Considering these experiences and your experiences in general, how would you say it’s most important (for people today) to understand “suffering?”

Question 3

From your perspective as a Zen Buddhist practitioner and teacher, how would you say you experience your relationship to other beings when you are responding to their suffering?

Question 3 prompt 1.

Are there any stories, metaphors, anecdotes, poems, or anything else that would help me understand your perspective?
Question 4

From your perspective as a Zen Buddhist practitioner and teacher, how would you say you experience your relationship to the world, as a whole, when you are responding to suffering?

Question 4 prompt 1.

Are there any stories, metaphors, anecdotes, poems, or anything else that would help me understand your perspective?

Question 5

How would you say your understanding of your relationship to other beings and to the world informs the ways in which you respond to suffering?

Question 6

Are there aspects of Buddhist practice or concepts from Buddhist doctrine that are most relevant to your relationship to other beings and to the world?

Question 7

From the perspective of your relationship to other beings and to the world, which actions do you consider most fundamental for responding to suffering?

Question 8

At this time, could you let me know if there any other considerations that I might have missed that you feel are important to include in this conversation? Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX F

DOMAIN AND CATEGORIES (DOMAIN AND TAXONOMIC CODING)
### Domain: Participants’ Social Work Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (code)</th>
<th>Total cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Political action</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Psychotherapy &amp; clinical social work</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conscientization</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Community organizing</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Group work</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Agency administration</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Empowerment &amp; antioppressive practice</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Advocacy, social action</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Case management &amp; related</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Policy practice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Social development</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Family therapy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. (Environmental focus)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Domain: The self-world relationship as…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (code)</th>
<th>Total cases</th>
<th>Total references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interconnectedness</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The world is my self, all beings are my self</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Others’ suffering is my suffering, it is personal</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Other as non-other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Human-non-human non-duality</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Kinship, belonging to each other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Opening to my experience opens me to your experience</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Interbeing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. One flow of being</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. All beings by nature are Buddha</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. One body</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Co-creating reality</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Indra’s Net</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Non-self</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Being of the world, a manifestation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Non-duality of helper and helped</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Wholeness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Emptiness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
19. Intimacy, mutuality of care

20. “Non-duality”

21. Pratityasamutpāda

22. Self beyond ideas, mystery, unknowability

23. Temporal, generational

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain: Suffering as…</th>
<th>Total cases</th>
<th>Total references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A doorway to compassion and non-duality</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Systemic, perpetuated through systems of oppression, multidimensional</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The illusion of separateness</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Suffering creates responsibility (to respond)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Valuable, necessary, a source of growth and wisdom</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A basic fact of reality</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Something that we all perpetuate in ways</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Not confined to the classical Buddhist formulation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Universal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Running from suffering exacerbates it</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. An opening, invitation to connection, wholeness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain: Important aspects of responding to suffering</th>
<th>Total cases</th>
<th>Total references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Being here fully, connecting wholeheartedly, quality of presence</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Not knowing, curiosity, wonder, openness (when responding to suffering)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Opening to suffering (of others)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Opening to suffering (our own)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Responding as a natural response to seeing our interconnectedness</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Openness, non-attachment to method and expectations</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Working with, connecting, solidarity, mutual support</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Situational responding</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Other as other, uniqueness, not imposing beliefs</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Strengths, knowing them and using them</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Responding as a community-collective</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Mutuality of individual and societal transformation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13. Simple kindness  &  11  &  20  \\
14. Responding with humility  &  12  &  18  \\
15. Standing up, speaking out  &  8  &  18  \\
16. Knowing our own limitations  &  12  &  17  \\
17. Seeing others’ wisdom, everyone has something to contribute  &  12  &  17  \\
18. Self-care, stability in order to sustain our efforts  &  10  &  16  \\
19. Avoiding demonization  &  9  &  16  \\
20. Caring for self is caring for others, and vice versa  &  10  &  15  \\
21. Self-awareness while responding  &  10  &  15  \\
22. Responding from silence, stillness  &  6  &  14  \\
23. Intuitive-experiential responding  &  6  &  13  \\
24. Body as a locus for transforming suffering  &  10  &  10  \\
25. Boundaries are important  &  8  &  10  \\
26. Creativity, creating new solutions  &  6  &  10  \\
27. Caring for any being is caring for all beings  &  5  &  7  \\
28. Reconnect with yourself, the world, what you love  &  6  &  6  \\
29. Responding vs. reacting  &  5  &  5  \\
30. Responding with patience, care, thoroughness  &  3  &  4  \\
31. Think long-term, generationally... not just short-term  &  3  &  3  \\

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain: Important practices, concepts, doctrines, and influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category (code)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Zazen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bodhisattva, bodhisattva vows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Two truths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Skillful means, appropriate response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Delusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Karma</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Sutra/Sutta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avataṃsaka Sutra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metta Sutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart Sutra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotus Sutra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prajñāparamita Sutras (as a category, not specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṃdhinirmochana Sutra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satipatthana Sutta</td>
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<td>37.</td>
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<tr>
<td>38.</td>
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<tr>
<td>39.</td>
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<tr>
<td>40.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX G

MEMBER CHECKING RECRUITMENT EMAIL
Dear (Participant),

I hope this message finds you very well! Please allow me to wish you and all of your dear ones a joy-filled 2020!

I am writing to provide an update on the dissertation project for which I interviewed you last year. I completed interviewing (35 interviews in total) in September and, since then, have been transcribing and analyzing the data.

At this point in the process, I am reaching out to all of the teachers whom I had the great privilege of interviewing. Specifically, I would like to offer several ways in which, if you are interested, you could review my work for accuracy. My sincere intention in this project is to reflect everyone’s perspectives as accurately as possible. Therefore, I would be most grateful if you could let me know whether you might be interested in taking one, both, or neither of these steps:

1. Reviewing the transcript of our conversation, with a few reflections on (what stood out to me as) salient themes.
2. Reviewing the transcript of our conversation and my reflections, plus the specific codes that I used while analyzing our interviews and the corresponding codebook.

At any step of the process, I will gladly welcome your corrections, additions, suggestions, etc. Please let me know.

With warmth, gratitude, and respect,

Siddhesh Mukerji
APPENDIX H

COPY OF LETTER CONFIRMING IRB APROVAL OF STUDY
Dear Siddhesh Mukerji,

On Monday, April 8, 2019 the Loyola University Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved your Initial application for the project titled "A Single Pearl: Implications of the Self-World Relationship in Zen Buddhism for Social Work’s Person-in-Environment Perspective". Based on the information you provided, the IRB determined that:

- the risks to subjects are minimized through (i) the utilization of procedures consistent with sound research design and
- do not unnecessarily expose participants to risk, and (ii) whenever appropriate, the research utilizes procedures already being performed on the subjects for diagnostic or treatment purposes
- the risks to participants are reasonable in relation to anticipated benefits, if any, to participants, and the importance of
- the knowledge that may reasonably be expected to result
- the selection of subjects is equitable
- informed consent be sought from each prospective subject or the subject's legally authorized representative, in accordance with, and to the extent required by §46.116
- informed consent be appropriately documented, in accordance with, and to the extent required by §46.117
- when appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety
- of subjects
- when appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality
- of data
- when some or all of the subjects are likely to be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence, such as children, prisoners,
- pregnant women, mentally disabled persons, or economically or educationally disadvantaged persons, additional safeguards have been included in the study to protect the rights and welfare of these subjects

Documented consent will be obtained from all subjects enrolled.

This review procedure, administered by the IRB, in no way absolves you, the researcher, from the obligation to adhere to all Federal, State, and local laws and the Loyola University Chicago policies. Immediately inform the IRB if you would like to change aspects of your approved project (please consult our website for specific instructions). You, the researcher, are respectfully reminded that the University’s ability to support its researchers in litigation is dependent upon conformity with continuing approval for their work.

Please notify the IRB of completion of this research and/or departure from the Loyola University Chicago by submitting a Project Closure Report using the CAP system. In all correspondence with the IRB regarding this project, please refer to IRB project number #2714 or IRB application number #6045.

The IRB approval granted for this project expires on 4/8/2020 12:00:00 AM

If you have any questions regarding this approval, the IRB, or the Loyola University Chicago Human Subject Protection Program, please phone the Assistant Director for Research Compliance at (773) 508-2689 or email the IRB at irb@luc.edu.

Best wishes for your research,

Noni Gaylord-Harden, Ph.D.
Vice-Chair, Institutional Review Board
REFERENCE LIST


VITA

The author, Siddhesh Mukerji, took his first real step on the path of social work by volunteering with the Peace Corps in Kazakhstan from 2009 to 2011. During this period, he worked with organizations that served youth in state care. Finding this experience deeply meaningful, Siddhesh decided to pursue a master’s degree in social work, which he earned from the University of Chicago in 2014. His studies focused on therapeutic social work practice, and he was grateful to use this skillset after graduating to serve adolescents residing in Chicago’s Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School. While Siddhesh formed enriching relationships with students and coworkers in this setting, he also encountered dehumanizing practices that evoked questions about the ethical and existential perspectives underlying social action. Several mentors encouraged Siddhesh to use doctoral studies to pursue these questions, prompting him to enroll in Loyola University Chicago’s social work Ph.D. program. Siddhesh’s doctoral studies focused on Buddhist perspectives on social action. His first publication in the field of social work illustrated the work of the human rights champion B. R. Ambedkar, offering implications of his lifework for social work scholarship on religion. Currently, Siddhesh teaches at the University of Vermont as a Lecturer, a role he began while simultaneously finishing his doctoral studies. His research, practice, and teaching agenda focuses on social work’s role in responding to the global ecological crisis. In January 2021, Siddhesh passed his doctoral dissertation defense with distinction. Looking to the future, he wishes to devote his career to helping bridge the worlds of
social work and environmental activism while continuing to explore how Buddhist thought may contribute to the ways in which we understand and respond to suffering.