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Learning from Buddhist Teachings and Ethical Practices in Qualitative Research

Pei-Jung Li

Indiana University - Bloomington, gisella0423yume@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper aims at conceptualizing research ethics in qualitative research with Buddhist teachings. As a Buddhist, I first introduce how Buddhism came to be central in my life and eventually influenced me as a qualitative researcher. I exemplify how the concepts of all-beings-are-equal, karma, the five precepts, and repentance might inspire a qualitative practice that centers ethics and informs a researcher's interactions with participants. I suggest that researchers not only work on reflecting on their body (actions), speech (talk), and mind (thoughts) but more importantly, move beyond just reflection and reflexivity to facing and resolving "unwholesome" moments that may arise during the research process. I thus demonstrate how to repent in regard to one's research-related actions, speech, and thoughts, with a particular focus on doing-no-harm and truthfulness. To illustrate, I offer an example from my own research that highlights how Buddhist teachings might be relevant in practice. My arguments aim to contribute to the literature on research ethics by introducing repentance by the researchers, alongside the Buddhist precepts, as central to ethical qualitative research practice.

Keywords

Buddhist teachings, no-harming, no-lying, repentance, research ethics

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Learning from Buddhist Teachings and Ethical Practices in Qualitative Research

Pei-Jung Li

Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, Indiana University
Bloomington, USA

This paper aims at conceptualizing research ethics in qualitative research with Buddhist teachings. As a Buddhist, I first introduce how Buddhism came to be central in my life and eventually influenced me as a qualitative researcher. I exemplify how the concepts of all-beings-are-equal, karma, the five precepts, and repentance might inspire a qualitative practice that centers ethics and informs a researcher's interactions with participants. I suggest that researchers not only work on reflecting on their body (actions), speech (talk), and mind (thoughts) but more importantly, move beyond just reflection and reflexivity to facing and resolving "unwholesome" moments that may arise during the research process. I thus demonstrate how to repent in regard to one's research-related actions, speech, and thoughts, with a particular focus on doing-no-harm and truthfulness. To illustrate, I offer an example from my own research that highlights how Buddhist teachings might be relevant in practice. My arguments aim to contribute to the literature on research ethics by introducing repentance by the researchers, alongside the Buddhist precepts, as central to ethical qualitative research practice.

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Buddhism has been part of my life since the moment I was born. My mother has long been a Buddhist. I remember her once telling me, "You're an easy child because your godmother is a Buddhist." From a Buddhist perspective, this statement was meant to imply that by being her godchild, I shared her good virtues which resulted in my temperament being better. My dad converted to Buddhism when I entered college, after which I converted and my younger brother soon thereafter. I was not a serious Buddhist until my master's degree advisor, who was also a Buddhist, demonstrated how Buddhist teachings converge with mundane life and even academic life.

Bridging the Mundane and Academic Life with Buddhist Teachings

It was five o'clock pm on a Wednesday in 2013. The bell rang, signaling that class was dismissed. I closed my laptop and waited for the instructor, who was also my master's degree advisor, to release the undergraduate students. As part of my responsibilities as a teaching assistant, I had been checking students' attendance and homework submissions. As I took the equipment back to my advisor's office, I noticed my advisor had also returned. The submission record I had just checked came to my mind. I could not help but show my dissatisfaction with the students. I said to my advisor, "I knew they wouldn't follow the homework guidelines and submit the homework on time, and that's why I gave them so much time to re-submit their homework. I even sent them reminders every week. Why are there still students coming to me

saying they didn't understand the rubric? They claimed that's why they haven't turned in the homework? The semester is already halfway over!"

As I put the tripod back and closed the cabinet door, I turned to my advisor. I expected he would recount the rules he provided the students or even ask me to send additional reminders with a stronger tone. To my surprise, his response had nothing to do with what was written on the syllabus. Rather, with a calm voice, he responded, "You know, everyone does what they value the most. Maybe they have more important things to accomplish compared to attending this class or spending time on homework. We respect their decisions. And when they graduate, the decisions they made will show their effects. It'll be reflected in their career paths. The karma will mature."

Karma. A concept that Buddhist practitioners believe in. Yet, this interaction with my advisor was my first time observing how religious practices might shape academic life. In academia, I always thought teaching and doing research should follow what we learn from the literature, which I often interpreted as being authoritative and fixed. At the time, I thought one's personal religious beliefs should only guide their conduct in their non-academic life. To me, academic life seemed to be separated from my mundane, everyday life. My advisor's response showed me the possibility of bridging the two.

When I later encountered an ethical dilemma in the first year of my doctoral studies, the connection between Buddhist teachings and the reflection on ethics became real for me. As I shared the dilemma with my master's advisor, he described my difficult situation: "you never know it's good or bad serendipity [with the people you met]. It may be determined that you and those who treated you badly accumulated bad *karma* in your or their previous life. You must suffer similarly to reduce that bad karma, then you can move forward." My parents also told me, "all you can do in this situation is to *repent* in order to reduce the bad karma, and *do good things, treat people fairly* to accumulate good karma." These words pushed me to think about my relationships with people both in mundane and academic contexts. Specifically, I began to reflect on ethical research practices and participant-researcher relationships.

The belief to keep the research process "scientific" and the researcher-participant relationship detached is often rooted in positivism (Varga-Dobai, 2012) yet qualitative research calls for a mutual "researcher to participant, human being to human being" standpoint (Eide & Kahn, 2008, p. 199). Given the unexpected nature of a research site, it remains a challenge for many researchers to pre-determine the ethical practices that may "cause less harm" in any given qualitative research study. Scholars have long argued that ethics boards are insufficient (Boser, 2007; Dennis, 2009; Hammersley, 2009; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2007), and instead have emphasized the importance of ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). A more recent perspective on ethics has integrated a critical lens positioning ethics as dialectical (Dennis, 2018). Dennis expanded ethical thinking from resting solely on an individual researcher to being a shared process between a researcher and participating community. Therefore, it has been argued that research ethics should be inclusive, open, and multi-positioned.

This critical perspective on ethics relates to the idea of spirituality, wherein its definition does not merely relate to religion. Dyson et al. (1997) described spirituality as critical reflections on self, others, and the supersensible. This supersensible, some may call "God" but in Buddhism we can call it "Buddha" or "Bodhisattva" and similar ideas exists in other belief systems. Estanek (2006) concluded that scholars nowadays perceive spirituality as creating spaces for tacit knowledge, individualized experiences, and personal stories. It can be positioned as critique to the mainstream religion and to the dominant epistemology of the academy. Finally, spirituality serves as common ground: the unseen web that connects all religions and/or diverse cultural expressions. The contemporary understandings of spirituality share common ground with critical perspectives like Dennis' (2018) discussion of research

ethics as “practices in the imaginative possibilities of becoming with others, practices through which my own self is at stake and through which the instantiation of myself as *a self* is open and fallible” (p. 67). In fact, more and more scholars have endeavored to adapt spirituality to qualitative research practice. For example, Carspecken (2018) discussed the role of love in ethnography work. Engaging in the caring for others and our own well-being, Carspecken concluded that the commonality between a good ethnographer and unconditional lovers includes open and respectful practices to enhance and change together with others in the community. The scholarship focused on spirituality in qualitative inquiry in general has less often been connected to *research ethics*.

Rooted in my experiences, I find the connection between spirituality and qualitative research practice to be generative for expanding how we envision qualitative research ethics. As such, this paper serves as an invitation to qualitative researchers to think about ethical practices from an alternative lens; that is, from a Buddhist perspective. By introducing concrete principles from Buddhism and illustrating their potential application to qualitative research, readers are invited to take up these practices in their own research.

Overview of This Article

I come to this work as a Buddhist practitioner rather than a Buddhist philosopher. I aim not to dive into historical or philosophical discussions about Buddhism. Instead, I seek to introduce the Buddhist concepts that have been informed by the Buddhist teachings I received in the past ten years. I assured that my interpretations be aligned with these original practices by checking with other Buddhist practitioners inside and outside my community (i.e., my temple and Buddhist Pure Land School). To begin, I introduce the Buddhist concepts that have influenced my practice of *ethical* qualitative research practices, including the most basic Buddhist beliefs of *all-beings-are-equal* and *karma*. These two concepts, I argue, guide the ways in which we treat others (in this case, our research participants). Then, to *avoid doing harm* to the participants, I introduce the five precepts of Buddhism and focus specifically on *no-harming* and *no lying*. I describe how these ideas could be used in qualitative research practice. Although these principles can guide research practice in generative ways, researchers avoidably make mistakes or encounter dilemmas in their research process. I thus also introduce the idea of *repentance* as one of the most crucial practices for reflecting on mistakes and more importantly, for repairing them. Recognizing there are challenges in real practice, I also discuss a few dilemmas and share how I think about them. Lastly, I offer an example wherein the above teachings of all-beings-are-equal, karma, the precepts, and repentance all came into play.

Let's Still Talk a Bit About Buddhism as Religion

To begin, it is important to specify the Buddhist tradition that I am writing from. Although I mentioned that by “spirituality,” I do not merely mean religion, Buddhism itself has many elements that resemble religion, which has been traditionally understood as “the belief in worship of a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). There are many schools and traditions of Buddhism, and each share some commonalities as well as hold differences.

I am a Taiwanese Pure Land practitioner. Taiwanese Pure Land is a school under Mahayana Buddhism that has been strongly influenced by Chinese Pure Land (Madsen, 2018). In Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese Pure Land School, they share the common goal of entering the Pure Land, which is the first step to Buddhahood and the place where people never suffer from rebirthing in Samsāra – the cyclicity of all life and existence. One of the biggest differences between the Chinese and Japanese school is how the practitioners appreciate the

concept of self and other power (the Buddha Amitābha’s power). For example, in Chinese/Taiwanese Pure Land, they recognize that the entangled self and other powers both contribute to the path in pursuing rebirth in the Pure Land (Jones, 2003, 2019). The historical backgrounds and cultural milieu have contributed to the nuances in understanding and practices.

Karma and All-Beings-Are-Equal

*May the merits and virtues accrued from this work adorn the Buddhas’ Pure Lands,
Showing gratitude to the four kinds of enlightened sages,
And aiding those who are suffering in the Six Paths of Transmigration.
May all sentient beings of the Dharma Realm practice the Bodhi path.
When this retribution body is over, may I reborn together with others in the
Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.*
願以此功德，普及於一切，
我等與眾生，皆共成佛道。
— Verse of Transference 回向偈

The dharma service comes to an end by chanting the above segment, aiming to transfer the merits (pariṇāmanā, 回向) accumulated during the service. The dharma service is usually followed by what is taught in the Sutra, inherited by the Venerable masters, and led by the monks. “Merit” refers to the basic concept in Buddhist ethics wherein beneficial forces accumulate after good acts. As one of the most basic practices with Buddhist practitioners, if we do something good – chant the name of Buddha Amitābha which is the main Buddha in the Pure Land School (Payne & Tanaka, 2004), or finish attending a dharma service – whenever we think merits accumulated, we return the merits not only to ourselves but also to others. This action reflects a central belief in Mahayana Buddhism; that is, that the purpose of Buddhist practice is not only to enlighten oneself, but more importantly, to save all beings from the struggle of Saṃsāra, the repeating cycle of rebirth (Cole, 1996). This idea of “always thinking about others” connects to Buddha’s compassion in seeing all beings as equal. The implication for this view is that no matter who someone is, they all have a chance to enter Buddhahood, which is the ultimate goal for a Buddhist (Jones, 2003). Another reason for the emphasis on *all-beings-as-equal* links to the key Buddhist principle of *karma*.

Karma could be easily understood as being like the concept of cause-and-effect; that is, one thing leads to another. Yet, it is far more than that. In empiricism, the idea of cause-and-effect oftentimes refers to seeable phenomena or actions that we can make an inference about (e.g., A causes B) (Hollis, 2002). Karma, on the other hand, is supersensible; that is, the mind or inner thoughts are also a cause of karma. For example, shown in Nibbedhika Sutta: Penetrative (AN VI.63): “intention, I tell you, is kamma¹. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and intellect.” The consequences of karma are not direct either. Unlike throwing a rock into a pond and immediately seeing water waves as a result, it is believed that good and bad karma accumulate and mature over time and then return to an individual. For example, if one maliciously lies to others several times, the consequences may not return to them soon but only after a few years.

Buddhists also believe that karma does not end when one passes away. Rather, when an individual passes away, they are believed to enter Saṃsāra with the karma they brought

¹ This is the same word as Karma.

from the previous/current life influencing the destiny of their next life (Bronkhorst, 1998; Harvey, 2018). For example, receiving poor treatment from someone in this life might be related to having done something bad to the person in a previous life. All beings are equal in this way that they all carry along karma. Regardless of the person – whether rich, privileged or otherwise – it is assumed that one can never escape from the maturing of karma and the entering Samsāra.

The goal for Pure Land Buddhists is to seek rebirth in the Pure Land where people never need to suffer from Samsāra and ultimately achieve Buddhahood after rebirth. However, if karma is always around with our every action, how can it be possible that we really escape from it to enter the Pure Land? If the bad treatments I received from the people I owed in the previous life is what I deserved in this life, can I ever reduce the pain or escape from it? There are indeed some practices that Buddhist practitioners adopt to seek changes. Accumulating merit by doing good things and practicing rituals is the most basic one. Serious Buddhist practitioners also follow the five precepts and repent, as I discuss in the next sections.

The Five Precepts

In the current society, some people act according to explicit moral laws and treat them as moral guidance. Laws explicitly regulate people's conduct, drawing a clear line between what one can do and cannot do. Similarly, in research ethics, no clear rules or checklists tell researchers what they ought to do and what they should not do, except perhaps the rule of thumb of doing-no-harm (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Ellis, 2007; Kim, 2016). In Buddhism, the five precepts, also known as the five virtues, are the basis of Buddhist ethics (Keown, 2013). The precepts explicitly state: *no-harming (no killing)*, *no stealing*, *no sexual misconduct*, *no-lying*, and *no intoxicants*. At the same time, to be able to practice these precepts requires one to internalize them and apply them in different contexts. It relies on self-regulated power and requires one to reconcile with their moral senses (Fink, 2013; Yun, 1995). Unlike written laws, these five precepts lie between the external-internal duality and can serve as a bridge between the two.

To begin with, *no-harming*, or *no killing* stands for not harming and depriving any sentient beings' life, even as small as an ant. Buddhist teachings inform people to be compassionate, respect all forms of life, and warn people that even killing or harming an insect would build bad karma. Countless Buddhist stories delivered this similar message. A common story in Buddhism is if someone accidentally saves insect or animal from being killed, eventually, they receive good returns. *No stealing* speaks to the idea of not occupying something that does not belong to you. This does not apply to only wealth but also abstract things, such as one's original research ideas. *No sexual misconduct* means that one should not cheat or betray their intimately committed other. This reconciles with the virtue of faithfulness and the pure mind (Lien, 2014). People could understand *no-lying* in a general way to refer to not cheating or not saying something to others with malicious intent. But it is also believed that gossiping or spreading harsh, misleading, false words breaks this precept. The rule of thumb is to be honest and sincere with others. Finally, *no intoxicants* refers to not abusing alcohol. Some also extend it to the misuse of drugs or an indulging lifestyle.

I suggest that these five precepts are clear enough to stand as explicit guidance for how qualitative researchers think about and practice ethical research practice, while also flexible enough to respond to the unpredictable moments in the research field. Among the five, *no lying* and *no-harming* are two of the most profound precepts that I have connected to my research practices – which I discuss next.

Connecting Buddhist Teachings to Qualitative Research Practices

How might these Buddhist teachings come into play when carrying out qualitative research? I suggest that a useful starting point is to keep in mind that we and our participants are the same. Driven from Buddhism's all-beings-are-equal, researchers must avoid embodying a hierarchical research relationship, which many scholars have discussed previously in relation to the power dynamics that always present between researchers and participants (e.g., McGuire & Cisneros, 2019; Turnbull, 2019; Vähäsantanen & Saarinen, 2013). Rather, when taking up these Buddhist teachings, we can recognize that we might come to learn from our participants. Indeed, many qualitative scholars have advocated that we should examine our assumptions and reflect on the biased and instinctual judgment of our participants and their lives (McCrary & O'Donnell, 2016; Peshkin, 1988). This practice is one of humility, showing that *we as a researcher are no higher or better* than our participants; that is, we as researchers are human, too (Mattes, 2018). In my own research, I often share with research participants that we are the same, meaning on the one hand, I do not pretend that I know all the answers, and I thus work to identify the ideal way of working together with my participants, but on the other hand, I tell them not to be afraid if they ever feel emotional or unmotivated to participate in research activities, and I do the same by revealing my feelings to them if I feel tired or bothered by external things. I consider this action to be reflective of the teaching of *no-lying*, too.

In Buddhist teaching, when we have a chance to meet and get to know someone in our current life, it means we had built serendipity in our previous lives; this would involve good or bad karma. Therefore, we first need to cherish our meetings with participants and extend gratitude toward them. We also want to resolve the bad karma and accumulate good karma while interacting with participants. To do so, in my research, I adopt the five precepts, especially the precept of *no-harming* and *no-lying*. Similar to the common rule of thumb of "do-no-harm" in research, we must work to prevent any actions or words from causing harm to participants. In relation to doing no harm, we also want to think of lying as a kind of hurtful action. Nevertheless, in my own research, I have found this practice to be complicated. In fact, some qualitative scholars have written of the dilemma of telling the truth to our participants (e.g., Ellis, 2004, 2007; Li, 2008).

Another representation of *no-lying* also includes spreading false words. We can think about it as we report our results. Ethically, we should present the participants' authentic voices. Many scholars have discussed ways to reduce misinterpretation, pre-assumptions, or bias in qualitative research (e.g., Carspecken, 1996; Watt, 2007), and certainly these should be carefully examined during data collection and analysis. The most profound teaching is that we should never say something that the participants did not say or overgeneralize their meanings. One of the common practices that qualitative researchers adopt is checking directly with the participants. For example, while conducting an interview, I frequently paraphrase what a participant shared in a way not only to summarize what they've told me, but also to make sure I did not misunderstand their meaning. If I have the chance to meet them more than one time, I sometimes compare what they have shared in the previous meetings to what they just shared.

When all these concepts come together, all-beings-are-equal serves as a baseline for the researcher to position themselves in the same place as the participants. I work hard to build sincere relationships with them and keep the communication open and honest. It is often hard to ensure we are always on track: that our interaction, the *words*, the *actions*, and what are *thoughts*, do not violate our beliefs to not harming them. Therefore, the practice of repentance is essential in helping us examining these aspects – which I discuss next.

Repentance: The Body, Speech, and Mind

*All the unwholesome karmas that I have done in the past,
They share the common basis resulting from greed, hate, and delusion since
beginning-less time,
And are expressed through body, speech and mind, I recollect them all
ashamedly,
Herein I confess and repent them all.*
我昔所造諸惡業 皆由無始貪瞋癡
從身語意之所生 一切我今皆懺悔
— Repenting of All Sins 懺悔偈

In our temple, we chant this verse at the end of every ritual before returning the merits. Even some of the week-long dharma services emphasize just repenting (e.g., the emperor Liang Repentance 梁皇寶懺, the Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance 慈悲三昧水懺...etc.). Repentance is a crucial practice in Buddhism that consistently fosters one to investigate their mistakes and the causes of those misconduct. Buddhist practitioners encourage one to wholeheartedly reflect on what they have done unwholesomely, considering what the misconduct is, how it unfolded, who may have been harmed. People are encouraged to vow that this misconduct does not occur again. The purpose is to mitigate the bad karma. In addition to vowing to Buddha Amitābha (the other power in the Pure Land School), it is also important to seek forgiveness from whom was harmed. From Buddhist perspectives, while the karma may have accumulated in one's life circle, when one seeks forgiveness from the other as an action of repentance, it may also eliminate the bad karma built between the two actors.

Thus, I argue that the concept of repentance can serve to deepen and extend my *reflexive* practice. Specifically, while in research, reflexivity is often conceptualized as “a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274), I work to move beyond self-reflection to consider others in this relationship as well. As written in the above excerpt and the Nibbedhika Sutta, karma is generated from our *body, speech, and mind*; that is, we repent for what we have physically done wrong, for any harsh or false words we have said, and bad thoughts that we may have considered even just for a second. Even still, we cannot repent for *everything*.

Thus, where might we start? For qualitative researchers, I suggest that the precepts of *no-harming* and *no-lying* are useful starting points.

No-Harming

When thinking about *no-harming in action*, the most direct connection is whether we perform any research actions (e.g., data collection, representing findings) that intends to or has caused harm to others. In social science research, it is perhaps less common that one might cause physical harm to others, particularly in comparison to the medical sciences (Doyle & Buckley, 2017). However, it is still possible that less visible physical harms could be caused to participants, such as mental discomfort or trauma brought on by participating in action research (Owen, 2006). Methodological literature has highlighted that when researchers fail to attend to participants' mental stress or resistance in engaging in research activities, participants may be negatively impacted, particularly when the research topic is sensitive (Draucker et al., 2009).

When thinking about *no-harming in speech*, the rule of thumb is not to speak harmful or harsh words. The Venerable Master Miao Lien (2014) taught that negative words are even worse than attacking others with weapons. Indeed, sometimes a single scolding word can leave

a life-long scar in one's mind. For qualitative researchers, a potentially harmful action in speech can occur when writing/publishing findings (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007). How we write about participants, for instance, may lead them to be easily identifiable in a research report, potentially affecting their reputations (Ellis, 2007). As an example, in my own qualitative work, I once had a participant express concern about the way I planned to write up her biographical data. Because of the nature of her work and nationality, she felt that she could be easily identified and believed this would cause harm to her in securing a future job. As Ellis (2004) reminded researchers, we should always assume everyone will read our research reports. Therefore, protecting our participants is a baseline commitment, yet easily ignored.

When thinking about *no-harming in mind*, the mundane practice is to always keep a good mind and positive thinking. One example that is commonly used in the Western countries is mindfulness from Zen Buddhism. Qualitative researchers incorporating contemplative practices such as Orellana (2020) and Janesick (2015) have encouraged researchers to enter research sites with an open heart and compassion. Such practices teach us to focus on the current moment and be open to all experiences. In research practice, we also want to make sure that we do not naïvely judge our participants or their communities (Berger, 2015). This should be consistently monitored throughout the qualitative research process (Pillow, 2003), and drawing upon Buddhist principles, would also lead us to repent when such instances of naïve judgement of participants or communities ensues.

In research, to avoid harming our participants and their communities, we must always examine our assumptions and how we *think* about them. While some would argue that there is no clear right or wrong way to think about research practices, I suggest that researchers' actions, speech, and thoughts always shape and potentially negatively interfere with their research conduct; that is, our thoughts ultimately shape how we orient to and treat our participants. For instance, scholars have discussed the range of ways that participants have been treated and written about in social science research. Some have argued that participants are objects that we should keep a distance from, while others – like Buddhist practitioners – have noted that we are all human beings and should be treated equally (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kim, 2016).

No-Lying

No-lying in actions refers to daily life practices that intend to deceive others. Indeed, there is long history of how deception might play into the research process.

For instance, Duncombe and Jessop (2002) and Kvale (2006) consider building rapport with participant as like doing fake friendship; that is, this is where researchers might strategically and skillfully perform as if they are a friend to the participants and pretend that they genuinely care about them. Their intent is to create trust with the participants for the sole purpose of obtaining publishable information.

No-lying in speech refers to not lying or spreading false words. In research, this involves not lying to our participants unnecessarily. In writing up research reports, we then commit to ensuring we do not forge data and report untruthfully. Qualitative researchers have often written about this in relationship to engaging in what is commonly termed as “validity checks” as a means of ensuring that their interpretations are firmly grounded in the data (Heale & Twycross, 2015).

No-lying in mind refers to examining our thoughts to see if our intentions with others are insincere. Some may question that just thinking something in our mind without real action would not harm anyone, and thus, why should we care? In Fink's (2013) discussion about Buddhist ethics, he argued that to judge whether something is right or wrong, the starting point

is to determine its origins. In other words, we must attend to our motivations and intentions, including whether we intend to do good or bad. That is, even just having a thought about harming or lying to others results in the accumulation of bad karma because the very origins of the thought are “bad.” In research practice, we want to reflect on our thoughts before, during, and after working with our participants.

Table 1 below summarizes the points of repentance from the body, speech, and mind in regard to *no-harming* and *no lying*.

Table 1
Examples of repentance, no-harming, and no lying

	Mundane Practices	Research Practices	Hypothetical Examples	Ethical Practices
		No-harming		
Body	Actions that would harm any sentient beings	Actions that would put our participants in danger, or not carefully address their concerns	When working with participants who have records abusing their family members, researchers keep thinking the participants as bad and guilty. They ask questions as if questioning criminals.	Rooting from all-beings-are-equal, it is encouraged researchers carefully reflect on and examine their pre-assumptions. Check with participants’ feeling all the way through research activities.
Speech	Harmful words	Harmful words or reports that could made participants identified and damage their reputation	When writing academic report, the biographical and sensitive information are not well protected leading to public tracking to the participants. Some descriptions in the report are exaggerated.	Ensure sensitive information are well protected by also discussing the best way to write up reports with participants.
Mind	Unwholesome thoughts	Thoughts in treating participants in a way that would further perform harmful, indifferent actions		
		No-lying		
Body	Actions that aim at deceiving others	Disguising actions that aim at building insincere relationships	Knowing the community they are going to work with is hard to access	The rule of thumb is to be insincere and authentic. Examine our

Speech	Lies or false words	with participants Lie to our participants or write untruthful things	to, the researchers pretend that they know the insider culture and intentionally act like the participants. To obtain trusts, they hide or even make up some of the personal information to show they are similar to the community members. When the project ends, the researchers have nearly no follow up or care with the participants.	intentions. Continue to communicate with the stakeholders and community members. Build rapport as if we are making friends with people encountered in our daily life.
Mind	Intentions or thoughts of cheating or deceiving others	Intention to build insincere relationships with the participants		

In YOUR Chinese Culture: An Example in Real Practice

I offer next an example that demonstrates an identity conflict I experienced wherein I became a little bit defensive while interacting with one of my participants. Monitoring my thoughts and speech during the interactions and pushing by repentance on *no-harming* and *no-lying*, eventually I decided to take action and self-disclosed my feelings with her.

The project aimed at exploring international Ph.D. students' academic experiences and, if relevant, their mundane lives here in the U.S. I limited my participants to international students whose mother language is Chinese/Mandarin because it is also my mother language. After determining my participant population, I mentally prepared myself for encountering participants from China, many of whom might hold different political beliefs on Taiwan's national status and its relationship with China (cf., Bush, 2013; Copper, 2020). I am Taiwanese and stand for Taiwan and China being different nations. Many of the Chinese, on the other hand, may believe that Taiwan is part of China.

In this project, my first participant, Tabitha (a pseudonym), was from China. I had met Tabitha previously, as we both had taken graduate courses together. We also had joined the same reading group and sometimes chatted in English after group meetings. But we did not have much of a connection beyond shared academic interests. So, Tabitha's decision to participate in my study would be the first chance that I had to get to know her as a researcher. After I introduced my project and answered all her questions, Tabitha agreed to participate. All our conversations were in Mandarin, with occasional code-switching to English. I mentioned to Tabitha that my study was limited to students whose mother language was Chinese or

Mandarin, and, in response, she said: “I am grateful that you’re working on a study focused on Chinese.”

This comment triggered for me my previous experiences interacting with people from China who did not believe in Taiwan’s sovereignty. I felt my identity as a Taiwanese was being threatened. I immediately clarified for the participant that my study was not only with Chinese people; rather, it was with those “whose mother language is Chinese.”

Since that moment, I became worried that Tabitha would bring up the topic and suggest that Taiwan was in fact simply a part of China. I noticed that in some of my responses to Tabitha, I began to emphasize that I was not familiar with the cultural contexts she was talking about. In doing so, I hoped to show that our cultural backgrounds were different and that we did not originate from the same country. Every time I did this, I worried that she would become offended; yet my sense of resistance kept pushing me to say, “we are not the same.” Tabitha did not show any negative reactions, and I even noticed that her descriptions became more nuanced in positioning our national identities as unique. I knew my responses were shaping what she was sharing.

I remained anxious and defensive for some time. I recall at one moment asking Tabitha: “in *YOUR* Chinese culture, how did you experience...” Right after I said this, I felt extreme guilt: *this sounded too strong. It was too obvious. I shouldn’t have said that, but I couldn’t control it. Tabitha is such a nice girl, and she didn’t do anything wrong. Why was I being so defensive?*

This emotion lingered in my mind until the end of the meeting that we were ready to wrap up and schedule the next meeting. Tabitha ended our initial encounter by saying she was delighted to join my study and have the chance to know herself better. After a few seconds of struggle, or during the whole meeting I was already struggling, I decided to tell her what was on my mind. I shared my worries about our potential political differences and how it influenced the way I had responded to her. I also shared with her my sense of guilt and offered an apology for possibly harming her dignity. I shared my gratitude for her being so open in her responses. She said she understood my struggles and expressed how she resonated with to my emotions and the situation. She shared that she considered herself a minority in China because of her religion and does not believe in her government that much nor holds a strong position about Taiwan and China’s political relationship. Hearing this was a great relief to me and benefited our following meetings.

How did the Buddhist teachings guide my actions and what were the dilemmas? The first is about *all-beings-are-equal* and my consistent showing *we-are-different* during the meeting with Tabitha. In my explanation to Tabitha about my project, she had revealed her concerns and asked if it was okay if, when she felt overwhelmed by life, she would abstain from completing the research activities. I told her it was fine to take a rest and be gentle to herself, and revealed that even I, as a researcher, had such moments and could not always fulfill research activities. I emphasized that we are no different as a researcher and a participant. However, when it came to my Taiwanese identity, I was challenged by implicit political tension which resulted in me changing my responses to Tabitha. Although we were the same (that is, equal as human beings), at the same time we were different when it came to our national identities.

Thinking on the concepts of karma and rebirth, maybe we had accumulated good merits in our previous life that I was now able to meet and work with Tabitha again in this life. I was grateful for this meeting, and always kept in mind that I should extend the good karma and avoid harming her. However, as I monitored my actions, speech, and thoughts as I interviewed Tabitha, I noticed that I held negative thoughts that served to exaggerate our differences. By acknowledging that I indeed did something inappropriate, I not only repented but also decided to take actions to repair it. In my case, I decided to be honest with my participant. Compared

to concealing my faults, revealing my mistakes and seeking understanding and forgiveness benefited our long-term relationship and allowed me to avoid building more bad karma. Of course, there was a risk in revealing my thoughts, as it could have created discomfort or it might have put my identity into a tenuous position (e.g., if she explicitly challenged my Taiwanese identity); yet I felt that if I had not shared my feelings fully, it would have continued to affect our interactions in future meetings. With the guiding of Buddhist teachings, I believed that it was best to fix my mistake.

Indeed, there are situations in which *no-harming* and *no-lying* might conflict with each other. Sometimes telling the truth could cause more harm (Ellis, 2007). *No-lying* does not mean full self-disclosure; the point is sincerity and truthfulness. In my practice, I first considered whether this was the information that my participant would want to or should know. In my example, I think my participant should know what was affecting our relationship because my concern was significant. I also made this decision in relation to the context: does there seem to be openness between me and the participant for me to tell something so notable about myself? Will the participant be interested in knowing the thing I am going to say? How will my sharing influence the following conversations and our relationship? Will I cause more harm to her by telling her the truth? My suggestion is that we can choose to conceal, but if I decide to reveal, *no-lying* comes into play. I chose to keep it truthful.

Conclusions

Drawing upon my experiences as a Buddhist and a qualitative researcher, I offer in this paper one way to think about research ethics using the concepts of *all-beings-are-equal*, karma, the five precepts, and repentance. *All-beings-are-equal* sets up the baseline for how we might think about the relationship between researchers and participants (Mattes, 2018). The concept of good karma informs us to cherish the serendipity with our participants. I might accumulate good karma in my previous life so that I can meet them in this life. With the warning of bad karma in mind, we want to avoid doing bad to our participants. We could use the five precepts, especially *no-harming* and *no-lying* as a starting check point. Under this foundation, I encourage the researchers to move one step forward by taking up the concept of repentance. The good or bad karma was caused by our actions, speech, and mind. Therefore, I encourage us to begin by reflecting on these three dimensions: what we have performed, what we have said, and what we have thought. We all make mistakes. If we noticed that the ethical concerns or mistakes may be made, extending from the Buddhist spirit to repent to both ourselves (the self-power) and to Buddha Amitābha (the other-power), I suggest that researchers should acknowledge their mistakes and work not to make them again (to the self). More importantly, they should further take on actions with the stakeholders or participants to fix it (to the others).

Indeed, contemporary understandings of spirituality share common characteristics with a critical lens, where open and inclusive spaces for dialogs and actions should be provided. A critical reflection to the dominant traditions, and to self and other (and “God,” the supersensible) is encouraged. Many qualitative researchers have advocated for and even experienced qualitative inquiry as spiritual and liberating (e.g., Bruce, 2008; Janesick, 2015; Li, 2018; McGuire & Cisneros, 2019; Orellana, 2020). The trend in working on research ethics via a critical perspective is emerging; alternatively and similarly, it is beneficial for us to reconsider research ethics through a spiritual angle.

When we think about the purpose of doing research, we not only want to benefit our participants but also make our world better by addressing social issues. On the other hand, the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism is to rescue every sentient being, or at least creating a peaceful and better life. At a certain level, doing research and Mahayana Buddhist practices echo each other. As the Venerable Master Miao Lien once said, no one is born noble. Once we are

awakened by the spiritual and ethical teachings, we can change our life habits (Lien, 2014). After all, when facing ethical dilemma, our personhood is un-separable from our conduct as a researcher (Dennis, 2018).

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Author Note

Pei-Jung Li is a Ph.D. candidate in qualitative and quantitative research methodology at Indiana University Bloomington. She received her first master's degree in education in Taiwan and her second master's degree in learning sciences from Indiana University Bloomington. Her current works center around international students in higher education, research ethics, researcher-participant relationship, and Buddhist-informed qualitative research practices. Please direct correspondence to gisella0423yume@hotmail.com.

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