ORIGINAL PAPER

Leading Without a Self: Implications of Buddhist Practices for Pseudo-spiritual Leadership

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Abstract

This paper extends Being-centered and spiritual leadership theory using non-self from the Buddhist philosophy to further our understanding of how inner life functions as the source of spiritual leadership. While spiritual leadership theory has received widespread acceptance and considerable empirical support, its developmental process and potential for being used to pursue self-centered ends remain underdeveloped. Drawing on non-self from the Buddhist emptiness theory, we identify different egoistic forms of attachment at each level of being that can lead to forms of suffering in spiritual leadership. Then we show how leaders operating at lower levels of being can fall into the trap of practicing a form of pseudo-spiritual leadership that is overly focused on self-centered or instrumental purposes and economic rationality. We then introduce mechanisms to move beyond pseudo-spiritual leadership practices and discuss implications for future theory, research, and practice.

Keywords Being-centered leadership · Spiritual leadership · Buddhism · Non-self · Emptiness

Introduction

To date, scholars have developed and discussed various forms of leadership such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1995; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Daft, 2008; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996), inclusive leadership (Ryan, 2005), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004), ethical leadership (Brown, 2007; Brown & Trevino, 2006), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977, 1998; Liden et al., 2008), moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992), and responsible leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006). However, Fry and Kriger (2009) note that current leadership models have failed to take into account the importance of inner feelings and thoughts. They also highlight the need for leaders to "engage in a continual quest for

greater awareness, consciousness, and other-centered values and attitudes that build the competence needed for forming accurate self-assessments and to use these self-understandings to effectively perform increasingly complex leadership roles" (p. 1688).

In this paper, we rely on Being-centered Leadership theory (BCL), which consists of five levels of being, to explore how inner life as the source of spiritual leadership (SL) can address the shortcomings of the currently accepted approaches to leadership noted above (Fry & Kriger, 2009). Moreover, without an understanding of the role inner life practices play in the development of greater awareness and other-centeredness, SL can be practiced as an instrumental means to self-centered ends (Bell & Taylor, 2004; Casey, 2002; Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007). We also seek to extend our understanding of how leadership practices can be activated at different levels of being by drawing on non-self in the Buddhist emptiness theory.

Emptiness (Pāli: *suññatā*, Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) is a fundamental Buddhist teaching that illustrates how phenomena, including the self, are empty of intrinsic existence and fundamentally flawed since "there is no logical or scientific plausibility to the principles upon which an individual constructs their self-concept" (Ho, 1995; Van Gordon et al., 2016, 2017, p. 311). According to Buddhist interpretations, the self does not exist intrinsically and cannot be actualized.
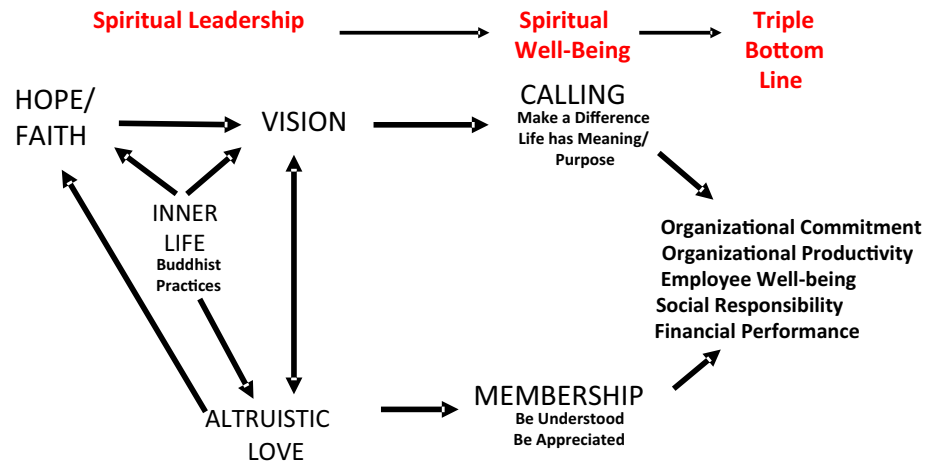
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Fig. 1 Spiritual Leadership Model

In other words, one's state of being is transient based on the impermanent nature of all phenomena. The concept of non-self promotes self-reflection and the correction of ego-centered tendencies, leading to greater sensitivity and awareness. A recent study examining Buddhist practitioners who were leaders found that their adherence to non-self facilitated a process of self-decentralization aimed at reducing human suffering caused by excessive attachments or self-fulfillment (Vu & Burton, 2022). This process involves relinquishing ego-centric desires for recognition, ego-serving knowledge that leads to presumptions and justifications that hinder true wisdom, ego-serving expectations, and illusions of a self that govern behavior toward the fulfillment of self-hood. The practice of non-self draws from Buddhist ethics that does not privilege agency as the core moral value within interdependent communities (Garfield, 2021). This perspective emphasizes leadership agency in favor of interchangeable leadership, which allows individuals to detach from the desire to lead and cultivate a particular sense of meaning at work (Vu & Gill, 2022). Such an approach has much to offer to our understanding of inner life in SL, which is focused on loving and serving others rather than a self-focused, instrumental approach to leadership.

The self has been explored to some extent by leadership scholars (Kovács, 2014; Kriger & Seng, 2005; Gray & Kriger, 2005; Swierczek & Jousse, 2014). In particular, Kriger and Seng (2005) posit that leaders should not place importance on the egoistic self, as this leads to desires and attempts to satisfy them, which cause suffering. This does not mean the denial of the self, but rather that the self is part of the interconnectedness of the world with endless causal networks (Kriger & Seng, p. 783). The concept of non-self rejects the comparing mind in terms of inferior and superior relationships. Gray and Kriger (2005) state that in Buddhism, there is no distinction between leaders and followers, which is also proposed to be the case in Being-centered and SL theories (Fry & Kriger, 2009; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013)
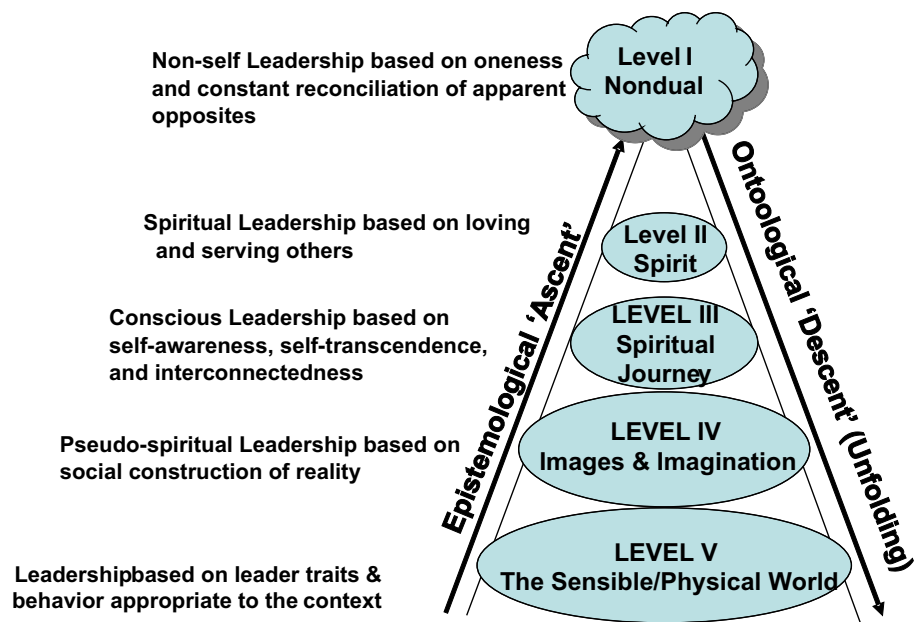
and similar (though not identical) to the Western concepts of distributed and multiple leadership (Gronn, 2002, p. 429)—allowing opportunities for all organizational members to exercise leadership in some way at some time. Vu and Gill (2019) also argue that it is important to let go of leadership approaches that produce excessive attachment to the self in order to promote reflexive and contextually sensitive leadership.

In this paper, we contribute to the literature of SL in a number of ways. First, we extend Fry's and Kriger's (2009) work on BCL by further examining SL at different levels of being. Second, using Buddhist epistemology and practices, we reveal how different forms of attachment at each level of being can lead to forms of suffering. Next, we demonstrate how leaders operating at lower levels of being can fall into the trap of practicing a form of pseudo-spiritual leadership, which focuses on instrumental outcomes such as organizational effectiveness and financial performance at the expense of employee and stakeholder well-being (e.g., Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009). Then, we show how Buddhist non-self and its ethics can provide support for leading more consistently at higher levels of being thus enabling leaders to move beyond self-serving pseudo-spiritual leadership. Finally, we offer avenues for future studies on SL as well as leadership studies in general.

The Role of Being-Centered Leadership in Spiritual Leadership

Spiritual leadership theory and the spiritual leadership model (See Fig. 1), which are grounded in an ethic of altruism (Florea, Cheung, & Herndeon, 2013; Steiner, 2019), has seen extensive research, validation, and application (Fry, 2003; Benefiel et al., 2014; Oh & Wang, 2020; Samul, 2019). SL requires the cultivation of an inner life, spiritual,

Fig. 2 Levels of Being: Adapted from Fry and Kriger (2009)

Non-self Leadership based on oneness and constant reconciliation of apparent opposites

Level I Nondual

Ontological 'Descent' (Unfolding)

Spiritual Leadership based on loving and serving others

Level II Spirit

Conscious Leadership based on self-awareness, self-transcendence, and interconnectedness

LEVEL III Spiritual Journey

Pseudo-spiritual Leadership based on social construction of reality

LEVEL IV Images & Imagination

Leadershipbased on leader traits & behavior appropriate to the context

LEVEL V The Sensible/Physical World

Epistemological 'Ascent'

or mindful practice, which is the source of hope/faith in a vision of serving others through the values of altruistic love (e.g., honesty, integrity, humility, kindness, compassion, patience, courage, trust, forgiveness, acceptance, and gratitude). SL then satisfies fundamental needs of both leader and followers for spiritual well-being through a sense of (1) calling or purpose that one's life has meaning and makes a difference and (2) membership or belonging whereby one feels understood and appreciated. In turn, spiritual well-being then positively influences the balance between economic, social, and environmental stakeholder expectations, often referred to the triple bottom line or "People, Planet, and Profit" (Fry and Egel, 2021; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). Although SL theory is rooted in Western culture, it has been examined in the Confucian cultural context with findings showing higher levels of spirituality in leaders can influence the achievement of organizational goals in South Korea (Kang et al., 2017) and decrease subordinates' wrongdoings in China (Wang et al., 2017).

Studies on SL have been criticized for being primarily focused on instrumental purposes (Bell & Taylor, 2004; Casey, 2002; Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009), a technique for economic rationality (Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007) and its hypothetical-deductive standpoint (Case & Gosling, 2010a, b) that fails to engage (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014; Mabey, 2013) and acknowledge the historical and political context of SL (e.g., Nash, 2003). For instance, most studies on SL have focused on productivity, sales growth, commitment, and financial performance and considers SL as a lead indicator of future financial performance (e.g., Benefiel et al., 2014; Fry et al., 2005; Fry & Matherly, 2006; Fry et al.,

2010; Oh & Wang, 2020), while rarely acknowledging or exploring potential negative effects of SL, such as how highly connected interpersonal relationships can create anxiety for followers or be associated with emotional exhaustion (Chanston & Lips-Wiersma, 2015; Cregård, 2017); Driscoll & Wiebe, 2007; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009).

Being-Centered Leadership

We propose that exploring inner life within BCL theory can address the above critique concerning instrumentalism (See Fig. 2). Drawing from Kriger and Senge (2005),[1] Fry and Kriger (2009) developed BCL theory based on the world's major wisdom traditions to describe the nature of inner life as a spiritual journey to demonstrate how leaders can move from an egoistic self trapped in fear, greed, resentment, and distortion of reality to a true self based on altruistic values such as forgiveness, acceptance, compassion, gratitude, and integrity to love and serve others. In other words, the BCL model illustrates a spiritual journey of transformation of leaders from ego-centered to other-centered states of knowing and being to guide leaders and, through spiritual leadership, facilitate clear vision, consciousness from moment to moment, and the ability to engage and enlist others. Examining inner life within this model can expand on

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[1] Examined Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism as five natural experiments in sense making and social action that have evolved over the last 1400 to 4000 years. In doing so all five religions developed a model consisting of five levels of knowing and being that place development of an inner life practice as central for spiritual development.

our understanding of what inner life entails and how it serves as the source of SL.

Being-centered leadership depicts five levels with different worldviews of reality that consist of lower-order stages of knowing and being toward higher-order stages representing different levels of consciousness. Each of the five levels provides different ontological and epistemological contexts that shape the appropriateness of different leadership approaches with corresponding modes of knowing and being in terms of truth, justification, self- versus other-centeredness, and what constitutes happiness (Kriger & Seng, 2005; Wilber, 2000a, 2000b).[2] The correlates to these five ontological levels from an epistemological viewpoint include (5) the sensible/physical world; (4) the creative imagination and world of images; (3) the consciousness of the spiritual journey; (2) the consciousness of spirit; and (1) non-dual consciousness. As leaders move up the levels and their knowledge of reality increases (Epistemological Ascent), they commit to the spiritual journey of self-transcendence and interconnectedness with all that is (the Non-dual) and become more attuned to love and serve others through SL. As they move down to the lower levels of being, leaders become less conscious and more concerned with materiality and selfish, instrumental pursuits, thereby regressing to practice pseudo-spiritual leadership (Ontological Descent).

Such a system can be described as *holonic*: each level as a whole is embedded in a higher level of the system, creating a nested system of wholes. For example, a whole atom is part of a whole molecule; a whole molecule is part of a whole cell; a whole cell is part of a whole organism. In a holonic system of being, each successive level of existence is a stage through which individuals pass on their way to acknowledging more levels of being. When a person is at a particular level of being, he or she tends to experience psychological states that are appropriate to that level. In addition, an individual's feelings, motivations, ethics, values, learning system, and personal theories of what constitutes happiness are consistent with and appropriate to that level of knowing and being. Thus, the progression through the levels in BCL represents a spiritual journey as a pilgrimage, representing a shift in consciousness to greater awareness of self, others, and eventually the connection and unity of all things. Leaders' spiritual development then is realized as leaders move through the levels to maintain, on average, higher levels of conscious awareness and other-centeredness to discover a more meaningful, purposeful, relational, and ultimately connective way of seeing the world and being in it. However,

BCL does not specifically address at which levels leaders can potentially be overly self-centered and instrumental. We argue that adopting non-self from the Buddhist philosophy as an analytical tool can reveal leadership self-orientations and intents at each level.

Buddhist Philosophy and Its Implications for Inner Life Development

Buddhist principles/practices, which are based on the Buddha's teachings (*dharma*), are derived from the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path (see Table 1). We propose that this process of individual development corresponds with different levels of consciousness that can affect leaders' beliefs, ethics, values, learning systems, and personal theories of what constitutes and justifies one's actions (Vu & Burton, 2020).

Suffering and Attachment

The Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) (truth of suffering, truth of cause of suffering, truth of cessation of suffering, truth of path to cessation of suffering) in the *Sacca-samyutta*[3] highlight that suffering exists, which in Buddhism refers to unhappiness, sorrow, distress, despair, misery, greed, hatred, and ignorance caused by attachment. Suffering (*dukkha*) refers to the principle meaning of misery or unpleasantness, however, based on its etymology, the word itself is interesting as it is formed of two terms: *dus*—indicating something unpleasant, difficult, or hard; and *kha*—indicating space, atmosphere, or sky (Peacock, 2008). Consequently, *dukkha* reflects a 'bad space' or a 'difficult situation.' The word 'suffering' we use in this paper as an English translation of the word *dukkha* can be best understood as 'unsatisfactoriness' or 'discontent' as the original term refers to "a vast range of phenomena from the inevitable conditions of illness, decline, and death to the ordinary discontent of everyday life" (Young-Eisendrath, 2008, p.543).

From this perspective, there is a cause of suffering and a path that leads to the cessation of suffering (Van Gordon, et al., 2015). Suffering is prevalent in life as it arises when individuals fail to perceive the impermanent nature of self and phenomena (Shonin, et al., 2015). Impermanence (*anicca*) in the *Anicca Sutta*[4] describes how three kinds of feelings, namely pleasant, painful, and neutral are

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[2] *Ontology*—assumptions which concern the very essence of the phenomena under investigation. *Epistemology*—assumptions about how one might begin to understand the world and communicate this as knowledge to fellow human beings (Burrell & Morgan, 1994).

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[3] *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (The grouped discourses of the Buddha): The third of the five *nikayas* (collections) of the *Sutta Piṭaka*—the second of the three divisions of the Pali Canon (SN56).

[4] *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (The grouped discourses of the Buddha) [SN36.9].

Table 1 The Buddhist Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path

Four Noble Truths (Sanskrit: *catvāri āryasatyān*i; Pali: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*)

(1) Life is full of dissatisfaction, suffering, and ending (dukka) (Siderits, 2007)

(2) Dissatisfaction is a result of desire or cravings (tanha) which can be transformed into the 'three poisons'- greed, hatred, and delusions (Flanagan, 2011; Mendis, 1994)

(3) Desire and suffering can be terminated by overcoming ignorance

(4) The Noble Eightfold Path is the solution to cure suffering (Metcalf & Gallagher, 2012)

The Noble Eightfold Path (Pali: *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*; Sanskrit: *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*)

Right view—wisdom to comprehend the impermanent and imperfect nature of life

Right intention—commitment to do good and be ethical

Right speech—being truthful and positive

Right action—being fair, honest, and respectful in ethical conduct

Right livelihood—living ethically without negative consequences

Right effort—motivation toward right livelihood and ethical living

Right mindfulness—ability to see the true nature of phenomena

Right concentration—ongoing action and practice

impermanent, compounded, and dependent arising[5] (the interdependent nature of phenomena), liable to destruction, to evanescence, to fading away, and to cessation. In other words, people suffer because their feelings rely too much on external conditions to fulfill their expectations and needs without recognizing the impermanent nature of external contexts and expectations. The essence of human suffering (*duhkha*) is highlighted by Gethin (1998) as below:

> *That something which is impermanent must be regarded as 'painful' (duhkha) follows, of course, from principles we have found expressed in the second of the four noble truths: if we become attached and try to hold on to things that will inevitably change and disappear, then we are bound to suffer*. (p.137)

Attachment to various things or concepts is therefore viewed as a cause of suffering. In Buddhist terminology, 'attachment' to unhealthy fixations or mental representations cause suffering because the reification of mental representations (thinking of them as solid, static, and permanent) is constantly changing and is subject to the interdependent phenomenal world (Sahdra & Shaver, 2013). Based on the Bhikkhu Sutta,[6] attachment is an unskillful path or practice that, if realized or understood, allows one to gain freedom from attachment to feelings. Unlike the optimal idea of 'secure attachment' or 'attachment security' in the main Western psychology of attachment theory that was conceptualized mostly based on parent–child relationships (Ainsworth et al.,

1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982), the ideal state in Buddhist psychology is non-attachment (Sahdra & Shaver, 2013).

Non-attachment in the Buddhist worldview has a more general meaning that reflects mental representations and the need to release rigid mental representations and personal views to eradicate suffering (Sahdra & Shaver, 2013). It refers to a subjective quality of ease, balance, and not feeling dissatisfied and fixated on mental representations (Sahdra, Shaver, & Brown, 2010; Sahdra & Shaver, 2013). However, it is important to recognize that non-attachment is not the same as reluctance, lack of connectedness to others, or avoidance of relationships such as avoidant attachment (aversion to intimacy and interdependence in close relationships) or anxious attachment (concern with rejection and abandonment in close relationships) in Western interpretations of attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969/1982; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Ignorance

Attachment to form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness results in ignorance [SN22.131],[7] which leads to suffering due to an inability to recognize the processes of dependent arising (the interdependent nature of phenomena) and the impermanence of phenomena [SN36.9].[8] To address this, the eight principles (right speech, right intention, right action, right view, right effort, right mindfulness, right conduct, and right concentration of the Noble Eightfold Path[9]

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[5] *Avijjapaccaya Sutta*—From ignorance as a requisite condition [SN12.35], *Saṃyutta Nikāya* -The grouped discourses of the Buddha.

[6] *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (The grouped discourses of the Buddha) [SN36.23].

[7] *Samudaya Sutta*—Origination [SN22.131], *Saṃyutta Nikāya*—The grouped discourses of the Buddha).

[8] *Anicca Sutta* [SN36.9], *Saṃyutta Nikāya*—The grouped discourses of the Buddha.

[9] *Ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga* (*Magga-samyutta* [SN45]): in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (The grouped discourses of the Buddha).

are offered as guidelines to overcome states of suffering and ignorance [SN35.80, SN45.1].[10] Based on the Four Noble Truths, the main narrative of these principles is to help practitioners and individuals, through stages and processes of transformation, overcome ignorance by defeating excessive desires/attachments that can lead to various forms of suffering. In order to do that, the roles of the eight principles in the Noble Eightfold Path serve as the underlying assumptions in forming Buddhist practices.

Overcoming ignorance is fundamental in Buddhism to achieve release from attachment and sources of suffering. This philosophical viewpoint and practice have been emphasized and shared by great Buddhist masters. For instance, Atiśa (verse 54)[11] emphasized that being attached to conceptual thinking can be a form of ignorance, while, according to Asaṅga,[12] ignorance (*avidya*)[13] arises from the absence of knowledge (*ajnana*), which leads to defilements, mistaken decisions, and doubts concerning the teachings (*dharma*).

When the mind creates a fabrication of reality that obstructs the perception of what is truly real, it reflects an understanding of phenomena as conventional truth only, which is a form of ignorance (Candrakīrti, chapter 24).[14] Therefore, ignorance can be a form of delusion and blindness (Śāntideva, verse 28, 63)[15] and the rejection of purifying the self (Āryadeva, Stanza 140),[16] which needs to be eliminated to allow discerning experiences of phenomena.

Non-self

There also needs to be an understanding of non-self to apply the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path fully. For instance, to be able to practice right view, right intention or right action, one has to free themselves from perceived assumptions, ideologies, or belief systems. This requires an effort to step out of the self and observe the impermanent and dependent-arising nature of the relevant context and make context-sensitive and appropriate decisions rather than being attached to one's fixed principles. Impermanence and non-self are mentioned as two of the three characteristics of existence by the Buddha in the *Dhamma-niyama Sutta* [AN3.134].[17] Furthermore, the Buddha taught in the *Maha-nidana Sutta* [DN15],[18] which is one of the most profound discourses in the Pali Canon, that the self is not separate or limited, but rather interdependent with everything in the cosmos. This is because all mental and physical activity, known as name-and-form, are causal factors that account for everything that can be described (Bodhi, 1984). Therefore, the concept of non-self is central to Buddhist philosophy and practice. However, it is also the most difficult worldview of Buddhism because the concept itself is alien to the western psychological paradigm (Kriger & Seng, 2005). Western religion and psychology tend to view the self as egoistic and distinct from others, or as part of a larger, non-dual unity. In contrast, Buddhism teaches that the self is empty of inherent existence, meaning that it is not a fixed, unchanging entity. This perspective is similar to the non-dual view, but it is based on the understanding that all phenomena, including the self, are subject to change. By recognizing the impermanence and interconnectedness of all things, Buddhism emphasizes an awakened understanding of the self and the world.

Apart from the Pali Canon of the Buddhist Theravāda School, non-self remains an important practice and philosophy of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools. In Buddhist philosophy, understanding non-self is crucial to understand the nature of phenomena. Atiśa highlighted how in the Mahāyāna tradition, the concept of non-self refers to the absence of inherent existence in both persons and all phenomena. This understanding is attained by refraining from contemplating the intrinsic nature of any phenomenon, and instead contemplating its lack of inherent self [Stanza

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[10] *Avijja Sutta*—Ignorance [SN35.80, SN45.1], *Saṃyutta Nikāya*— The grouped discourses of the Buddha.

[11] Atiśa Dīpankara Śrījñāna was an Indian Buddhist master, who is held in special regard by Tibetans (Tenzim Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama). In his most influential scholarly work *Bodhipathapradīpa* (Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment) (Sherburn, 1983), he referred to conceptual thinking as ignorance [verse 54].

[12] Ārya Asaṅga was an Indian scholar who was the founder of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He discussed ignorance in *Abbidbarmasamuccaya*—an important text of the Mahāyāna Abhidharma. It contains nearly the main teachings of the Mahāyāna and can be considered as the summary of all the other works by Asaṅga (Boin-Webb, 2001).

[13] In *Lakṣaṇasārasamuccaya*, The compendium of characteristics, Section I [22].

[14] In Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*—one of the most important compositions of Candrakīrti [Chapter 24, PP, pp.429–493]. Candrakīrti's works influenced the development of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy in India and in Tibet.

[15] In Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (An Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life), a Buddhist monk and philosopher who influenced Tibetan Tradition, Chapter II (Confession of Negativity).

[16] In Āryadeva's, *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* (Chapter VI: Showing the Method for Rejecting the Afflictions, a disciple of Nagarjuna and a Madhyamaka philosopher.

[17] *Dhamma-niyama Sutta*—The discourse on the orderliness of the Dhamma (AN3.134) of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (The further-factored discourses of the Buddha).

[18] *Maha-nidana Sutta* (The great causes discourse) (DN15) of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (The long discourses of the Buddha).

53].[19] To illuminate the empty nature of phenomena, one must reject self-perception and the intrinsic nature of possession of the self (Candrakīrti', verses 73–77, 166–170).[20] If individuals hold onto the belief that there is a permanent self, a paradoxical question arises: if the self is permanent, how can the impermanent body bear a scar from a past life? (Āryadeva, Stanza 232).[21] Therefore, when the false view of the self is pacified, all reactive emotions can also be pacified (Śāntideva, *ŚS* 242).[22]

Buddhist Emptiness Theory

Within the Mahāyāna school, emptiness (Pāli: *suññatā*, Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) refers to the fundamental Buddhist teaching that phenomena—including the self—are empty of intrinsic existence and that being attached to self is an illusion and a source of suffering or form of obsession (Ho, 1995; Van Gordon et al, 2016). For example, the philosophy of Madhyamika in the Mahāyāna school propounded by Nāgārjuna is based on the insight of emptiness (*sunyata*), dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*), and nominal–verbal designation[23] (*praj-napti)* (Garfield, 1995). Emptiness highlights how a phenomenon (including the self) is both conditioning and conditioned by others: "Whatever is independently co-arisen, that is explained to be emptiness" (Nāgārjuna, verse 18).[24] Based on relational reasoning, all phenomena—both internal mental events and external physical objects—are empty of any true nature. Emptiness is important to deconstruct philosophical views, including the Buddhist teachings as skillful means (*upāya*),[25] a technique used by the Buddha to respond to a variety of karmic differences of his followers in different contexts (Schroeder, 2004). In the Lotus Sūtra (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), all Buddha's teachings are none other than skillful means where Nāgārjuna argues for the 'emptiness' of the Buddha's teachings, and for the 'emptiness' of that very 'emptiness.' (Schroeder, 2011). In other words, there is a need not to attach the Buddha's teachings to any single religious practice, view, or philosophical position—including 'emptiness' itself.

In Tibetan Buddhist philosophy of the Vajrayāna school, the self's lack of a solid basis is the core to releasing attachments arising out of ego. The concept of 'I' is a whole set of disconnected thoughts and feeling without a unifying entity (Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, 2012). Individual ego or self only exists in relation to all else in the context of continuous change: "The ego or self has no substantively or temporally immutable content, no essence… profound recognition of this situation as a condition of and for one's identity is one way of experiencing loss of ego" (Cooey, 1990, p.14). Emptiness is therefore not nothingness but has wisdom (Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, 2008). Gampopa highlights how individuals who do not perceive the absolute (empty) nature of reality can be effectively deluded (Gampopa, 1998).[26] Wisdom (*Prajñā*) in Buddhism is the knowing of 'inherent emptiness' (Atiśa, verse 47)[27] because things arise from emptiness in a robust way since phenomena are neither eternal nor annihilated (Candrakīrti, verse 6.38).[28]

Emptiness embodies the idea of impermanence and interconnectedness through transpersonal and non-personal characteristics, in response to the changing nature of phenomena. Buddhism rejects the assumption that the self-entails personal uniqueness, similarities, and differences in comparison with other individuals (Banaju & Prentice, 1994). The concept of non-self in Buddhism reflects a de-emphasis of agency as the primary moral value (Garfield, 2021). This idea is supported by Buddhist metaphysics and ethics, which stress the interconnectedness of all phenomena and the importance of considering multiple dimensions of a phenomenon, beyond just agency, motivation, action, or consequences for others (Garfield et al., 2015). In other words, non-self places the self and agency within the nexus of interdependent community (Garfield, 2021), which highlights the contextual approach (Schroeder, 2011) in Buddhist ethics.

Non-self and emptiness also facilitate individuals' self-reflexivity and criticality as well as the appreciation of context-sensitivity in practice. Without assumptions, rigid ideologies or belief systems, or attachment to an egoistic self, leaders are better able to reflexively question their own understandings, interpretations, and actions (Cunliffe, 2009, 2016; Driver, 2017; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). Once the

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[19] In Bodhipathapradīpa (Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment), Insight and Means, Contemplation (Emptiness [Stanza, 53]).

[20] In Chapter 6 of Madhyamakāvatāra (Entrance to the Middle Way)—Candrakīrti work on the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness (śūnyatā).

[21] In Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way, Chapter X: Showing the Realization of the Refutation of the Self.

[22] In *Tathāgataguhya Sūtra* (The Sūtra on the Unfathomable Secrets of the Tathāgata), Mahāyāna sutra on the nature of the body, speech, and mind of bodhisattvas and the Buddha.

[23] Nominal–verbal designation is a linguistic concept used in Buddhist philosophy to explain the nature of language and its relationship to reality. It is a process by which language assigns names and descriptions to phenomena Yet, the names and descriptions we give to phenomena are merely conventional as the same object or event can be labeled and described in different ways by different people or in different contexts.

[24] Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, verse 18 of Chapter XXV.

[25] Upāya in the doctrine of 'skill-in-means' (*upāya-kausalya*).

[26] In the Jewel Ornament of Liberation—one of the influential books on entering the path of Buddhahood -

[27] In *Bodhipathapradīpa* (Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment).

[28] In Madhyamakāvatāra (The Sixth Ground, The Manifest).

ego is attenuated in the pursuit of right effort in cultivating right intentions and right actions, the appreciation for moral, responsible, and ethical actions is more likely to be recognized (Cunliffe, 2009, 2016; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hibbert, et al., 2014). For example, without attachment to a specific leadership style (e.g., mental representations of an ideal leadership style), leaders are more able to reflexively and critically review their decisions and perceptions, and thus are more likely to engage in discussions with followers that are more appreciative of their contributions and viewpoints. This promotes a dynamic process and exchange relationship whereby leaders and followers are active participants, collectively cultivating right actions together (Hollander, 1980; Van Breukelen et al., 2006). Appreciating the impermanent nature of context is one of the fundamental principles of practicing non-self in Buddhism since impermanence highlights that external contexts, such as followers' preferences for authoritative leadership, are sometimes beyond leaders' control. In responding to the complex and the constant nature of contexts, leaders need to facilitate proactiveness and skillfulness, but without self-serving and ego-centric motives (Vu & Tran, 2021).

Unpacking the Development of Inner Life Through Buddhist Non-self and Levels of Being

While some studies reaffirmed the importance of the non-self for contemporary leadership development, they have not investigated the process of how to attain, however briefly, this state of being (Kriger & Seng, 2005). To address this issue, we explore the value of Buddhist principles and practices to the cultivation of inner life as a source of SL, and its implications for SL development. In doing so we deconstruct how Buddhist practices/principles facilitate spiritual development and progress through the levels of being. In addition, we unpack the process of cultivating non-self in Buddhist emptiness theory based on the BCL model. In doing so, we examine how non-self can be attained as a non-dual state of being by abandoning potential attachments (mental representations) of pseudo-spiritual leadership inherent in the lower levels of being (Fry & Kriger, 2009).

Level V: Leadership Based on Leader Traits and Behaviors Appropriate to the Context

The fifth level of being refers to the physical and observable world, which forms the basis for self-centered and instrumental outcomes, whereby leaders actively engage in worldly affairs through their behavior (Burrell & Morgan, 1994). Trait, behavior, and contingency theories of leadership are examples of leadership approaches at this level,

which have a primary focus on organizational and leadership effectiveness (Bass, 1990; House, 1996; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Yukl, 2006). At this level, there is a desire to attain organizational and leadership effectiveness by cultivating needed leadership skills and traits grounded in *having* (e.g., materialism) and *doing* (e.g., professional status) (Fry & Kriger, 2009). Often the Level V leader's personal focus is on the evidence of success based on their legitimate authority or position power, public visibility, and prominence, including an office location, furnishings, and privileges that set the leader apart, sending signals of superiority. Such trappings of success may be excessive and it follows that Level V leaders may be narcissistic, self-aggrandizing about personal accomplishments, and unable to accept responsibility for mistakes or organizational failure.

At Level V, having and doing are central to the ego-based self (Fry & Kriger, 2009; Kriger & Seng, 2005). While many studies on leadership highlight the traits, competencies, and styles that leaders should possess (Daft, 2008; Northouse, 2007; Vu & Gill, 2019; Yukl, 2012), the pursuit of these nurture a self-centered ego, thus leading to suffering from a Buddhist Perspective (Schwartz, 1990). For instance, when leaders strive to be ideal leaders (with the prescribed skills, traits, and behavior), they become attached to single-minded pursuits of personal and organizational instrumental gain, which may compromise or jeopardize interests of employees and other non-financial stakeholders (Avanzi, et al, 2012; Dukerich et al, 1998; Umphress & Bingham, 2011). Moreover, leaders are trapped in the idea that to be effective, there is a need to practice certain types of leadership, which can lead to suffering from pursuing leadership styles that may not be compatible with their skills and traits, resulting in counterproductive or overly enforced leadership practices. Striving for positive capabilities and desired materialistic outcomes is not wrong. However, the attachment to needs (having) and what needs to be done (doing) can block leaders from recognizing the drawbacks of passion and delight in and of themselves, which can lead to suffering such as impaired functionality or emotional pressures (*Satta Sutta* [SN23.2]).[29] Therefore, placing overly high expectations and commitment on instrumental outcomes (such as effective leadership and organizational performance) can be counterproductive as it reflects ignorance/suffering. To move away from suffering at level V, there is a need to realize such desires as the first step of the Four Noble Truths.

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[29] *Satta Sutta*—A Being [SN23.2], *Saṃyutta Nikāya*—The grouped discourses of the Buddha.

Level IV: Leadership From Images and Imagination

Level IV focuses on the social construction of reality through the creation and maintenance of the subjective experience of individuals in developing awareness and knowledge (Almaas, 2004; Burrell & Morgan, 1994). Leadership at this level involves the use of images and imagination through creation of an organizational vision and implementation of cultural values that serve to create agreement on a socially constructed reality that motivates followers to achieve higher levels of organizational commitment and performance.

Referencing Fig. 2, at this level those claiming to be spiritual leaders are self-centered concerning their attempts to shape others' images and imagination of effective leadership. This leads to the practice of *pseudo-spiritual leadership*, grounded in narcissism, authoritarianism, and Machiavellianism, that will manifest through attempts to manipulate or take advantage of employees in pursuit of instrumental personal and organizational interests (Degroot et al, 2000). In the extreme, pseudo-spiritual leaders resort to deception and exploitation of employees and stakeholders in the search for personal gain and organizational profit maximization, which can have a negative impact on followers and lead to anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Chanston & Lips-Wiersma, 2015; Christie et al, 2011; Cregård, 2017; Fry & Kriger, 2009).

However, by drawing on Buddhist non-self, this potential conflict can be unpacked and explained using BCL. For example, if leading from Level IV, leaders may claim to be practicing SL, but in reality are self-serving and practicing pseudo-spiritual leadership (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). In doing so they manipulate their illusions of the existence of the true self because there is an "unwillingness to relinquish a deep-rooted belief that self-centered expectations emanating from the egoistic self will lead to leadership and organizational effectiveness" (Shonin et al., 2013, p. 64). In other words, an overemphasis and strong attachment, perhaps unconsciously, to instrumental, self-serving personal beliefs, and value systems can lead to suffering in relying on a misguided interpretation of what one perceives to constitute SL.

According to Buddhism, as long as there are excessive desires and attachment to expectations of others' behaviors or future actions, there will be suffering (Vu & Tran, 2021). Attachment to being a leader that meets others' expectations can also lead to ongoing suffering since all phenomena and relationships are impermanent and interdependent in nature (*Cetana Sutta* [SN12.38]).[30] In other words, having expectations that a particular leadership vision and set of cultural values will foster effective leadership is an illusion,

demonstrating individuals' manipulation of what and how to define good leadership without acknowledging that leadership is also shaped by context. Attachment to fulfill a particular social role and fear of being vulnerable to others if expectations are not met can raise ideas about a socially expected self and associated mental formations, leading to worriedness, distress, and suffering (*Upaadaaparitassanaa Sutta* [SN12.38][31]; Vu, 2021; Vu & Burton, 2021).

Level III: Leadership Based on Self-Awareness, Self-Transcendence, and Interconnectedness

Level III is the gateway to Level II, within which the true practice of SL becomes possible, as it is at this level that the transformation from self- to other-centered begins to take place and continues for a lifetime through the pilgrimage that is the spiritual journey. Level III then is the source of the values of altruistic love that are foundational for hope/faith in a vision of serving others at Level II. Level III is where leaders commit to the spiritual journey of self-transcendence and interconnectedness to confront the egoistic self and the suffering inherent in attachments to having and doing (Level V), and images and imagination (Level IV) through the practice of pseudo-spiritual leadership. The resultant suffering from these attachments can be so intense that leaders become open to seeking conscious awareness of being trapped in an ego-centered experience with a primary focus on the past or on the future, which creates a hindrance to being in the present. This realization is critical as the Level III of being fosters a state of feeling-realization in which leaders spontaneously deal with situations with deep present-moment awareness of their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013; Kriger & Seng, 2005). Such an experience is important for the emergence of SL in Level II, because without conscious awareness, leaders can be trapped in egoistic states that can prevent them from understanding the context and needs of followers (Fry & Kriger, 2009; Osborne, 1970; Tolle, 2005).

It is also at Level III, where leaders discover the importance of moment-to-moment self-awareness so that they can redefine identity from self- to other-centered (Benefiel et al., 2005). This process of self-realization or conscious awakening then becomes the source of the other-centered values of altruistic love which form the foundation for SL through hope/faith in a vision of serving others in Level II. However, there is still a danger of falling into the egoistic self when there is an overemphasis on being aware of thoughts and feelings, which can distract them from wider and deeper experiences of awareness (Almaas, 2004; Tolle,

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[30] *Cetana Sutta* [SN12.38] of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, The grouped discourses of the Buddha.

[31] *Upaadaaparitassanaa Sutta*—Grasping and Worry, [SN22.7], *Saṃyutta Nikāya*—The grouped discourses of the Buddha.

1999; Wilber, 2000a). This false perception of the self and an attachment to awareness and feelings can cause leaders to regress to more ego-centric states (Fry & Kriger, 2009).

The Level III of being reflects the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism to eradicate the suffering inherent in Levels V and IV based on the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path (right action, right intention, right view, right effort, right livelihood, right concentration, right speech, and right mindfulness). For instance, right effort (*Samma Vayama*) helps to overcome the five hindrances (*pañcanivarana*), which include sensual desire and is similar to having and doing in Level V. It is therefore crucial that leaders can make the right effort to avoid pushing forward their own predetermined ways of doing things that may block employees' contribution or ideas.

The importance of conscious awareness at this level also reflects right mindfulness—having the presence of mind to learn from past experiences and attachments so that leaders can heighten personal development, learning, and self-transformation (Analayo, 2010; Bodhi, 2011; Purser & Millilo, 2015). However, as the Buddha explained, attachment to the past can be counterproductive and lead to suffering in certain contexts since present experience cannot be described solely in terms of past actions (*Bhaddekaratta Sutta* [MN131][32]; (*Sivaka Sutta* [SN36.21])[33]). For example, there is the possibility that attachment to past leadership success can make leaders become trapped in the egoistic self. Likewise, over-attachment to imagined future leadership actions should be abandoned as they may distract attention from urgent matters of the present. In other words, over-attachment to the pursuit of self-transcendence by reminiscing the past and anticipating an ideal future rather than enacting non-self can be a form of suffering, whereby leaders can be so concerned with attaining self-transcendence that they unconsciously suffer.

Level II: Spiritual Leadership Based on Loving and Serving Others

Level II is the level of being where the actual practice of SL first becomes possible. It is the manifestation of leading through spirit—the intangible, life-affirming force in human beings (Anderson, 2000; Moxley, 2000), which enhances self-transcendence and deepening connectedness with the universe to refine individual and social identity (Benefiel, 2005; Duschon & Plowman, 2005; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). Leaders at Level II work with others to co-create hope/faith in a vision of serving others through altruistic

love. They are not threatened by cultural or religious standards, respect the fundamental dignity of all human beings, embrace diversity and inclusion, and seek to understand and empathize with stakeholders' perspectives and respect their opinions (Delbecq, 2008). However, some sense of self still exists, although this is much reduced in Level II. Even though awareness is enhanced at this level, leaders can still be trapped in the illusions of the need to be other-centered (Fry & Kriger, 2009). This is because, as mentioned previously, the levels of being are holonic and, although each higher level of knowing and being transcends and includes each of the lower levels, leaders can still lose presence and regress and lead from different levels (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). However, at Level II, the leader has the spiritual tools developed in Level III to recognize these regressions and is thus able to develop the ability to practice SL at Level II more consistently.

In terms of Buddhist principles, Level II incorporates right livelihood by having an awareness of diligence and consciousness, rightness regarding persons' respect, consideration of others, and awareness of truthfulness in business transactions (Bodhi, 2011). Leaders at this level demonstrate an altruistic ethics-based state of awareness from right mindfulness, considering the impermanent and dependent-arising nature of both internal and external relationships. For instance, right mindfulness can help leaders to develop the moral reflexivity that fosters insightful understanding of different stakeholders (Vu & Burton, 2020). SL at this level involves both right intention to subsume individual interests and right effort in nurturing the dependent nature of relationships in leadership.

However, at the second level of being, self, and identity are constructed in constant contextual negotiation within an interplay between individuals and others in social contexts that both constitute and constrain individuality (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001; Lacan, 1977). This reflects the Buddhist view of impermanence, which emphasizes unexpected and constant contextual changes beyond individuals' control. Thus, those seeking to lead from Level II as spiritual leaders may become over attached to the aspects of the spiritual leadership model that fosters employees' sense of a larger purpose and belonging (Dehler & Welsh, 1994; Delbecq, 1999; Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). In fact, according to Lacan (1988), in such circumstances the ego may become attached to a larger identity such as the organization and its purposes (Driver, 2005).

This demonstrates the conventional level of non-self in Buddhism, where there is still an illusion of a self that can lead to empty speech (Driver, 2005). For instance, leaders may have good intentions in seeking to establish a sense of purpose for employees. However, some employees may not appreciate such support as others do. This translates into how leaders may still follow their perceived way of right

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[32] *Bhaddekaratta Sutta*—An Auspicious Day [MN131] of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (The middle length discourses of the Buddha).

[33] *Sivaka Sutta*—To Sivaka [SN36.21] of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (The grouped discourses of the Buddha).

intention and right action rather than deconstructing the needs of employees. Therefore, over-attachment to being a spiritual leader at this level can be a source of suffering since awareness of the governing principles of awakening (the self, the cosmos, and the Dharma) are not taken fully into consideration (*Adhipateyya Sutta* [AN3.40]).[34] To move SL toward level I, there is a need to have non-self as the source of SL, where mental representations of the self and of SL are rejected.

Level I: Non-dual/Non-self Leadership Based on Oneness and Constant Reconciliation of Apparent Opposites

Level I, the highest level of being, incorporates and transcends Level II. Here, leaders embrace pure being and pure emptiness, which lies at the heart of all of the major religious and spiritual traditions. Level I is beyond knowledge and concepts and, as such, challenges leaders to live through the transcendence of all opposites or dualities as they work with others to co-create hope/faith in a common vision to love and serve others (Affifi, 1939; Kriger & Seng, 2005). At this level spiritual leaders do not see a distinction between themselves and followers as these are perceived as labels only (Fry & Kriger, 2009). For instance, leadership is not just about having the right traits, values, and competencies appropriate for the task or having the right behavior at an appropriate time for the situation, it is also about the source of meaning for leadership aspiration, moving away from the ego-based self to a transcendent unity. (Fry & Kriger, 2009; Kriger & Seng, 2005; Pava, 2003). Great leaders such as Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammad, and Krishna from Christian, Buddhist, Islam, and Hindu traditions, respectively, exemplify this level of being (Egel & Fry, 2018; Fry & Kriger, 2009).

While Level III and II demonstrate aspects of Buddhist non-self, these levels reaffirm the reality of being without rejecting the existence of the self. However, at the Level I of non-self, the egoistic self is absent, as it has been emptied out by the practice of non-self. As a result, leaders are able to transcend their ego and operate without being tied to a particular conception of leadership or their own image as a leader. Expectations and pressures that stem from the duality of leader and follower are no longer present, as this dichotomy has dissolved. By emptying out the egoistic self, leaders are freed from the expectations and pressures to maintain a certain leadership image that is tied to egoistic desires. They are more willing to interchange the roles of leader and follower, as the barriers that separate the self (the egoistic self) are no longer present at this level. However, even though the existence of self is rejected at Level I, it is important to note that few attain, much less maintain, this level for long, since all phenomena lack intrinsic existence due to their impermanent nature. In other words, because of the holonic nature of the levels of being, the conditions in which leaders can operate at Level I are inherently empty and may change in an impermanent context. With new conditions or in new contexts, such leadership approaches may begin to manifest in lower levels and thus no longer reflect a Level I non-self form of leadership.

For example, according to the *Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta* (MN72) in the *Majjhima Nikāya*,[35] the Buddha, demonstrated a non-dual/non-self form of leadership approach, without imposing an identity in his leadership behavior. A wandering monk asked the Buddha if there was a self (*ātman*). The Buddha refused to answer the question because, in that particular context, Vaccagotta was confused and providing answers could have added to Vaccagotta's confusion. In other words, the Buddha believed that truth is the best 'medicine' and something to be spoken only in a specific context with the specific needs and problems of a particular person (Schroeder, 2004). Although the Buddha had answers and solutions, he kept his silence because, for him, all knowledge was ideology and needed only in certain contexts for certain reasons, as sometimes it is better for people to experience the answers themselves to gain wisdom without receiving corrupted answers passively (Organ, 1954; Radhakrishnan, 1927, p. 273). Buddha's response showed how he managed to avoid biases from over-confidence in manipulating knowledge and the situation by applying non-self and emptiness toward his own Dharma (teaching), knowing that his teachings/leadership were just means that were dependent on the context of his followers and subject to change. Mental representations of the self are rejected by rejecting one's leadership style and ideology that are no longer context-sensitive and relevant. At this level, spiritual leaders can work to create a context for others to learn to operate from higher levels of being.

Discussion

By identifying the existence of suffering within different levels of being, we have highlighted how Buddhism can be a source of inner life development. Given that attachment at different levels of being can influence SL, this section offers new insights that can serve as a guide for the practice of SL more consistently at Levels III and II.

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[34] *Adhipateyya Sutta*—Governing Principles [AN3.40], *Aṅguttara Nikāya*—The further-factored discourses.

[35] The second of the five *nikayas* (collections) of the *Sutta Piṭaka*—the second of the three divisions of the Pali Canon] (The middle length discourses of the Buddha).

Mechanisms to Move Beyond Pseudo-spiritual and Instrumental Leadership Practices

We propose that the practices of self-reflexivity, criticality, and context-sensitivity are essential for enhancing awareness of pseudo-spiritual leadership at Levels V and IV. This is necessary to prevent leaders' attachment to leadership 'doing' or 'having,' instrumentalization, and resulting anxiety and emotional distress in followers (Chanston & Lips-Wiersma, 2015; Cregård, 2017).

Self-reflexivity and criticality—Self-reflexivity and criticality are crucial for leaders to be able to question the assumptions, pursuits, organizational policies, and practices that lead to suffering (Case & Gosling, 2010a, 2010b; Cunliffe, 2009, 2016; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Hibbert, et al., 2014). They foster the leader's ability to question who they are in the world, how their interactions are contextually bounded, and how they can act more responsibly and ethically (Cunliffe, 2009, 2016; Driver, 2017; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). Self-reflexivity and criticality also enhance the willingness to activate an unbiased investigation into leadership values that accelerate the transition to Levels III & II. Further, they facilitate the leader's ability to question ways of being and allow for the development of organizational policies and practices to better guide responsible and ethical action (Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Rozuel, 2011).

Context Sensitivity—It is also important that leaders are context-sensitive to followers' needs (Schermerhorn & Bachrach, 2015). For example, through context-sensitivity, SL can address contemporary issues of how leaders introduce spirituality, their SL practices, and the degree to which they allow expressions of spiritual and religious diversity (Case & Gosling, 2010a, 2010b; Hicks, 2002; Hopkins, 1997; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Context-sensitivity can guide leaders in skillfully moderating and being aware of spiritual expressions that do not jeopardize belief systems or cultural norms in organizations, especially in diverse organizational contexts where leaders' own spirituality or religious beliefs may not be compatible with followers' spirituality or religiosity (Spoelstra et al., 2021; Vu et al, 2018). Being context-sensitive in regard to hope/faith, vision, and altruistic love in SL is also important. For example, showing too much enthusiasm in caring for and helping a particular employee may be perceived as favoritism by other employees (Simpson, 2014).

Moreover, context-sensitivity enables leaders to acquire new skills and knowledge, including cultural intelligence, to develop a more inclusive and critical worldview (Taylor, 2017), which can help leaders move away from pseudo-spiritual leadership practices. Context-sensitivity is also crucial to facilitate flexible and reflexive cultivation of the Level II state of SL as it is difficult for leaders to maintain this level

for long due to the impermanent nature of phenomena. It is also important for leaders to recognize when they descend to lower levels of knowing and being. Once they have done so, leaders are, through reflexivity and context-sensitivity, more able to let go of attachments and self-serving intents and return to the higher levels of being.

Implications of Right Mindfulness for Strengthening Inner Life of Spiritual Leadership

Level III, which is the source of hope/faith, vision, and altruistic love in developing SL (see Fig. 1), is cultivated through various mindful practices (e.g., meditation, prayer, yoga, journaling, walking in nature). Mindfulness practices are therefore key for letting go of one's ego-centered, egoistic self, which is essential for moving beyond pseudo-spiritual leadership in Levels V and IV (Fry & Nisiewicz, 2013). Learning from past experiences and one's own failures facilitates the rejection of the egoistic self as it brings forward the process of self-transformation inherent in Level III that is beyond ego (Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Vu & Burton, 2020). This allows one to lead more consistently through presence in the now to better love and serve others by developing SL at Level II.

Based on non-self to attain wisdom-enacted states of mindfulness, we propose that right mindfulness (Purser & Millilo, 2015; Pye, 2005; Vu et al, 2018) can help leaders unravel and reject desires that can lead to suffering. For instance, it facilitates a skillful execution of right action, right intention, and right effort from the Noble Eightfold Path in the sense that leaders become less attached to a particular form of leadership, but instead are guided by followers' context-specific circumstances with interchangeable leadership (Vu & Gill, 2022) where the roles of leading and being led by others need to be encouraged. In other words, right mindfulness provides a guide whereby ego-based, selfish actions are replaced by compassionate but context-wise evaluations and decisions. For instance, the wheel of mindfulness framework (King & Badham, 2020) can facilitate mindful leadership approaches for leaders to move to and maintain their leadership at higher levels of conscious awareness and other-centeredness: *Individual mindfulness* (awareness of self, others, complex environments) to recognize the impermanent nature of leadership in itself and the willingness to change when necessary; *Collective mindfulness* (mindful organizing values and behaviors) to facilitate interchangeable leadership; *Individual wisdom* (meta-skill of self-awareness, self-regulation, and compassion) to move back to higher levels of conscious awareness when leaders may fall back to lower levels with self-serving intents; and *Collective wisdom* (considerations into systematic and collaborative reflection on collective purposes and potential organized irresponsibility) to critically and reflexively

facilitate moral conversations with followers to revise *having* (e.g., materialism) and *doing* (e.g., professional status) in leadership.

However, it is important to note that right mindfulness reflects a skill-in-means that is empty and is subject to change when needed. It should be practiced context-sensitively and even rejected when needed based on the different contexts leaders face. This is essential for cultivating the wisdom and intellectual understanding of one's surroundings to transform self- to other-centeredness by reducing attachment and desires (Vu & Gill, 2018). With right mindfulness as a skillful means, spiritual leaders can master moment-to-moment awareness to enhance personal development, learning, and self-transformation (Purser & Millilo, 2015).

Implication of Buddhist Practices for Being-Centered leadership Theory, Research, and Practice

To date, other than the present study, there have been no studies that have theoretically investigated the dynamics of what inner life practices are more likely to produce higher levels of Being-Centered leadership (Fry & Kriger, 2009). Therefore, further theorizing, empirical, and qualitative studies examining the application of Buddhism within the levels of being are needed. In particular, we suggest the need for leadership studies that draw from context-sensitivity, right mindfulness, self-, and critical-reflexivity since we have highlighted how these can contribute to the realization of over-attachment to leadership practices that may lead to different forms of suffering which inhibit the development and practice of SL at Levels III and II. Non-self should also be further examined to explore how it can contribute to the execution and operation of SL, especially in dealing with ethical dilemmas in different contexts where interpretations of ethics remain relative. Moreover, following the Buddhist ethics narrative of deemphasizing agency as the core moral value (Garfield, 2021), future studies could explore how and to what extent the role of agency changes across levels to examine the enactment of non-self in leadership at different levels.

Non-self also unpacks how states of being and doing in developing SL can be forms of attachment that can lead to leadership inauthenticity and the overemphasis on a desirable image of effective leadership that fails to embrace followers (Brown, 2015;Collinson, 2011; Ford & Harding, 2015; Gronn, 2002; Harding, 2014; Schedlitzki et al., 2018; Sinclair, 2011). In the pursuit of this idealized self, these pseudo-spiritual leaders may fantasize about themselves in self-aggrandizing or grandiose ways, which are associated with narcissism (Steyrer, 2002). Therefore, research is needed on how an obsessive focus on doing and having (Level V) and images and imagination as manifested through

the social construction of the organization's vision and cultural values (Level IV) lead to pseudo-spiritual leadership and an over emphasis on instrumental ends, such as profits over follower and stakeholder well-being. There is also the need to explore what must be inherent in the suffering needed to motivate leaders to commit to the journey of self-transcendence and loving and serving others through Levels III and II to maintain, on average, higher levels of conscious awareness and other-centeredness.

In practice, self-reflexivity and criticality in leadership can be enacted in collective sharing sessions between a leader and followers through open discussion and offering leeway for followers to constructively contribute. The contemplation during such sessions goes beyond individual reflexivity attained in individual meditation as it allows a process of testing by followers, which can enhance leaders' ethical framing of their decisions and actions through critical moral conversations with followers (Gunia et al, 2012). Such a process would directly influence leaders' state of mind and phenomena (Bodhi, 2011), guiding their right intention and right action.

Finally, our approach to this study also reveals one of its major limitations: that we used a particular philosophy to unpack the levels of being. Thus, one of the greatest challenges for future scholars is to generate further theory and research to investigate the degree to which practices from other religious traditions, as was posited by Fry and Kriger (2009), [36] may also contribute to the understanding of how BCL operates through multiple levels of ontology and epistemology as the source of SL.

Conclusion

By examining inner life as the source of SL from non-self in Buddhism, we have revealed how SL can present itself as pseudo-spiritual leadership at lower levels of being. Using the levels to examine leadership approaches, it is clear that instrumentality in any form of leadership is a creation of the egoistic self inherent in the human condition. (Lips-Wiersma & Mill, 2014). In addition, non-self as an analytical tool can help us to identify forms of pseudo-spiritual leadership (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2009), particularly when leaders internalize the idea that pseudo-spiritual leadership at Levels V and IV is the main vehicle by which to form social relationships and produce instrumental outcomes.

We also explored how non-self from Buddhist emptiness theory, as derived from the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path inherent to Buddhism, can be viewed through the lens of the levels of being in Being-centered leadership

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[36] See Table 1 (p. 1671).

and contribute to this understanding. Using Buddhist practices, we revealed how different forms of attachment at each level of being can lead to forms of suffering and how leaders operating at lower levels of being can fall into the trap of practicing a form of pseudo-spiritual leadership. In doing so, we examined the changing nature of the practice of SL at different levels of being and explained how Buddhist practices provide mechanisms to move beyond pseudo-SL practices at Levels V and IV to develop the practice of SL at Levels III and II of being. Yet, the development of SL at Levels III and II still can fall back to pseudo-spiritual leadership practices if the notion of non-self is lost to self-centeredness in leadership approaches. Self-reflexivity, criticality, and context-sensitivity are especially crucial for strengthening leaders' awareness of recognizing the sources of suffering and provide the doorway for higher levels of being to emerge and flourish throughout the organization.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Research Involving Human Participants and Animals This study does not contain any studies involving human participants and/or animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent This study does not require informed consent.

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