Paying Attention: An Examination of Attention and Empathy as They Relate to Buddhist Philosophy

Jennifer Carmichael

Department of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, York University, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada; jenlcar@yorku.ca

Abstract: The human response to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a concerning decline in empathy for each other and the planet. A dualistic conception of mind and body coupled with a capitalist society that requires belief in an inherent self to fuel consumerism both complicate our ability to empathize because these ideas reify our conventional self. This paper argues that an understanding of the Buddhist conception of emptiness as explored in Nagarjuna’s Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā) paired with mindful observation of embodied physical experience can allow for an understanding of “self” as a web of interacting processes within the larger web of interacting processes which constitutes the world. This can facilitate a shift in our mode of engagement with the world towards one of empathy because it demonstrates the emptiness of essence of an inherent self and instead situates the conventional “self” as interrelated with the world. Touching on related concepts such as Thich Nhat Hanh’s interbeing, this paper argues that contemplating emptiness while practicing Buddhist mindfulness techniques rooted in bodily sensation can facilitate empathy, which allows for the possibility of not only recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also of rebuilding our global community and thriving as a more empathetic society in the future.

Keywords: empathy; attention; embodiment; emptiness

1. Introduction

One of the fundamental underlying social issues that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed is Western society’s general lack of empathy for each other and the planet. The violent confrontations over vaccines being witnessed all over North America are evidence of the former, while the complete disregard for the massive increase in waste produced by discarded personal protective equipment in the face of the pandemic is evidence of the latter. The lack of empathy for each other became particularly evident in Canada in September of 2021, as protesters gathered outside of hospitals across the country and harassed healthcare workers and patients trying to gain access. Healthcare workers in Ottawa shared feelings of disbelief, anger and frustration; they have been working on the front lines of this pandemic for the past year and a half, feeling all of the difficulty and stress their positions demand, and they want to feel supported, not disrespected (Kupfer 2021). In Vancouver, meanwhile, crowds of protesters verbally and even physically assaulted healthcare workers outside a hospital, slowed ambulances, delayed patients entering for treatment and disturbed patients inside (Austin 2021). Opinions on vaccination aside, harassing people who have been working on the front lines to help save lives, or people who are trying to access healthcare, shows an incredible and concerning lack of empathy for our fellow humans.

On a global scale, the dramatic increase in waste, including single-use plastics during the COVID-19 pandemic, has put environmental policy on hold and, in some cases, even reversed it. Large increases in single-use plastics have been experienced all across the globe, including Canada, which estimates a 250% to 300% usage increase of single-use-plastic...
during the pandemic (McGillivray 2020). Some citizens in the United States are being advised to discard PPE in mixed-waste, instead of recycling, over fears of contamination. Recycling programs are being restricted worldwide over fear of spread in recycling plants. Some states have even banned the use of reusable shopping bags due to concerns over virus spread. Lobbyists from the plastics industry in the United States have capitalized on these fears and successfully reversed policies meant to ban or reduce single-use plastics in many jurisdictions, in some cases even succeeding in re-introducing single-use plastics (Patrício Silva et al. 2021, p. 3). Canada delayed its planned single-use plastics ban and some businesses suspended their reusable containers programs as well (McGillivray 2020). It is as though the pandemic has been used as an excuse to stop putting attention, money, and effort towards our climate goals. The environmental casualties of our global, human response to COVID-19 are almost never considered; the health of our human society seems to trump the health of the planet in media, public policy, and public opinion. This oversight not only shows a lack of empathy toward the planet, but also a dangerous short-sightedness; with medical waste and PPE heading predominantly to landfills or informal incinerators, instead of being properly treated as medical waste (Patrício Silva et al. 2021, p. 3), these decisions could have lasting environmental repercussions beyond the scope of normal single-use plastic waste.

2. How Did This Happen?

In Buddhist terms, individuals in contemporary society tend to view (and are even influenced to view) the conventionally real as inherently real. This reification is the root delusion that leads to suffering (Garfield 1995, p. 314) and, I argue, is contributing to the declining empathy being experienced for each other and the planet. Two related harmful delusions under which contemporary society operates involve the conditioned belief in the inherent existence of a self that is separate from others, and the delusion that mind and body are separate.

2.1. The Delusion of Inherent Existence

In The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakāraṇīya) (ca. 100–200 CE), Nagarjuna splits the notion of existence into two categories to help demonstrate the fundamental Buddhist tenet of emptiness. For something to exist inherently, it requires an essence; it must be uncaused, independent, and unchanging. No phenomena meet these requirements according to Nagarjuna, therefore all phenomena are empty of inherent existence (Garfield 1995, p. 221). Conventional existence, on the other hand, is “to exist dependently, to be the conventional referent of a term, but not to have any independent existence” (p. 90). Understanding emptiness as an absence of essence allows for phenomena to be viewed as neither an entity nor unreal, but as conventionally real (p. 305); it presents a middle way between the dichotomies of reality and unreality.

Emptiness is an aspect of Buddhism that can cause anxiety if it is not well understood. It is important to note that Nagarjuna defines emptiness as empty of essence—essence requires phenomena to be uncaused, independent of other phenomena, permanent, and not fabricated from other things. Nagarjuna argues that all phenomena originate in dependence upon conditions, are interdependent, impermanent, and fabricated; therefore, they are empty of essence (Garfield 1995, p. 221). Not having essence, however, does not mean phenomena do not exist, and nor does it disparage conventional existence in comparison to ultimate; it is simply a way of describing our lived experience. Garfield uses the example of a table to demonstrate this non-nihilistic idea of emptiness. Stating that a table is “empty” means that it lacks essence, but not that it is completely nonexistent; obviously, the table is visible and tangible. However, it is only a “table” because we (humans) have labeled it as such. Without that label, it could be considered “four quite useful sticks absurdly surmounted by a pointless slab of stick-wood waiting to be carved” or “a brief intersection of the histories of some trees” (p. 90). There is also no fixed boundary “between the existence of a seed, the tree to which it gives rise, a piece of wood from that tree, and a
Moving past the delusion of essence can allow for the world to be experienced not as a collection of things, but as a web of interacting processes (Loy 2003, p. 85). As in the example of the table, it is not the (conventional) elements themselves, but the infinite relationships among these elements that constitute the web of interacting processes of which the table—and everything—is a part. Thus, the table constitutes a dependent, interconnected and ever-changing process amid other infinite and interconnected processes, without inherent essence. The problem, according to Nagarjuna, arises when conventional existence is reified; if conventional existence is treated as real, intrinsically existent phenomena with essence, then it becomes the world of illusion (Garfield 1995, p. 276) and contributes to delusion, which causes suffering. In fact, Nagarjuna identifies reification as “the root of grasping and craving [desire] and hence of all suffering” (p. 314).

Unfortunately, we, as a Western capitalist society, are conditioned to desire and crave things, and we have been laboring under the delusion that these things we grasp have an inherent essence, which will somehow improve our lives. We are, however, always disappointed, as nothing has essence; this misunderstanding then leads to further craving and grasping, and individuals become stuck in a cyclical delusion. Emptiness can be a source of fear for one stuck in the cycle because emptiness itself has been reified by our society as something negative, something lacking; consumerism encourages us to avoid emptiness entirely by filling it with things, and this has increasingly become habitual thinking at a global level. The Buddhist conception of emptiness is however not a lack of anything; it is simply an understanding of phenomena as impermanent, dependent upon conditions, and having an identity that is dependent upon convention (Garfield 1995, p. 315), as in the example of the table. It is the reification of the conventionally real—mistakenly believing that things have essence—that can lead to suffering.

Another perhaps more modern way of understanding Nagarjuna’s concept of emptiness is provided by Thich Nhat Hanh through his term interbeing, which posits that, “The one can be seen in the all, and the all can be seen in the one. One cause is never enough to bring about an effect. A cause must, at the same time, be an effect, and every effect must also be the cause of something else. Cause and effect inter-are.” (Nhat Hanh 1999, p. 222) In the example of the table, he points out that for it to exist (in the conventional sense of the word) we need causes such as wood, a carpenter, time, and skilfulness, which themselves “need other causes to be;” the carpenter, for example, needs his parents, breakfast, fresh air, etc. Thus, “everything in the cosmos has come together to bring us this table” (ibid.). The concept of interbeing argues that humans are not separate from each other or our environment, but rather that human elements and non-human elements in our environment are a single, inseparable entity. Understanding interbeing is understanding the Earth herself as an entity of which we are a part, and that animals, air, water, forests, etc., are as cells within the body of the planet (Lim 2019, p. 127). Interbeing as a term, unlike Nagarjuna’s emptiness, does not have a nihilistic connotation, in that it encapsulates everything—the earth, in turn, can be seen as a cell within the solar system, the solar system as a cell within the galaxy, and the galaxy as a cell within the larger cosmos—thus, we are the cosmos and the cosmos is us. The term interbeing emphasizes the connection all humans have to each other and the planet; this connection, when both understood and experienced, I believe will allow a more empathetic mode of engagement with the world, and facilitate socially engaged Buddhism.
2.2. The Delusion of Self

The delusion of inherent existence is particularly problematic when related to empathy because it leads to the delusion of an inherently existent self that is separate from others, therefore complicating our ability to empathize. As disconcerting as it may be to contemplate at first, our sense of “self” is also a conventionally designated entity; although we may think we have an inherent sense of self that is unchanging and separate from others, it is a delusion, as the self is also empty of essence. The lessons of Nagarjuna show that one who is mindful of the Middle Way will make no separation between the subjective self inside and an objective world outside, as both are empty of essence; this allows for the understanding that what is in the best interests of the (conventionally designated) individual is also in the best interests of everyone, and the planet. This idea is closely related to the idea of emptiness discussed above. Garfield (1995) summarizes Nagarjuna, “Once we see the world from the standpoint of emptiness of inherent existence, the history of any conventionally designated entity is but an arbitrary stage carved out of a vast continuum of interdependent phenomena” (p. 199). Since all entities are without their own essences, there is no possibility of an “otherness-essence,” and hence no inherent distinction between the self and the other (p. 112). Viewing the self in this way allows for the understanding that an empathetic emotion like compassion “not only increases the happiness of others who receive it, it also increases our own [happiness]” (Loy 2003, p. 82). This is the case since what is beneficial to our (conventional) self is also beneficial to the (conventional) other because there is no ultimate separation of either self or other since neither can be said to possess an (inherent) essence.

Loy (2003) argues that this mistaken belief in “subject-object dualism, which we tend to take for granted, is the root delusion that makes us unhappy” (p. 164). He suggests that instead of being separate from the world, the sense of self is simply one manifestation of the world (p. 164). This perspective engages with the world not as a collection of things, but as a web of interacting processes (p. 85); the sense of self becomes simply an awareness of certain aspects of these interacting processes at an arbitrary time. Loy (2008) suggests that the sense of self is “composed of mostly habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and acting. That’s all” (p. 17). In other words, “at each moment, we are the total consequence of what we have done and of what we have experienced” (Garfield 1995, p. 238). The delusion is labeling this momentary awareness—which changes, even as it is contemplated in the moment—as an inherently existing self.

Unfortunately, Western capitalist consumer society requires that citizens believe in a self separate from others; advertisements and media therefore perpetuate this delusion with voracity. Consumers are encouraged to buy items that set us apart from our peers, or that allow us to keep up with trends, or in the hope that we are noticed by others, mindsets which require the belief in a self which is separate from the other. Social media has driven this delusion of a divide between self and other to an unprecedented level, as its fundamental purpose is to present a clearly defined and socially laudable “self” to garner attention and validation. Capitalist consumer society also indoctrinates consumers to believe that newer is always better, and that convenience is tantamount to happiness, leading to a complete disregard for the incredible amount of waste such a society creates. For example, the constant and wildly-hyped releases of new mobile devices with new, more convenient features—and the millions of people who line up to get each new device—also have the unfortunate result of massive amounts of electronic waste, as consumers discard their old devices without considering the health of the planet. The values perpetuated by consumerism thus lead us to engage with other people from the point of view of competition rather than empathy, and with the planet from the point of view of usefulness and dominance rather than empathy, largely as a result of contemporary society’s reification of self.

For Thich Nhat Hanh, “the solution to the ecological problems is a transformation of our consciousness related to our notion of happiness and lifestyle” (Lim 2019, p. 126). Viewing the world through the understanding of interbeing can fundamentally change...
the way we interact with each other and the planet because we realize that when we pollute others or the environment, we pollute ourselves. Understanding the conventionally designated self as a web of interacting processes engaging with other webs of interacting processes within the larger web of interacting processes which constitutes the world can allow for a shift in mindset from the harmful delusion of essence towards an empathetic mode of engagement, as it demonstrates that there is no separation between self and other.

2.3. The Great Divide

However, it can be difficult to move past the delusion of self in a society that constantly encourages the delusion. In fact, Western philosophers such as Descartes may have helped to perpetuate this delusion by breaking down our internal sense of self into two more conventionally separate parts: mind and body. This is in contrast to Buddhist conceptions of mind-body entanglement. Geshe Dadul Namgyal uses the analogy of two continuously intertwined pieces of string to demonstrate that “as long as mind and body are together in a particular mind-body construction, they are mutually dependent in terms of their continuum; the previous instances of the body help in the continuity of the subsequent instance of the mind, and vice versa” (Durant and Namgyal 2017, p. 106). The delusion that mind and body are separate further removes us from the understanding of ourselves and others as processes, and thus further complicates our ability to empathize with others, and arguably even complicates our ability to feel compassion for ourselves.

Perhaps part of the reason much of contemporary society is under the delusion of the inherent existence of an uncaused, unchanging, and independent self is related to the de-valueation of many of our bodily sensations and processes in relation to cognitive processes. The modern world tends to demand a largely disembodied mode of engagement most of the time; we frequently ignore the body and its feelings in the present moment, or regard them as a nuisance, especially when it comes to visceral sensation. Modern society demands this largely disembodied mode of engagement in most tasks, especially those we label as “work,” and especially when that work involves conceptual logic. Even occupations that involve physical labour demand that we ignore our bodies; for example, a factory worker must ignore his sore back in order to finish his quota, while a nurse must ignore her upset stomach in order to care for others. Along with environmental stimuli, biological needs, and injury, emotions can also cause bodily sensation that must be ignored in order to perform well at work; a teacher, for instance, cannot let her anger with her partner show in front of her students. This has led to the delusion that emotions, due to their effects on the body, must also be ignored when individuals are acting as functioning members of contemporary society. The problem with the idea of a dualistic conception of mind and body as separate and very different entities, frequently diametrically opposed, is that the argument requires that both mind and body are reified. I believe this reification-within-reification has deepened the delusion of an inherent self and made the task of understanding the Buddhist conception of no-self even more daunting.

However, recent research in neuroscience and cognitive science has shown that the mind is part of the processes of body as much as the body is the part of processes of the mind, which could help to begin to translate Buddhist conceptions of no-self into a more palatable understanding for contemporary Western society. Examining the ways in which humans learn should immediately make clear how important the body is to cognition, and how detrimental it is to dismiss bodily sensations. Nagataki and Hirose (2007) state that “human intelligence [...] has evolved by way of getting optimally adapted to the world, and the interaction with it takes place through the body [italics mine]” (p. 225). The fact that we have a body dictates the ways in which we can engage with the environment, and this “restriction by having a body essentially defines the nature of human beings” (p. 225). Furthermore, Rusbridger (2012) emphasizes that there is no such thing as a feeling in isolation; instead, “the external world is taken into the self through a prism of feelings” (p. 149). Moreover, Guendelman et al. (2017) argue “the experience of emotional states is built up from the continuous reciprocal interactions of regulatory mechanisms [...] which
offers an integrative view of cognitive and emotion processes within homeostatic regulatory mechanisms” (p. 18). Interpreting Nagarjuna’s words from a phenomenological point of view, Garfield (1995) similarly writes, “the domain of perceptibles and the structure of perceptual experience and knowledge depends on our ability to represent and individuate objects, and that sensory contact is sensory contact in the first place only in virtue of its role in experience, which is in turn dependent upon the entire perceptual process” (p. 337). By removing the processes of emotion and feelings from theories of cognition due to the mistaken understanding of an inherent separation and reification of mind and body, philosophers such as Descartes also reached the conclusion that the body must be separate from the logical, cognitive mind since emotions are felt within the body and often make logical thinking difficult. Emotional components and the embodied nature of human experience are thus not only often ignored, but even maligned. This could be having a detrimental effect on our ability to engage with the world in an empathetic mode according to the embodied simulation view of empathy (Gangopadhyay 2014), which posits that “neural mechanisms responsible for one’s own action control and mapping of emotions and sensations are also responsible for understanding the others’ actions, emotions and sensations” (p. 120). This suggests that empathy may be facilitated through enhancing one’s awareness of one’s own action control, emotions and sensations—which is also the goal of Buddhist mindfulness techniques involving embodied awareness.

3. The Possibility of Change

I argue that awareness of the conventional self as delusion coupled with mindful observation of our embodied physical experience as a web of interacting processes can allow for the possibility of experiencing other life-forms, and even the planet itself, as processes that interact with our processes (and as therefore part of our processes), thus increasing our empathy for others and the planet. Practices that allow a shift in awareness to embodied physical experience, such as meditation, can “[open] the eye to a new possibility of rebuilding our worldview [. . . ] by educating our bodily consciousness” (Francesconi and Tarozzi 2012, p. 281). If we, as a global society, can shift our mode of responsiveness to the world and each other from one of reification and delusion to one of empathy through the practice of mindful embodied awareness, there is a chance we can not only recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also rebuild our global community and thrive as a more empathetic society in the future.

While contemplating the emptiness of phenomena and the impossibility of an inherent self can be uncomfortable on the surface, when we look deeper, these ideas are actually liberating because they allow for change. Nagarjuna points out that “such phenomena as arising, ceasing, suffering, change, enlightenment [. . . ] are possible only if they are empty [italics mine]” (Garfield 1995, p. 308) and “the achievement of nirvana requires dependence, impermanence, and the possibility of change, all of which are grounded in emptiness” (p. 322). In this view then, “there is no difference in entity between nirvana [enlightenment] and samsara [suffering]; nirvana is simply samsara seen without reification, without attachment, [and] without delusion” (p. 331). A person enters nirvana as a state of being, not as a place to be (p. 333). The act of shifting our perception to and of the here-and-now can thus turn our suffering into a sense of well-being and harmony within this world. However, while encouraging us to break the habit of reification, Nagarjuna cautions that we must not fall into “the abyss of nihilism” because then “action itself is impossible and senseless, and one’s realization amounts to nothing” (p. 314). The problem with emptiness is not emptiness itself; it is the socially conditioned perception of emptiness as a lack of something that is the problem. We keep trying to fill up the emptiness—but “nothing that we can ever grasp or achieve can end our sense of lack” (Loy 2008, p. 21), of course, because we are characterizing emptiness as a lack of essence, and all phenomena are empty of essence, therefore no phenomena can fill the emptiness. Instead, we must change our perception of emptiness, and with it, our mode of being in the world. Awareness that all phenomena has the “coextensive properties of emptiness, dependent-origination,
Being mindful of Nagarjuna’s conceptions of emptiness and no-self in the Middle Way allows for a mode of being that gives “priority to opening ourselves up to the world and a greater acceptance of the open-ended impermanence of our existence” (Loy 2003, p. 113). Loy suggests that, “meditation is letting-go [of our desire to fill the emptiness], getting back to the emptiness/fullness at our core” (Loy 2008, p. 23). The emptiness of essence allows for a fullness of possibility. The practice of mindful awareness of this idea through meditation also helps to reconstruct the sense of self in a less reified way by “helping us become more mindful in daily life” (p. 23). Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that the transformation of consciousness is a paradigm shift that “requires the practice of mindfulness to realize the nature of interbeing, with the awareness that Earth and all beings are interconnected and indivisible as a single entity, and cultivation of the insight that one’s consciousness is also the consciousness of the Earth” (Lim 2019, p. 126). Simply being aware of the fundamental emptiness and interbeing of all phenomena might seem easy, but it is difficult to be aware in this way in our contemporary world; attention and practice is required.

3.1. Paying Attention

Although we do not usually think about it this way, it can be helpful to consider attention as a limited resource; its abundance or scarcity depends on, among other things, where you are, what is happening around you, how much time you have, and how you are feeling. If you are very tired, for example, you might have less attention in your proverbial wallet to “pay” than someone who has had a full night’s sleep; if there is an overwhelmingly offensive smell, you might find it difficult to pay attention to anything else; or if you are feeling a strong emotion, it may be difficult to shift your attention away from it. However, we can and do choose what to spend our attention on, but sometimes we forget that it is a scarce commodity that we have control over. For example, think about how much time you spend in a day paying attention to something specifically, on purpose. What kinds of things take up most of your attention funds? Social media, news media, film, television, YouTube, advertising and other people are frequent attention guzzlers. Now, think about how much time you spend in a day paying attention to sensations you perceive in your own body, in comparison. For most members of contemporary society, the latter is negligible; many even actively ignore sensations perceived in the body, because we believe our attention is better paid elsewhere.

In his book Money, Sex, War, Karma (2008), David Loy outlines three ways in which our awareness—what we pay attention to—is conditioned that was not experienced by previous Buddhist cultures and practitioners (p. 96): the fragmentation of attention, the commodification of attention, and the control of attention. Our attention is fragmented because we are bombarded by information and connectivity constantly through our ever-present technology (p. 97); our attention is commodified by the constant onslaught of advertising in our consumer culture (p. 98); and our attention is controlled through sophisticated propaganda, which manipulates what we think (p. 100), including perpetuating the delusion of an inherent and separate self. If Gangopadhyay’s (2014) embodied simulation view of empathy is correct, then it is no wonder that we, as a global society, have difficulty empathizing with each other and the planet; we actively ignore our bodily sensations and emotions because there is not enough attention left over after all of the attention...
traps contemporary society must navigate, thus complicating our ability to empathize with others.

According to Loy (2008), the solution to these afflictions of awareness is “the liberation of collective attention” (p. 102). This involves bringing our awareness back to the here-and-now, to our lived, embodied experience, and learning to de-condition our awareness from attention traps that feed delusions, including the delusion of an inherently existent self. This is a form of mediation that is an improvable skill, available to all; awareness can be considered “part of the basic nature of the mind, one that has been temporarily obscured by habitual patterns of delusion but can be developed, just like every other natural potential that human beings have” (Francesconi and Tarozzi 2012, p. 280). The discovery of mirror neurons has led to the theory that the role of the body is to “clarify and translate the interaction with the external world, where the most important element [. . . ] is neither the external world nor the body, but the relationship between them” (p. 275). This is important to consider when engaging with conceptions of empathy because our emotions, often influenced by our relationships with each other and the world, are felt in our bodies. In Descartes’ Error (2005), Antonio Damasio suggests that emotions are just as cognitive as any other perceptual image (p. 158), and that these emotions produce feelings in the body, defined by Damasio as the “experience of what your body is doing while thoughts about specific contents roll by” (p. 145). In other words, the mind is not separate from the body; instead, the two are interrelated and ever-changing processes engaging with the processes that constitute the world. It makes sense then, that to better engage with our own emotions and ability to empathize, we can practice paying attention to what our bodies are feeling while we emote and empathize.

The Satipatthana Sutta (n.d.) outlines contemplation of the internal and external body as one of the foundations of Buddhist mindfulness, but it is often a practice that is forgotten in the hustle and bustle of contemporary life. The text suggests that, “contemplating the body as a body internally, [. . .] contemplating the body as a body externally, [. . .] contemplating the body as a body both internally and externally [. . .] contemplating in the body its nature of arising, [. . .] its nature of vanishing, [. . .] its nature of both arising and vanishing” all while “abid[ing] independent, not clinging to anything in the world” is an integral part of mindfulness (Section 2). It is important to note the final part of the passage, “not clinging to anything;” in order for mindful contemplation to occur, the practitioner must let go of judgement, analysis, or any emotion related to the observation. The practice is simply to observe.

Interestingly, the practice of paying attention to internal sensations of the body—interoception—has gained attention across disciplines in recent years. Interoceptive awareness has been “shown to facilitate awareness and identification of one’s emotional state, and thus the regulation of negative affect;” additionally, “sustained, non-evaluative attention to interoceptive sensations was suggested to disengage individuals from dysfunctional cognitive patterns (e.g., negative rumination) [. . .] that perpetuate negative moods” (Khoury et al. 2017, p. 1167). Simply bringing our attention to an embodied awareness, as long as it is accepting (non-evaluative), can thus have an enormous impact on emotion, and can offer a means of breaking the cycle of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies.

One of the most important social processes that has been shown to benefit mental health—and which has traditionally been considered a purely disembodied form of cognitive control—is emotion regulation, defined by Guendelman et al. (2017) as “all the conscious and non-conscious strategies we use to increase, maintain or decrease one or more components of an emotional response, including implicit, nonconscious, and automatic processes, as well as explicit, voluntary and conscious mental processes” (p. 5). There are many emotion regulation strategies, ranging from those that favour conceptual focus on acceptance and attention to those that favour awareness of bodily states. Strategies which represent disembodied cognition such as avoidance, rumination and suppression have been associated with anxiety, depression and eating disorders (p. 2). Avoidance ignores bodily sensation; rumination ignores body sensation in the present moment, instead making
the body feel as if it were actually in the situation being ruminated over; and suppression labels the bodily feelings caused by emotions as negative and therefore undesirable. Furthermore, these disembodied maladaptive strategies complicate our ability to empathize with others (Khoury et al. 2017, p. 1165), which could be contributing to the declining empathy within our society. From a Buddhist perspective, Garfield (2017) argues, “Because our own maladaptive mental activity is the root of primal confusion, it is the root of the other root vices of attraction and aversion, and so of all vice, and so of all suffering. Because our own effective mental activity is the only possible root of insight and understanding, it is the only possible root of compassion, of virtue and so of liberation” (p. 209). It makes sense that an inability to regulate emotion complicates our ability to empathize because emotions take up so much of our attention; it is very difficult to empathize when an individual is caught up in their own emotions, as there is simply not enough attention to pay to both.

3.2. The Importance of Pairing Philosophy with Practice

It is important to note that maladaptive emotion regulation strategies focus solely on cognition and thought process, caught up in the delusion of a dualistic interpretation of mind and body; they ignore the role of the physical body in emotion generation, experience, and regulation. Garfield (2017) points out the impossibility of separating philosophy (cognition) from practice (in the body): “Without mindfulness, even carefully considered and endorsed reflective knowledge is not efficacious in action, just as a carefully memorized score cannot guide a musician’s skillful performance without the cultivation of its action-guiding force, or a playbook guide a basketball player without assiduous practice, not only of the play itself, but also of the perceptual and motor skills that enable its effective execution in the moment of play” (p. 209). Summarizing verses from Śantideva’s Bodhicaryāvatāra, he adds, that “care for the mind is the foundation of all other virtuous activity, as well as the foundation of the possibility of happiness, the release from suffering, and a meaningful life; [Śantideva] concludes this passage by emphasizing that this care amounts to the union of attention and introspective vigilance. That is the essence of mindfulness” (p. 206). Mindful emotion regulation strategies, such as meditation, incorporate this attention to introspective vigilance via sensory-perception and interoceptive-proprioception (Guendelman et al. 2017, p. 14), thereby situating emotion regulation as an embodied process (p. 16) in the present moment rather than a purely conceptual one. It is important to note that mindful emotion regulation is not a purely embodied process either; it simply introduces the body into the equation, providing a more balanced perspective. Disembodied emotion regulation strategies aim to change the content of emotional states while mindfulness-focused strategies focus on changing the relationship to emotional states rather than the content itself (Guendelman et al. 2017, p. 16). By changing the perspective from which emotions are experienced to a mode which includes attention to bodily sensation, mindful emotion regulation encourages acceptance and curiosity about the experience rather than avoidance, rumination or suppression (p. 16).

Rumination can be a particularly formidable complication to empathy because emotional states elicited by the ruminations cause the body to feel as if it is actually in the situation being ruminated over, therefore demanding immediate attention. For example, if I am lying on a beach on my last day of vacation and I am ruminating over the unattractive prospect of returning to work, my body responds by eliciting the feeling of actually being in that unpleasant environment. The thought, and the emotion it elicits, takes my attention out of the present moment and complicates my ability to engage with my current environment. This idea is described by Antonio Damasio (2012) in his “somatic marker hypothesis;” he posits that the brain creates and stores sensory “maps” of body states that elicit a felt emotional response in the body (p. 110). He argues that, “the brain can simulate, within somatosensing regions, certain body states, as if they were occurring; and because our perception of any body state is rooted in the body maps of somatosensing regions, we perceive the body state as actually occurring even if it is not” (p. 109). So, if a thought that causes a fear response—heart racing, body tingling—is ruminated over, the body re-creates
the feeling of the fear response, even if the trigger of the response is not in the present environment. For this reason, I argue that rumination severely complicates our ability to empathize with others because it takes our attention, including our body state, out of the here-and-now.

However, a key to understanding—and even to practicing—empathy could also be hidden in the somatic marker hypothesis. Damasio (2012) argues that “the connection we have established between our own body states and the significance they have acquired for us,”—for example, the understanding that being afraid is a largely unpleasant feeling—“can be transferred to the simulated body states, at which point we can attribute a comparable significance to the simulation” (pp. 111–12); according to this understanding, we feel empathy for a person experiencing fear because our brains simulate the feeling of fear in our own bodies, which reminds us of its unpleasantness, and might even motivate us to help the person in fear. This understanding of the brain and its connection to felt body states is also important when it comes to the idea of practicing an empathetic mode of engagement with the world—in other words, a lived state of empathy. Damasio (2012) argues, “a state that has already occurred in the organism should be easier to simulate since it has already been mapped by precisely the same somatosensing structures that are now responsible for simulating it” (p. 110); thus, the more we practice bringing attention to how an empathetic state—or an understanding of interbeing/emptiness for that matter—feels in the body, the easier it is to elicit that felt state, even in a circumstance that might be challenging. The Buddhist practice of mindful contemplation of the internal and external body offers a practical method of practicing this mode of engagement.

I argue that pairing the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness with the physically experienced practice of understanding emptiness can facilitate emotion regulation, thus paving the way for an empathetic mode of engagement with the world. Mindfully bringing attention to more of the felt, bodily processes that constitute what we experience as our subjective “self” in the present moment can allow individuals to break free of attention traps. This can, in turn, allow individuals to observe the interrelatedness and changeability of their own bodies (including thoughts) and environments in real time, thus providing an ever-accessible, real-world example of the emptiness of essence. It is important to note that these observations should occur with the understanding that our conventionally designated “self” is in fact both interdependent and in a state of constant change, as Nagarjuna suggests, or in the process of interbeing with all other human and non-human elements through the lens of Thich Nhat Hanh. Loy (2008) suggests that Buddhism is “about awakening, which means realizing something about the constructedness of the sense of self and the nothing at its core” (p. 23). Observing the body in real time as a web of interconnected processes may help to awaken the experience of interbeing and of emptiness of essence. Perhaps part of the reason Western society tends to reify the “self” is due to our valuing of certain senses (which are processes in themselves) over others.; For example, consider how much attention you pay to each of your senses, respectively; there is a good chance you pay more attention to visual and auditory stimuli than olfactory or gustatory, and more attention to the latter two than to internal and external sensation or proprioception. This is largely a result of the society in which we live; attention traps like advertisements almost always engage with sight and/or sound exclusively. If we pay most of our attention to attention traps, we pay most of our attention to those two senses. However, the processes that we conventionally define as lived experience are filtered through all of our senses, thus the practice of engaging with more of those senses more often may facilitate understanding of the self as a process, and by demonstration, of the emptiness of essence.

Garfield points out that Nagarjuna’s understanding of emptiness must be “internalized through meditation, so that it becomes not merely a philosophical theory that we can reason our way into, but the basic way in which we take up the world” (p. 340). Similarly, Thich Nhat Hanh advocates that mindfulness should be integrated with all activities as a way of life, regardless of whether or not the activities are worldly or spiritual (Lim 2019, p. 230). If we understand the fundamental interbeing of the cosmos at all moments,
in all activities of daily life, an empathetic mode of engagement is possible—perhaps it even becomes the only mode of engagement possible. This idea situates socially engaged Buddhism firmly within Buddhist tradition. As Nhat Hanh points out, “Buddhism means to be awake” and “if you are awake, you cannot do otherwise than act compassionately [. . . ]. So Buddhism must be engaged in the world. If it is not engaged it is not Buddhism” (Gowens 2014, p. 234). A mindful meditation practice is thus a vital part of understanding conceptions of emptiness and interbeing, and is also, according to Garfield (2017) “regarded by all scholars and practitioners of all Buddhist traditions as essential not only for the development of insight but also for the cultivation and maintenance of ethical discipline” (p. 204).

Guendelman et al. (2017) define mindfulness as practice as “the concrete practice of mindfulness meditation, the deployment (and training) of a non-elaborative (non-conceptual) present-centred, exploratory and non-judgemental (non-valorative) awareness” with the intention of inducing mindfulness as a state, which is “the actual proper first-person experience of the non-elaborative, present-centred, non-judgemental awareness” (p. 3). Khoury et al. (2017) point out the effectiveness of these mechanisms when they note that the “repeated practice of bringing attention to an internal sensory stimulus trains the practitioner’s ability to regulate attention and distinguish between thinking about physical sensations […] versus experiencing them directly” (p. 1167). This suggests that eventually, mindfulness as practice can lead to mindfulness as a day-to-day state of being through attention to physical sensations paired with Buddhist philosophy. Garfield (2017) writes, “the cultivation of mindfulness is the cultivation of a particular spontaneous response: that of being mindful. This cultivation is the very point of mindfulness meditation. Here we must remember that mindfulness is not simply an accompaniment to or a quality of actions or of perceptual sets; being mindful is itself an action, and training in mindfulness makes being mindful, being attentive, a spontaneous way of taking up with the world” (p. 217). Santideva further emphasizes that “when mindfulness becomes spontaneous we gain control of our emotional and interpersonal lives” (p. 217). It is my belief that if enough individuals can experience this state of being more often through the practice of mindful body contemplation, it will allow for a more empathetic engagement with the world because it facilitates an understanding of the world as part of the individual, and of the individual as part of the world.

4. Indira’s Net

Once we can both conceive of and observe the body as a web of interacting processes interbeing, we can begin to view “other” things as processes interbeing with us, including our sense of self, our fellow humans and the planet. The Huayen school of Mahayana Buddhism describes a helpful analogy to demonstrate the interconnectedness, changeability, and dependency of all phenomena: Indira’s Net. At each eye of this infinite net, there is a jewel with infinite faces that reflects all other jewels in the net; each reflection is therefore also itself reflecting all other jewels. Each phenomenon in this arrangement is thus “at the same time the effect of the whole and the cause of the whole” (Loy 2003, p. 183). In the words of Graham Priest, “All the jewels in the net encode each other. Each one, as it were, contains the whole. In the metaphor, the jewels represent the objects of phenomenal reality; and the infinite reflections represent their mutual dependence” (Priest 2015, p. 226). Priest, however, argues for a slightly different version of this traditional interpretation that is particularly relevant when considering notions of empathy:

Change the metaphor slightly. Let us suppose that the interaction between the jewels is not one of reflection; suppose instead that the interaction is one of resonance—in the way that vibrations of an object can cause similar vibrations in closely located free-standing objects. Interpret the vibrations as the “vibes” of a tranquil mind or of a disquieted mind, which we all show to others. When we are surrounded by people who are agitated, angry, and aggressive, it is much harder to be peaceful; and conversely, disquiet will normally be mitigated if we are surrounded by compassionate, peaceful people—and so on, transitively. The
effect, of course, is reciprocal. There can, then, be no radical disjuncture of being between myself and others. (Priest 2015, p. 233)

The idea of the jewels vibrating in resonance with one another makes more sense as a metaphor than the jewels reflecting one another when considering empathy because a vibration is felt while a reflection is only seen, and a change in one vibration has a felt effect on all parts of the vibrating whole. It makes the immediacy of the connection between objects of phenomenal reality more evident, which can lead to the realization that, “my relation to your interests is the same as my relation to my own—or better: we both have an interest in our common interest” (p. 239). This conception of the world allows for a shift in perception. Loy writes, “instead of being a subjective consciousness confronting the world as an object, I am a manifestation of it, interpenetrating and interpenetrated by it” (Loy 2003, p. 184). In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, I am interbeing with it. This understanding allows for individuals to let go of their delusional sense of a reified self separate from others and realize they are the net—and not just part of the net, but “the whole of the net, come to consciousness at this particular place and time” (p. 193) by virtue of their infinite processes interrelating within a larger set of infinite processes. Loy suggests that, “when I discover that I am you [. . .] the ethical problem of how to relate to you is transformed” (p. 184). This facilitates empathy not only for each other, but also for the planet, because in such a conception “human beings cannot be considered the crown of creation, because there is no hierarchy and no center—unless it is everywhere” (p. 183). The idea of interbeing, as well, “is to get rid of dualism and relativity, and to see the whole world as one single entity” (Lim 2019, p. 132). Indira’s Net—and its demonstration of interbeing and the emptiness of essence—thus removes the teleological and hierarchical view that each specific thing has a specific purpose with associated value in a grand scheme of things, because there are no separate, specific things to have separate, specific purposes.

5. Conclusions and Implications

I argued at the beginning of this paper that individuals in Western society tend to view each other in terms of competition and the planet in terms of usefulness and dominance, instead of empathy, and that this view is due to the reification of a sense of self. Loy argues that this anthropocentric attitude “perceives all beings as quantifiable and disposable raw material,” which leads to the valuing of all beings “only insofar as they are good for something—in effect, good for our own purposes” (p. 192). The human response to the COVID-19 pandemic has made it inescapably clear that this delusional mindset is unfortunately the norm in contemporary society. It is no wonder that a society that perpetuates the delusion of an inherent self, separate from others and the world, has resulted in declining empathy for each other and the planet if individuals within that society view “others” only through the lens of what is good for their own purposes. The Cartesian dualistic notion of a separation between mind and body has further reified parts of the conventionally designated self, which has further obfuscated the understanding of emptiness of self. Letting go of the delusion that mind and body are separate is vital to understanding our conventionally designated “self” as empty of essence because it allows for what we experience as “self” to be understood as a manifestation of the constantly changing, interrelated, interdependent processes that constitute the world. Pairing an understanding of Nagarjuna’s conception of emptiness of self with the Buddhist practice of mindful internal and external bodily contemplation can allow for individuals to both understand and experience interbeing and emptiness of essence simultaneously, thus facilitating understanding. This understanding can, in turn, make possible a shift in the way individuals engage with the world; instead of laboring under the delusions perpetuated by contemporary attention traps, those who understand the Buddhist conception of emptiness and interbeing can begin to practice a mindful, empathetic mode of engagement with each other and the world. Considering Thich Nhat Hanh’s interbeing as an alternative understanding to emptiness can help to emphasize the importance of interconnectedness within the tenet of emptiness.
In verse 12 of chapter XVIII “Examination of Self and Entities” (Garfield 1995), Nagarjuna emphasizes that the doctrine of emptiness is itself empty, and can thus be practiced without a teacher:

When the fully enlightened ones do not appear.
And when the disciples have disappeared,
The wisdom of the self-enlightened ones
Will arise completely without a teacher. (p. 253)

This, too, is a liberating aspect of emptiness; it makes the understanding and practice of the Middle Way accessible to everyone, at any time, in any place. Garfield writes, “by understanding clearly the nature of the self and of the entities to which it is related [. . . ], even without a teacher or a Buddha to instruct one, a patient mediator can attain his/her own awakening” (p. 253). This suggests that the ability to comprehend emptiness of essence and to practice mindfulness is present in all of us; we need only to uncover it within ourselves.

Another interpretation of this verse is perhaps possible, and in light of the current ongoing global crisis, I feel it is worth mentioning. “The wisdom of the self-enlightened ones will arise completely without a teacher”—could this be because this wisdom can be demonstrated by the planet and understood by us once we accept that we are the planet because the planet is us? Hui Lim (2019) emphasizes a comment that Thich Nhat Hanh made in Love Letter to the Earth (2013) that is chilling when read in 2022. He states, “The Earth has the capacity to restore balance. Sometimes many, many species have to disappear in order for the balance to be restored” (Lim 2019, p. 127). These words lent urgency to the situation back in 2013—if the Earth was trying to remind us that we are her and she is us, then she is crying out the message to us now, and we can no longer afford to ignore it. An empathetic engagement with the world is now vital at the level of species survival.

However, there is hope: in an interview with Lions Roar in 2017, Tibetan monk, scientist and author Matthieu Ricard states, “having more consideration for others is the most pragmatic way to deal with the challenges of our times” and that, contrary to the dominant Western thought that humans are innately selfish, “human beings are innately compassionate and [. . . ] we have the capacity to be more so. There are [. . . ] proven methods for systematically increasing compassion in ourselves and in our society” (Miller 2017). Compassion, for the purposes of this paper, can be defined as a trained response to empathetic feeling that insulates against negative affect while inducing motivation to help. Recent experiments across disciplines have provided empirical proof that mindfulness strategies have an impact on our brain, health, and behaviour, including our consideration for others. In the Zurich Prosocial Game, for example, participants were given the option of helping another participant surmount an obstacle at the risk of losing points for themselves. Before playing the game, some participants were given a brief training on meditating on compassion while others were given training on improving memory (Leiberg et al. 2011). The results show that the participants trained in compassion meditation were more likely to help others and that “the increase of pro-social behaviours towards strangers was proportional to the period of time spent training in compassion” (Miller 2017).

In a separate study, Ricard helped psychologist and social neuroscientist Tania Singer and her team conceive of a model differentiating between empathy and compassion that is important to consider. In untrained brains (untrained in non-referential compassion and loving-kindness), feelings of empathy can cause parts of the pain matrix in the brain to be activated; however, when trained brains, such as Ricard’s, engage with the pain of others with loving-kindness and compassion, a different network in the brain is activated, one associated with positive emotion, warmth and affiliation (Singer 2017, pp. 239–40). Singer argues that we all have empathy, “the capacity to resonate with the suffering of others,” but if it becomes too strong a feeling, it can lead to empathetic distress, which can then lead to nonsocial behaviour (p. 240). However, compassion training can change the way we engage with the suffering of others and lead to positive outcomes. She writes, “If you
know how to turn empathic resonance into compassion, then you are safer. You know how to develop positive emotions of concern toward the other, and you develop prosocial motivation, a strong motivation to help” (p. 240). Whether individuals have a tendency to go from empathy to distress or from empathy to empathetic concern and helping is “probably affected by individual differences very early on in childhood that determine how you react” (p. 250). However, further studies have also shown that it is a teachable skill and an emotion regulation strategy (p. 243). Ricard provides a helpful metaphor: “Empathy without compassion,” he suggests, “is like an electric water pump without water: it quickly overheats and shuts down. So we need the water of love and compassion to continuously cool down empathic distress and counteract emotional exhaustion” (p. 253).

Singer’s model suggests that we must contemplate the possibility that contemporary individuals find themselves stuck in an empathic distress response and thus avoid engaging with the suffering of others—or the planet—at all, as a (maladaptive) emotion regulation strategy. Is it possible that what seems like a decline in empathy in our society is actually a fear of it, or an aversion to it? If so, compassion training may be both the key to unlocking an empathetic response and the support needed to shift that empathetic resonance from distress to compassion. This shift would situate feelings of empathy as motivators of behavior that can bring about meaningful change in the way we interact with each other and the environment on the global level.

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### Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, I will use Antonio Damasio’s (2012) conception of emotions as the automatic, physical responses to stimuli—such as increase in heart rate and increase in circulation to the legs in a fear response that favours running (rather than freezing)—while feelings are the perceived sensation of fear, such as the heart racing and the legs tingling as blood rushes to them (pp. 116–21).

2. See Damasio’s ([1994] 2005) somatic marker hypothesis.

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