

# Suffering, Authenticity and Freedom: Comparative Perspectives of Buddhist and Heideggerian Conceptions of Human Existence in East-West Dialogue

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## Abstract

In the context of globalization and the subsequent transformations of this process, a cross-cultural and cross-social understanding between Eastern and Western philosophies appears inevitable. Concepts and elements, formerly separate, interweave and blend together. But the absence of a true synthesis of philosophical conceptions of human beings has not helped to overcome the spiritual and existential crises of modernity. In this paper, an examination of Buddhist and Heideggerian existentialist conceptions of human beings, human suffering and liberation is conducted, followed by identification of key similarities and differences between them. The paper compares the similarities between Buddhism's *Nāma-Rūpa* (mind-body interdependence) with Heidegger's *Dasein* (being-there), and divergences between the former's communal ethics of the Noble Eightfold Path with the latter's individualistic "resolve" ("*Entschlossenheit*"). The concept of "cultural additivity" and syncretic tradition of *Tam Giáo* are applied to further mediate ideas from Buddhism and Heidegger through an integration of Taoism.

## Keywords

Eastern Philosophy, Western Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy, Existentialism, Heidegger, Three Teachings, Taoism

## 1. Introduction

Global cultural interchange has intensified since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the

process accelerated under globalization and creating a mish-mash of configurations that would have been unlikely in the past. The dissolution of traditional barriers through technology and economic policies helped to reimagine and reconcile disparate systems whether between the Eastern soteriological model found in Buddhism, or Western existentialist critiques of modernity such as Heidegger's. As noted by some, these two conceptions have emerged and re-emerged throughout the era of modernity to counter its resulting spiritual crises, whether caused by hyperconnectivity-induced consumerism (Amir, 2024), identity alienation (Shorin, 2024) or the psychological anxieties arising from global events.

Both of these schools of thought, Buddhism and Heidegger's existentialism, share a common critique of an ontological vantage point in the form of Cartesian dualism, which has become widespread in justifying reductive individualism (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2015) or technological objectification (Hornborg, 2015; Abrams, 2015). *Nāma* and *Rūpa*, the foundational concepts of Buddhism, remove the subject-object binary distinction, whereby the attachment to a fixed individual "self" perpetuates cycles of suffering ("*Samṣāra*"). Heidegger's *Dasein* is critical of similar themes of disengaged rationalism through viewing human existence as relational and temporal. As such, the two intersect in their rejection of the atomistic and subjectivistic view of human existence.

Why a synthesis of these two thought systems should be examined is explained by the complicated background of East-West cultural interchange itself. Western perception of Buddhism has often treated its philosophy as a body of mystified, amorphous answers to modernity's social ills, overlooking the core ethics and views on human beings (King, 1999). Complimenting this exoticization is the marginalization of these thought systems to a non-changing, permanently suspended "Eastern spirituality", as Western thoughts are said to continuously evolve and become the default arbiters of reason (Trouillot, 1995).

Some modern scholars of religion seek to overcome this selective understanding of Buddhism through an application of the *Four Noble Truths* to uncover the structural avarice inherent in modern economic systems (Loy, 1997). However, the sociological approach of more critical Western scholarship often locates the source of suffering in external systems, and this paper would like to more closely examine the introspective nature of core Buddhist philosophy, specifically the *Mahāyāna* ideal where the individual and collective liberation ("*Nirvāṇa*") are inseparable. And from this and the subsequent review of Heidegger's conceptions of human freedom, the paper seeks a viable synthesis that can come to a greater understanding of 21<sup>st</sup> century existential and spiritual maladies.

## 2. The Conception of Human Beings in Buddhist Philosophy

Addressing the issue of human beings is one of the most fundamental tenets in Buddhist philosophy. The main object that Buddhism studies is humans and human values (Lê, 1998). Similar to classical philosophical systems in history, Buddhist philosophy analyzes humans on the basis of dividing humans into two ele-

ments: *Nāma* and *Rūpa*, referring to mental and physical aspects of existence. However, the difference between Buddhist philosophy and classical philosophical systems lies in the fact that Buddhist philosophy elevates humans to an entity that can and should aim to recognize something true and more sublime than secular life, and from there emerges Buddhism's true path towards liberation.

## 2.1. Human Nature and Existence in Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhism holds that humans are independent subjects. It is humans themselves who can cause their own suffering, *Saṃsāra*, and it is also humans who must find ways to eliminate suffering for themselves. Thus, according to Buddhist philosophical conception, human life is a chain of suffering. Those sufferings are entanglements caused by one's inability to clearly distinguish right from wrong, and blind attachment. Humans can be said to have been born from the combination of "causes and conditions," so the self is an entity that "exists yet does not exist," and it is precisely because humans do not recognize this "existing yet not existing" that they suffer. This conception is clearly expressed in Buddhism's *Four Noble Truths* doctrine: the *Truth of Suffering*, the *Truth of the Origin of Suffering*, the *Truth of the Cessation of Suffering*, and the *Truth of the Path*, as four clear truths about human suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to end human suffering.

According to the first truth, the *Truth of Suffering* ("*Duḥkha*"), human life is filled with suffering. "The tears of sentient beings in the three thousand worlds, if collected, would be more than the water in the four seas." *Suffering* is a cruel and widespread reality. But few people dare to look directly at it, instead trying to avoid it or eliminate suffering by relentlessly seeking pleasure. In the *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*, three types of feelings are mentioned: Suffering feeling, Pleasant feeling, and Neutral feeling.

Thus, clearly, there is not only Suffering feeling but also Pleasant feeling. Adverse conditions give rise to Suffering feeling, but favorable conditions give rise to Pleasant feeling, and conditions that are neither favorable nor adverse give rise to Neutral feeling. In summary, conditions can make people either happy, suffering, or neither happy nor suffering. Buddhism does not deny the feeling of happiness, but that happiness is only momentary and illusory. Buddhism advocates liberation from suffering—*Duḥkha*, that is, leading people to true, eternal, pure happiness, happiness that is qualitatively different from the false, impermanent pleasant feelings of the mundane world (Mai, 1998).

Buddhism does not stop at pointing out the sufferings of human life, but also indicates why humans suffer, the method to eliminate suffering, and the path to eliminate suffering. Regarding the causes of suffering, Buddhism presents them in the *Truth of the Origin*.

The second truth, the *Truth of the Origin* ("*Samudaya*"), the Sanskrit term for the second Noble Truth, points out the causes of human suffering. Those causes are not far away, they are within humans themselves. Buddhism has summarized

those causes as: Greed, Hatred (Anger), Delusion, Pride, Doubt, Identity view (Thinking the body is real and permanent), Extreme view (One-sided understanding, such as adhering to annihilationism or eternalism), Wrong view (Incorrect understanding), Attachment to views (Clinging to one's own understanding as correct), and Attachment to rites and rituals (Practicing in ways that deviate from the right path). Buddhism considers greed, hatred, and delusion as the three main causes, the source of all suffering, and the cause of reincarnation. The *Truth of Suffering* and the *Truth of the Origin* are the cause and effect in the mundane world.

The third truth, the *Truth of Cessation* (“*Nirodha*”) requires the elimination of suffering to achieve peace. In the Buddhist scriptures, it is recorded that the Buddha said, the vast ocean has only one taste, that taste is salt, and the Buddha's teaching is the same. Although his teachings are as vast as the ocean, they have only one goal, which is to end human suffering. The *Truth of Cessation* is the pure fruit of *Nirvāṇa* resulting from practicing pure karma brought about by the *Truth of the Path*. Cessation is the nature of extinction, the place where karmic formation has ended, where there is no more cycle of birth and death. Pure karma necessarily produces pure fruit: that is the *Truth of Cessation*. “When delusional karma no longer arises, the mind always abides in a state of tranquility: that is the realm of *Nirvāṇa*” (Nguyễn, 1976).

The ultimate goal of liberation is *Nirvāṇa*, the Sanskrit term referring to the state of liberation from suffering. Human life is a stream of birth-death changes governed by the law of cause and effect, karmic retribution. Greed, hatred, and delusion are the causes of all suffering. And *Nirvāṇa* is the end of the cycle of reincarnation, meaning the cessation of the stream of cause and effect and karmic retribution. *Nirvāṇa* here is a state of abandoning all afflictions, escaping ignorance, not a realm of happiness like heaven. *Nirvāṇa* is the state of ending the cycle of birth and death.

The fourth truth, the *Truth of the Path* (“*Marga*”) points out the way to help sentient beings liberate themselves from the cycle of birth and death. Buddhism presents many methods to help people cultivate body and mind to escape the cycle of reincarnation. One of those methods is the *Noble Eightfold Path*, further discussed in the next section.

In summary, the *Four Noble Truths* are four truths that are always connected to sentient beings, to each person. The causes of suffering explained in the *Truth of Suffering* and the *Truth of the Origin* are the *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* (“*Pratītyasamutpāda*”). The *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* explain the birth and formation of suffering. These twelve causes, each serving as a condition for the next, create all things in this world. This conception reflects the process of movement and development of all things in the universe according to the law of cause and effect: something exists in the present because it was created in the past. This is the point of difference between Buddhism and Christianity. Christianity explains that all things in the universe, including humans, were cre-

ated by God, a supernatural being. Buddhism uses the Twelve Links to clearly explain the origin and movement of all things, the universe, and humans.

All things, including humans, move and form through the *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* in both forward and reverse directions. According to the theory of the *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination*, humans are born because of the harmonious combination of causes and conditions, and humans die because these causes and conditions dissolve. The *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* are the cause, the origin of human existence in this world. Humans exist because of causes and conditions. Causes must rely on conditions to produce results. Results then become other causes, and thus the cycle of birth and transformation continues. Buddhism only acknowledges continuous transformation due to causes and conditions, and does not accept any supernatural forces or Creator responsible for creating things or humans.

The *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* form a continuous chain connecting humans in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. They are: Ignorance (“*Avidyā*”), Formations (“*Saṃskāra*”), Consciousness (“*Vijñāna*”), Name-and-Form (“*Nāmarūpa*”), Six Sense Bases (“*Ṣaḍāyatana*”), Contact (“*Sparsā*”), Feeling (“*Vedanā*”), Craving (“*Tṛṣṇā*”), Clinging (“*Upādāna*”), Becoming (“*Bhava*”), Birth (“*Jāti*”), and Aging-and-Death (“*Jarāmaraṇa*”). The theory of the 12 causes describes human life, encompassing past, present, and future lives, creating the karma of sentient beings, of each person, creating the cycle of birth and death. This theory focuses on explaining human principles, the causes of the cycle of rebirth in the ocean of birth and death.

To escape the cycle of birth and death, according to Buddhist philosophy, one must eliminate karma, must eliminate the Twelve Links, but must do so according to each link. “These *Twelve Links of Dependent Origination* reflect the path leading to human life and the flow of life of a specific person; these conditions clearly reflect the causal relationship between past life, present life, and future life (following), that is, two layers of cause and effect across three lives (of one life)” (Bùi, 1998).

## 2.2. The Conception of Liberation in Buddhist Philosophy

Liberation is a central tenet in Buddhism, because the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to liberate humans from the repetitive cycle of birth and death of a human life, from the suffering of ignorance. Buddhism aims to show people the path to a peaceful, happy life or the path to liberation from the restraints of desire, to rescue people from a tragic state of alienation. This liberation can only be achieved through the *Noble Eightfold Path* leading to *Nirvana*. This is the purpose of Buddhism. As the *Truth of the Path* in the *Four Noble Truths*, the *Noble Eightfold Path* (*Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration*) represents the standards in the process of perception, thinking, and action of each person.

- *Right View* requires correct perception of things, avoiding the situation of

judging or observing things incompletely, seeing only a partial or one-sided aspect of the true nature of things, like the blind men examining an elephant. Therefore, *Right View* requires analyzing principles in a realistic way, understanding the true nature clearly, not having superficial knowledge that leads to distortion or error.

- *Right Thought* is using reason to solve objectives that we can achieve. The correct objective must be the principle of the *Four Noble Truths* to clearly understand the cause and effect of the worldly and transcendental, to escape suffering.
- *Right Speech* is speaking correctly and truthfully: not lying, not spreading rumors, not speaking divisively causing disunity, not using harsh or rude words to criticize others, not speaking meaninglessly or uselessly.
- *Right Action* is behavior that aligns with principles, honor, and peace. The speech precepts of Buddhism aim to help people achieve the goal of *Right Action*.
- *Right Livelihood* is living righteously, in a profession that does not violate ethics or law. In other words, not sacrificing or harming the happiness of others for one's own personal gain.
- *Right Effort* is determined will, with tireless effort, not stopping until success is achieved. Right Effort means that to succeed in work, besides having to try hard, one must try in the right way, neither being lazy nor procrastinating, nor being too hasty or impatient.
- *Right Mindfulness* is maintaining clarity, alertness, accurately understanding all of one's actions. *Right Concentration* is achieved through proper meditation, reaching a state where the mind is restrained in one place, without disturbance.
- *Right Concentration* helps people adjust their consciousness to perceive accurately. Buddha Shakyamuni, more than 2500 years ago, through the method of *Right Concentration* under the Bodhi tree, realized the *Four Noble Truths*. *Right Concentration* helps people merge into a harmonious, peaceful, equal, and balanced realm.

To achieve liberation, according to Buddhist philosophy, people need to practice the *Noble Eightfold Path* to transform the space where humans live, the realm of *Sahā*, that has little good and much evil. Humans are always pushed into the cycle of birth and death, repeating endlessly. Therefore, humans must escape this law in this space, in which time is one dimension.

Almost all Buddhist sutras address the issues of *True Suchness* (“*Tathātā*”) and liberation. According to Buddhist teachings, everything that humans perceive as experience is an illusion. That illusion is a chain of temporary connections of temporary elements. These temporary elements are, in essence, manifestations of something transcendent behind them, that is, some absolute entity.

What is liberated is *True Suchness* escaping from the endless, beginningless, and endless cycle of existence. *True Suchness* manifests in each sentient being.

Each individual does not actually liberate themselves individually, but simultaneously liberates the entire *True Suchness* of which that individual is a part.

Liberating sentient beings, therefore, is the liberation of *True Suchness*. The Buddha liberating sentient beings is also liberating himself. Conversely, sentient beings liberating themselves is also liberating the Buddha. The perfection of each individual is the perfection of all, and liberating this perfection means liberating each part of *True Suchness*. The unity of all as parts of the absolute is the premise for the liberation of each separate individual, the basis for each individual to move toward eternal peace not just for themselves but as a part of the whole.

### 3. The Conception of Human Beings in Martin Heidegger's Existentialism

Martin Heidegger is one of the most prominent existential philosophers. His philosophy takes human existence as its subject, and his philosophy is fundamentally a philosophy about human beings. His conceptions of human beings are most clearly expressed through his famous works which are “*Sein und Zeit*” (Being and Time), originally published in 1927 and “*Die Frage nach der Technik*” (The Question Concerning Technology), originally published in 1954.

#### 3.1. Authentic Living—Heidegger's Starting Point

Heidegger's starting point when addressing the conception of human beings is the notion of authentic living. Authentic living here manifests the *Existenz* (“existence”) in each human being. As the most essential and fundamental aspect of human existence, *Existenz* is a mode of living, a unique living attitude of the individual as a finite being. *Existenz* is not essence as something unchangeable, predetermined, and preexisting. It is connected to the possibility of existence (Nguyễn & Đỗ, 2009). *Existenz* is the most essential, innermost, originating and inherent aspect of each self within us. *Existenz* is what makes one person clearly and unmistakably different from others.

The meaning of human life is determined by the self or *Existenz*. We only achieve *Existenz* when we have become conscious of our authentic self, when we clearly understand that living is not merely living as a biological entity, but living to fulfill our noble and unique mission. *Existenz* here should not be understood in the ordinary sense as synonymous with what is currently present or biologically existing, but rather *Existenz* here represents the aspiration to become what we want to be, transcending what humans currently are. *Existenz* contains infinite possibilities and is connected to human freedom. *Existenz* is a “destiny” that each person has chosen.

According to Heidegger (1994), *Existenz* can be recognized in contemplation of death, in finite existence oriented toward death. As the most essential and fundamental aspect of human existence, *Existenz* has primacy, priority, and originality. Like other existential philosophers, Heidegger considers human existence and *Existenz* as preceding essence. In each of us, human essence is not something pre-

determined, but is formed by *Existenz* through the self-selection of life goals and meaning, through life projects created by oneself, and through implementing them with dreams, aspirations, will, determination, and the spirit of daring to act and take responsibility. Therefore, for each person, without *Existenz* there would be no essence.

### 3.2. Human Existence—*Dasein*

Human existence (“*Dasein*”) is the fundamental originating existence of human beings. *Dasein* has primacy and is the starting point. *Dasein* is a most unique type of being, conscious of its own existence, capable of questioning the problem of existence, capable of self-design and creating its essence in the future. Heidegger (1994) affirms: “This existent is ourselves, among many possibilities of existence we also have an ability that forces us to search for something designated as *Dasein*, existence—being—here”.

The structure of *Dasein* is examined in terms of psychology and temporality. In psychological terms, the mode of human existence in the world is worry, anxiety, and fear, which are the basic structures of human existence, the a priori forms of *Dasein*. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* does not exist at points in space, nor within the physical body itself. *Dasein* is not attached to space, but it is connected to time, to historicity and to the temporal structure: past, present, and future. Corresponding to this temporal structure, *Dasein* as worry, anxiety, or fear has a structure consisting of three elements: 1) Being-in-the-world (“*In-der-Welt-sein*”); 2) Existence of being-in-the-world; 3) Being-ahead-of-itself or projection. These three elements are always connected but not from past, present to future but in the opposite direction.

Being-in-the-world in Heidegger’s thought is the internal a priori determination of humans, expressing the past form of time. As something a priori, human existence is not a product of actual circumstances as some materialist philosophers conceive. Being-in-the-world should not be understood as the spatial coexistence of two objects, or as the relationship between subject and object, but it is a fundamental structure of *Dasein*. Existence is in a specific place, unmistakable, rejected, thrown into life. This thrownness (“*Geworfenheit*”) is also a fundamental attribute of existence.

The existence of being in the world is the mode of human relationship to things as companions of humans during a limited period of life. This mode requires maintaining distance between humans and things. It corresponds to the present element of time.

As being-ahead-of-itself, human existence differs from all other beings, all material or biological entities in the material world. It corresponds to the future element of time. The anticipatory nature of this existence is shown in that it is always what it is not, because it always runs ahead of itself, is always its possibility, always designing itself into something greater than the present moment.

All three temporal elements—past, present, and future—of *Dasein* interpen-

trate each other and are fundamentally different from objective time. The past is not what is behind, what has passed and no longer exists, but is still something that exists constantly, is both present and future. Unlike objective time viewed as a straight line comprising successive “present” elements, the existential timestream does not move from past to future but in the opposite direction from the future.

According to Heidegger, time is an attribute, an essential structure of *Dasein* or human existence. Time here is not understood as objective time. In psychological terms, human worries, anxieties, and fears are not only directed toward other beings around them but first and foremost toward their own mode of existence. Fear here is fear for existence in the world (fear for one’s future), fear for the possibility of non-existence (fear of death). In this fear, humans approach nothingness. Humans stand before nothingness. Human existence is existence oriented toward death and contemplating death and from death, when one is dying. This is precisely the moment in which the meaning and urgency of human existence are most clearly revealed as the being-toward-death. The cause of this urgency is the finite nature of human life, which we often forget due to being busy with daily survival. We often forget that, in reality, human life is too short, that we must live a life full of identity, unmistakable because of death. Death will awaken us, dare to realize our existence; be steadfast with our decisions, dare to live our free life and dare to take responsibility for it, dare to make our life meaningful, dare to create our life in our state of thrownness.

Thus, according to Heidegger, contemplation of death is the key not only to clarify temporality as the cause, limit, and prospect of human existence but also the origin, impulse, enthusiasm for life, and the basic motivation encouraging us to act in the remaining years of our life.

### 3.3. Authentic and Inauthentic Modes of Existence

Authentic (“*eigentlich*”) and inauthentic (“*uneigentlich*”) modes of existence are the pivotal, core, most fundamental points in Heidegger’s existential philosophy about human beings.

The authentic mode of existence is understood as the mode of living in which humans are always conscious of their finitude, historicity, and individual freedom. Each person will live faithful to their conscience, principles, and self. The authentic mode of existence can be most clearly felt at the moment when humans are dying, facing death, facing nothingness. This is also the moment that most clearly reveals the meaning of one’s authentic existence and one discovers oneself as a being-toward-death (“*Sein-zum-Tode*”). Orienting toward death, contemplating from death, about death, and daring to look directly at death is the best way for humans to escape the daily survival constraints, for humans to recognize their authentic meaning of life. According to Heidegger, in that state, one will discover the deepest secrets of human existence, become conscious of one’s existence, and feel existential fear. That fear opens up a new prospect before humans when they become conscious of their despair before death and connect their self and exist-

ence with nothingness.

Conversely, the inauthentic mode of existence is the mode of existence that departs from one's self, one's existence, and one's authentic meaning of life. The inauthentic mode of existence is manifested in situations where humans must think, speak, and act against their conscience or their own principles, entirely governed or pushed by the social environment, by others, by externally imposed factors. At this point, humans lose themselves and tend to view themselves or others as objects. This mode of existence identifies existence with being, being with the world. In traditional philosophy, a way of thinking dominates according to which humans are considered similar to all things, objects, or creatures, forgetting the temporality, historicity, finitude of human existence. This is an escape of the self, of human existence from itself, living according to opinions, alien principles of mass thinking, or according to imposed embellishments on oneself.

Heidegger criticizes the view that sees humans as a cog in some machine, like the mechanics in Chaplin's film "*Modern Times*": "The worker all day only specializes in screwing bolts, when work hours are over, on the street he still wants to screw people's necks, he screws bolts with everything he encounters" (Trần, 2015). Under this condition, humans are just tools and have no distinctive identity; they are rounded off without any sharp edges. In society there appear those holding that view who sell their honor, conscience, dignity cheaply, flatter, those who do not live truthfully with their hearts, live falsely, irresponsibly, etc. The consequence is that individuals will not be responsible for the things they cause. These phenomena reflect a picture of social alienation; it also shows the profound conflict between society and the individual. However, according to Heidegger, this inauthentic mode of existence has its origins in the essential structure of human existence. Humans in daily life, by being busy seeking ways to survive, sometimes at all costs, we have forgotten ourselves, forgotten our authentic self, not living according to our conscience. We fall into things that belong to others and not to ourselves.

## 4. Comparative Analysis

### 4.1. Similarities and Differences

The conception of human beings in Buddhist philosophy and Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy has several similarities as follows.

First, both philosophical conceptions have a pessimistic starting point, asserting that human life is full of suffering. Buddhism maintains that human life is an ocean of suffering, while Heidegger's existential philosophy holds that humans suffer from the moment they are born, being thrown into life in desolation, and one of the proofs of human suffering is the fact that all newborns cry when they enter the world. The purpose of both Buddhist philosophy and Heidegger's existential philosophy is similar in that they aim to liberate and free humans from suffering, albeit through different methods and based on different explanations.

Second, both philosophical conceptions begin from the primary elements that

constitute humans and human nature. Buddhism asserts that humans are formed from two elements, *Nāma* and *Rūpa* (material and spiritual), while Heidegger maintains that humans are constituted and constructed from *Dasein* (human existence) as the foundational originating element, having primacy and serving as the starting point. Human existence precedes essence, and thus both come to reject the ontology of Cartesian dualism, albeit in different ways: *Nāma-Rūpa* dissolves the mind-body dichotomy via affirming their interdependence, upon which a fixed self (“*Attā*”) emerges; *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world (“*In-der-Welt-sein*”) negates subject-object distinction and sees its inauthentic mode of being as *Dasein*’s absorption into the impersonal “they-self” (“*das Man*”).

Third, both philosophical conceptions elevate humans, placing them at the center of their philosophical thought, and both aim toward the purpose of liberating or freeing humans. While Buddhist philosophy directs humans toward Nirvana through the *Noble Eightfold Path*, Heidegger’s existential philosophy indicates that humans can only be liberated when they live authentically with their true self, achieve genuine freedom, and can construct their authentic essence in life, without being governed and bound by surrounding temptations, demands, and pressures from society that conflict with their personal principles. Both of them call to confront the truth of existentiality, but differ in approaches: Buddhism is communal and prescriptive, but Heidegger’s resoluteness (“*Entschlossenheit*”) chooses an introspective struggle with temporality.

Fourth, both conceptions, when discussing the origins of human nature, assert that the roots of human nature are innate, not dependent on the social environment. Heidegger points out that human *Existenz* is innate, whose *thrownness* creates human nature and the distinct self in each person, making one person different from others. Buddhist philosophy maintains that at birth, humans already bear the consequences from previous lives, according to the *Samāsāric* law of cause and effect.

Despite having many similarities, there are several differences in the conception of human beings between Buddhist philosophy and Heidegger’s philosophy.

First, the difference in the conception of human nature: While Buddhism asserts that humans are constituted from two elements, *Nāma* and *Rūpa* (material and spiritual), with human nature in this life implicitly determined from previous lives, Heidegger maintains that in each of us, human nature is not something innate at birth, but rather something constructed by each of us, by each person’s self, by each person’s a priori *Existenz*. Human nature is formed through free choice, through life projects and the implementation of these projects, through human involvement in social life in relation to others.

Second, the difference in the conception of human suffering. Buddhism asserts that human life is an ocean of suffering; humans suffer due to greed, hatred, and delusion, due to having too many desires, and due to thoughts and behaviors in previous lives that must be repaid according to the law of karmic retribution. Meanwhile, Heidegger maintains that humans suffer not only because they are

thrown into life and must make their own decisions in life, but also because they lose themselves, live inauthentically with themselves, and cannot fulfill their desires and aspirations.

Third, the two conceptions differ in their methods of liberating or freeing humans. Buddhism presents the *Noble Eightfold Path* as a method to liberate humans from all suffering, directing humans to abandon greed, hatred, and delusion, to give up their aspirations, emphasizing a tendency toward world-renunciation. The stages of the Path slowly dismantle clinging to the sense of self and phenomenal worldliness, leading to liberation under *Nirvāṇa*. In contrast, emphasizing a tendency toward world-engagement, Heidegger asserts that humans need to have will, energy, dreams, aspirations, and must have their own ambitions and desires, moreover maintaining their authentic existential self, not losing themselves in any circumstance to be liberated and free. To achieve authenticity (*“Eigentlichkeit”*), liberation is not seen as an end-state like *Nirvāṇa*, but a continual process of being-toward-death (*“Sein-zum-Tode”*), where authenticity arises from embracing finitude rather than transcending it. Humans should live faithfully to their authentic mode of existence, to their principles of living, to their hearts, rather than losing their self, due to external circumstances or the struggle for survival, living aimlessly and wasting their lives.

#### 4.2. Mediating Buddhism and Heidegger’s Existentialism through the Tao

As we examine the ways in which Buddhist philosophy and Heidegger’s existentialism may converge through similarities and differences, one cannot overlook the significant engagement with Taoist thought by Heidegger, transforming a standard Western philosophical point of view to one that acts a bridge that may better synthesize these seemingly disparate value systems. The process in which such thoughts are reconciled has been a common occurrence within Eastern paradigms, such as Vietnam’s syncretic Three Teachings (*“Tam Giáo”*) that coalesced the ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism into the nation’s core belief systems.

Heidegger’s engagement with the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经) was facilitated by his collaboration with Chinese scholar Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, and it had a transformative effect on his later critique of technological modernism (Xia, 2023). His assertion that humans must “keep watch over the unconcealment... of all coming to presence” (Heidegger, 1977) could easily describe the Taoist principle of *wu wei* (无为, “non-coercive action”). As the Taoist sage harmonizes with the *ziran* (自然, “self-so”) of nature, Heidegger is cautiously against technological *Enframing* (*Gestell*) by deferring to Being’s self-revelation. This departure from Western rationalism mirrors the *I Ching*’s (易经) distinction between the ascending Tao and descending “vessel” (器):

*“That which is formless is called Tao; that which has form is called vessel.”*

Here, Heidegger’s Being is attuned with the Tao’s ineffable and generative

movement, transcending human comprehension. Both of them warn against reducing nature into a Cartesian subject-object dichotomy that Buddhist *Nāma-Rūpa* also deconstructs through its emphasis on Dependent Origination (*Pratīyasamutpāda*).

Vietnam's cultural additivity (“*cộng tính văn hóa*”), a concept in Vietnamese studies that describes the process of layering rather than replacing traditions, enabled the harmonious syncretism of Confucian ethics, Buddhist soteriology, and Taoist cosmology into *Tam Giáo* (Vuong et al., 2018). For example, the 15th-century *Tứ Thư Ước Nghĩa* (四书约义) considers Confucian *nhân* (仁, “benevolence”) as complementary to Buddhist *từ bi* (慈悲, “compassion”) and Taoist *đức* (德, “virtue”). Temples and altars of worships often enshrined Confucian scholars, Bodhisattvas, and Taoist immortals (*tiên*) side-by-side, in accordance with the axiom “*Tam giáo đồng nguyên*” (三教同源, “Three Teachings share one origin”) (Nguyễn, 2022).

The concept of cultural additivity and syncretic traditions of *Tam Giáo* thus provide an axis through which Buddhism and Heidegger's existentialism are further mediated, through a Taoist lens. Three points of mediation emerge from this lens:

- Non-dual revelation: Heidegger's Clearing (*Lichtung*), the open region where Being reveals itself, finds strong parallels with the Taoist *xuất hư* (出虛, “emerging from emptiness”) and the Buddhist *sūnyatā*. All three conceptions reject substance ontology, seeing reality as a constantly adapting movement of presence and absence.
- Releasement: The Eightfold Path's *Right Livelihood* and Heidegger's “release-ment toward things” (*Gelassenheit*) both advocate natural engagement with the world, similar to the Taoist ideal *yǔ wù wéi chūn* (与物为春, “springtime harmony with things”).
- Destiny and karma: As Heidegger's thrownness finds commonality with Buddhist saṃsāric conditioning, it also reverberates with the Taoist cosmic mandate (命). Although karma implies moral causality and *geworfēnheit* denotes existential contingency, the distinction is mediated via Vietnam's syncretic tradition where ancestral karma of *nghiệp* (業) interconnects with communal ethic of *phúc* (福, “blessings”).

### 4.3. The New Three Teachings for Modernity and Technological Alienation

Heidegger's (1977) caution that “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” reveals greater depth when read alongside Taoist and Buddhist conceptions that reject rationality as an instrument. We can relate to Zhuangzi's parable of the “useless tree”, which survives precisely because it cannot be commodified, to Heidegger's call to safeguard Being's mystery, as Buddhism's values condemn greed-driven exploitation as a root of suffering. Vietnam's hybridized tradition, which includes the practices of *thiền định* (禪定, “Zen medita-

tion”) to cultivate mindfulness (*chánh niệm*), can further include Heidegger’s (1977) insistence that “questioning is the piety of thought”.

Thus, Heidegger’s Taoist turn and Vietnam’s *Tam Giáo* together postulate a post-metaphysical ontology transcending the Cartesian dualist distinction of East-West binaries, to enable a new form of Three Teachings for the modern era. With *Dasein* as the “shepherd of Being” tending to *pratīyasamutpāda*, alienation is overcome where liberation (*nirvāṇa*) and authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) are mediated by mindful co-becoming with the *Tao*. In a Vietnamese context, the hybridizing of thoughts stands as not merely theoretical prospect but a time-tested practice, allowing for schools of thought to mutually enrich rather than oppose one another.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, although appearing in two different Eastern and Western cultures, at two widely separated time periods, the conception of human beings in Buddhist philosophy and in Heidegger’s existential philosophy reveals profound interconnections beyond mere coincidence. Both reject Cartesian dualism and Heidegger’s engagement with Taoist thought further illustrates how several philosophical traditions of the East and West have never truly been divided nor isolated from each other. Although there are still differences, the ultimate purpose of both conceptions is to indicate the path to liberation and freedom for humans and humanity from suffering and inauthenticity. Vietnam’s syncretic tradition of the Three Teachings stands as one of such examples of how to mediate and integrate a diverse body of thoughts, creating space for these conceptions to coexist and enrich one another rather than compete as opposite binaries. Today, the conception of human beings in both these philosophies still holds value for the development of humanity worldwide, to restore and reconnect humans to their own authentic selves and the world in the face of globalization and technological acceleration, even more so within culturally integrative environments in the East such as Vietnam’s.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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