



BUDDHIST CONCEPTIONS OF ULTIMATE REALITY FOR ETHICAL TEACHER LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper develops a philosophical and conceptual research framework examining how Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality—impermanence (*anicca/anitya*), non-self (*anatta/anatman*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and emptiness (*śūnyatā*)—can inform ethical teacher leadership and teachers' professional growth. Ultimate reality in Buddhist philosophy refers to *paramārtha-satya*, the level of truth disclosed once conventional, conceptually constructed appearances (*samvṛti-satya*) are seen through; it is not a metaphysical substance but the interdependent, impermanent, and empty nature of all phenomena, including the self. Drawing on Theravāda, Madhyamaka, and canonical sources alongside contemporary scholarship in Buddhist studies, philosophy of education, and educational leadership, the paper situates these conceptions within a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological framework designed to explore how in-service teachers understand ultimate reality and perceive its bearing on ethical conduct, compassion, integrity, mindful presence, and reflective professional development. The paper closes with major findings drawn from this conceptual synthesis, implications for teacher education, and delimitations for future empirical inquiry. The work is offered as a theoretical-philosophical foundation and methodological blueprint rather than a report of completed fieldwork.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260405029>

Keywords: *Ultimate Reality; Śūnyatā; Pratītyasamutpāda; Ethical Teacher Leadership; Professional Growth; Buddhist Philosophy of Education; Mindfulness*

Introduction

Teacher leadership in the twenty-first century is exercised amid conditions that classical models of instructional authority did not anticipate: accelerating curricular change, the erosion of settled professional identities, rising emotional labour, and a widening expectation that teachers model, and not merely transmit, ethical conduct. Within this context, scholars and practitioners alike have turned toward contemplative and wisdom traditions—Buddhism prominent among them—as resources for rethinking what it means to lead ethically in a classroom and to grow professionally across a career (Romano & Chang, 2022). Buddhist philosophy is distinctive among these traditions in that its ethical teaching is inseparable from its metaphysics of ultimate reality: right conduct (*śīla*), meditative cultivation (*śamādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) are not free-standing virtues but are understood to arise together from an accurate seeing of how things actually are. It is this integration of ontology and ethics that makes Buddhist thought a particularly generative, if underexplored, resource for theorising ethical teacher leadership and professional growth.

The emergence of the present study is best understood against three convergent developments. First, within educational leadership scholarship, there has been a decisive move away from positional and transactional conceptions of leadership toward relational, ethical, and values-based conceptions in which the teacher is understood as a moral agent whose interior disposition shapes classroom culture (Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024). Second, within the psychology and philosophy of education, the popularisation of secular mindfulness has generated both enthusiasm and critique; critics have argued that mindfulness detached from its ethical and philosophical roots in Buddhism risks becoming a individualised coping technique rather than a genuine resource for ethical transformation (Romano & Chang, 2022). This critique has renewed scholarly interest in returning to the philosophical foundations—particularly the Buddhist conception of ultimate reality—that originally gave contemplative practice its ethical seriousness. Third, comparative and cross-cultural philosophy of education has increasingly argued that Asian philosophical traditions offer conceptual resources that are not reducible to, and should not be assimilated into.

Meaning of Ultimate Reality

In Buddhist philosophy, ultimate reality is not a hidden substance, a first cause, or a transcendent deity standing behind appearances. It is instead the way things actually are once conventional, conceptually superimposed appearances are seen through. Buddhist epistemology characteristically distinguishes two levels of truth: conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*), the level at which persons, objects, and events appear to possess fixed, independent identities, and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), the level at which those same phenomena are seen to be impermanent, dependently originated, and without inherent, self-standing essence (*svabhāva*) (Encyclopedia of Buddhism, n.d.). The Madhyamaka philosopher Nāgārjuna, writing in the second century CE, systematised this distinction and identified ultimate reality with *śūnyatā*, emptiness—not as a nihilistic void, but as the absence of independent existence that is the necessary condition for dependent, relational existence (Britannica, n.d.). Three interlocking doctrines constitute the classical Buddhist account of ultimate reality: impermanence (*anicca/anitya*), the teaching that all conditioned phenomena arise and pass away moment to moment; non-self (*anatta/anātman*), the teaching that no fixed, unchanging self can be found within or behind the five aggregates (*skandhas*) that constitute a person; and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the teaching that all phenomena arise in dependence upon causes and conditions and possess no existence apart from that web of relations. Emptiness, in the mature Madhyamaka articulation, is best understood as the unifying insight that draws these three together: to say that a phenomenon is empty is to say that it is impermanent, selfless, and dependently originated, and therefore without the fixed, independent essence that ordinary, conventional cognition projects onto it.

रूपं शून्यता शून्यतैव रूपम् ।

यः प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादं पश्यति स धर्मं पश्यति । यो धर्मं पश्यति स प्रतीत्यसमुत्पादं पश्यति ।

“He who sees dependent origination sees the Dharma; he who sees the Dharma sees dependent origination.”

(Attributed to the Buddha; cf. *Majjhima Nikāya* 28, *Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*)

अनित्या बत संस्काराः

उत्पादव्ययधर्मिणः ।

उत्पद्य हि निरुध्यन्ते

तेषां व्युपशमः सुखम् ॥

“Impermanent indeed are conditioned things, of a nature to arise and pass away; having arisen, they cease; their stilling is bliss.” (*Dīgha Nikāya* 16, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (Pāli))

This paper treats ultimate reality, so understood, as a philosophical and phenomenological orientation rather than a doctrinal proposition to be assented to. What matters for the purposes of ethical teacher leadership is not metaphysical assent but the practical, dispositional consequences of taking impermanence, non-self, dependent origination, and emptiness seriously as descriptions of how one's own mind, one's students, and one's classroom actually function.

Ethical Teacher Leadership and Professional Growth in Buddhism

Buddhist ethics does not proceed from a rule-based deontology or from a calculus of consequences alone; it proceeds from an account of the mind and its relationship to suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation. Right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, is understood as clear seeing into impermanence, non-self, and dependent origination, and this right view is held to condition right intention, right speech, right action, and right livelihood—the ethical factors of the path (Romano & Chang, 2022). A teacher who has internalized *pratītyasamutpāda* is positioned to see classroom behaviour, achievement, and misconduct as arising from webs of causes and conditions rather than from fixed, essential traits, which has direct bearing on compassion, fairness, and non-judgmental discipline (Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024).

Professional growth, in turn, is reframed by Buddhist philosophy away from a linear accumulation of credentials and competencies and toward an ongoing, non-terminating cultivation (*bhāvanā*) that has no final, fixed endpoint—consistent with the doctrine of impermanence itself. Reflective practice, in this framing, becomes analogous to the Buddhist practice of mindful self-examination (*satī-sampajañña*): moment-to-moment, non-judgmental attention to one's own teaching conduct, thoughts, and reactions, sustained across a career rather than confined to periodic appraisal. Collaboration and collegiality, likewise, gain philosophical grounding in dependent origination, which frames professional identity itself as relationally constituted rather than autonomously achieved (Chang, 2022, as cited in Romano & Chang, 2022).

The present moment gives this inquiry particular urgency for several converging reasons. Teacher attrition and burnout are widely attributed, in part, to an over-identification of professional worth with fixed, externally validated outcomes—precisely the kind of clinging that Buddhist philosophy diagnoses as a principal source of suffering (Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024). A study that returns explicitly to Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality—rather than to secularised mindfulness technique alone—therefore fills a genuine gap: it asks how teachers themselves understand and interpret the philosophical foundation from which ethical mindfulness practice originally derives its seriousness, and how that understanding, in their own perception, shapes their leadership and growth.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study positions Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality as the philosophical wellspring from which two interrelated outcome domains are theorized to flow: ethical teacher leadership and teachers' professional growth. Four philosophical constructs—impermanence, non-self, dependent origination, and emptiness—are treated as the operative content of 'ultimate reality' for the purposes of this study. Ethical teacher leadership is conceptualized through five dispositional

markers frequently associated with Buddhist virtue ethics in the education literature: integrity, compassion (karuṇā), fairness (upekkhā-informed equanimity), mindfulness (sati), and wisdom-guided responsibility (Burton et al., 2021; Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024). Professional growth is conceptualized through reflective practice, professional competence, collaboration, ethical commitment, and lifelong learning, framed as an ongoing, non-terminating process consistent with the doctrine of impermanence rather than as a finite trajectory toward mastery. The framework's importance in the current scenario rests on the observation that most existing models of teacher leadership and professional growth are grounded, whether explicitly or by default, in Western liberal-humanist and managerial paradigms that presuppose a stable, autonomous self as the locus of agency, competence, and accountability (Sage, 2021, as cited in secondary Buddhist-education literature).

The Need of the Study

Existing empirical literature on mindfulness and Buddhist-informed practice in education has concentrated disproportionately on individual psychological outcomes—stress reduction, emotional regulation, and burnout mitigation—while comparatively neglecting the philosophical substrate of ultimate reality from which Buddhist ethics derives its coherence (Romano & Chang, 2022). There is, accordingly, a need for a study that (a) treats ultimate reality as a philosophically serious construct in its own right rather than as background colour for mindfulness technique; (b) investigates how practising teachers themselves interpret and make meaning of these philosophical constructs, rather than assuming a doctrinally correct interpretation; and (c) connects that interpretive understanding explicitly to the twin professional outcomes of ethical leadership and career-long growth. The present study addresses this need through a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological design capable of honouring the first-person, meaning-making character of teachers' philosophical and spiritual understanding.

The Significance of the Study

The rationale for the study is twofold. Philosophically, it contributes to comparative philosophy of education by articulating, with textual and scholarly grounding, how a non-Western metaphysics of ultimate reality can be translated into a coherent account of professional ethics and growth without reducing that metaphysics to a set of therapeutic techniques. Practically, it responds to persistent concerns in teacher education—ethical fatigue, burnout, and the erosion of a stable professional identity under conditions of rapid change—by offering teachers a framework in which impermanence and non-attachment are reframed not as threats to professional stability but as resources for resilience and equanimity (Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024).

The study is significant for teacher educators designing contemplative or ethics-oriented professional development, for school leaders seeking philosophically grounded (rather than merely technique-based) approaches to staff wellbeing and ethical culture, and for scholars in philosophy of education and comparative religious studies seeking empirically informed accounts of how ancient philosophical constructs are received and reinterpreted by contemporary professional practitioners.

The Delimitations of the Study

- The study is delimited to teachers' subjective understanding, interpretation, and perception of Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality; it does not adjudicate the doctrinal correctness of any single Buddhist school (Theravāda, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, or others) and does not seek to establish a single authoritative reading of ultimate reality.
- The study is conceptual and methodological in its present form; it proposes and justifies a qualitative interpretive phenomenological design rather than reporting completed empirical fieldwork, and any findings offered herein are drawn from philosophical and literature-based synthesis rather than from primary interview data.
- The study is delimited to in-service school teachers and does not extend to monastic educators, university faculty, or students, although implications for these groups may be noted.
- The study does not seek to promote religious conversion, proselytisation, or devotional practice; Buddhist philosophical constructs are engaged as conceptual and ethical resources appropriate to plural, secular educational settings, consistent with the 'right mindfulness' framing found in the contemporary literature (Romano & Chang, 2022).
- Comparative reference to other philosophical or religious traditions (e.g., Vedāntic or Abrahamic conceptions of ultimate reality) is made only where necessary for conceptual clarity and is not the primary focus of the study.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do teachers understand and interpret Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality?

RQ2: How do teachers perceive the influence of Buddhist philosophical and ethical principles on ethical teacher leadership?

RQ3: How do Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality contribute to teachers' professional growth?

Research Objectives

O1: To explore teachers' understanding and interpretation of Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality.

O2: To examine teachers' perceptions of how Buddhist philosophical and ethical principles influence ethical teacher leadership.

O3: To examine how Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality contribute to teachers' professional growth.

The Review of Related Literature

International Literature (Outside India)

Burton, Culham, and Vu (2021), writing in the *Journal of Management Education*, examined the philosophical foundations of spiritual practice—including Buddhist contemplative traditions—in management and professional education pedagogy. Comparing three spiritual traditions, the authors argued that spiritual practices grounded in a coherent metaphysics of interdependence and non-attachment offer management and professional educators pedagogical resources for cultivating ethical judgement that purely secular, competency-based curricula cannot supply. Significantly for the present study, Burton et al. (2021) cautioned against extracting isolated techniques (such as breath-focused meditation) from their philosophical foundations, arguing that such extraction diminishes the transformative, ethically serious character of the practice—an argument that directly supports this paper's decision to foreground ultimate reality rather than technique alone.

Romano and Chang (2022), publishing in *Education Sciences*, offered a critical theoretical examination of 'right mindfulness' in United States teacher education, arguing that secularised mindfulness interventions in schools have been substantially decontextualised from the Buddhist Eightfold Path and its ethical dimensions, resulting in an individualised, self-help orientation that risks perpetuating rather than addressing systemic inequities. Drawing on the concept of 'right mindfulness' as the intersection of awareness and ethics, the authors proposed integrating the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path—rooted in an understanding of impermanence and non-self—into critical teacher education so that mindfulness practice serves collective ethical transformation rather than individual coping alone. This study is central to the present paper's argument that ethical teacher leadership requires philosophical grounding in ultimate reality, not merely technique.

Sumaryati and Lasiyo (2024), publishing in the *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*, explored the application of Buddhist ethical philosophy—centred on the Four Noble Truths and the acceptance of dukkha (suffering)—as a resource for enhancing teacher competence in the twenty-first century. Their finding that Buddhist ethics 'requires elaboration in normative provisions in various fields of life' (Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024) directly supports the present study's rationale for translating Buddhist metaphysical constructs into an operational framework for teacher leadership and growth.

National Literature (India)

Liem and Paswan (2023), based at Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, India, and publishing in the *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, examined the doctrine of impermanence (anicca) as a pragmatic resource for improving the quality of individual conduct and emotional regulation. Drawing on Pāli canonical sources including the *Dhammapada* and the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the authors argued that a lived recognition of impermanence enables individuals to transform resentment into compassion, to reduce reactive anger, and to cultivate an optimistic, adaptive orientation toward continually changing circumstances. Their analysis of the impermanence of both external circumstance and internal emotional state provides direct philosophical support for this paper's treatment of anicca as a resource for teacher resilience and equanimity under professional stress.

Hanh (2023), based at the School of Buddhist Studies, Philosophy, and Comparative Religions, Nālandā University, Bihar, India. The study explained *śūnyatā* as the recognition that phenomena are empty of independent, inherent existence while remaining causally and relationally real, and argued that this recognition dissolves rigid, dualistic thinking and self–other opposition, thereby grounding more compassionate, less reactive ethical conduct.

The reviewed literature indicates convergent but incomplete attention to the relationship between Buddhist ultimate reality and teacher professional life. International scholarship (Burton et al., 2021; Romano & Chang, 2022) has been more concerned with critiquing decontextualized mindfulness and calling for a return to ethical and philosophical foundations, while offering comparatively little empirical exploration of how individual teachers themselves interpret those foundations. Indian scholarship (Liem & Paswan, 2023; Hanh, 2023), closer to the textual and philosophical wellsprings of the tradition, has offered rich doctrinal explication of impermanence and emptiness but has not extended this explication specifically into the domain of teacher leadership or professional growth. This gap—between philosophically rich doctrinal explication on one hand and applied, teacher-focused ethical scholarship on the other—constitutes the specific niche that the present study is designed to occupy.

The Methodology of the Study

Research Method: The study employs a qualitative research method. A qualitative approach is warranted because the study's central concern is meaning-making: how teachers themselves understand, interpret, and narrate their relationship to philosophical constructs (ultimate reality) that are inherently resistant to quantification and that are experienced and articulated differently across individuals.

Research Design: An Interpretive Phenomenological Design (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, IPA) is recommended because the study seeks to understand how teachers make meaning of Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality and how they perceive the relevance of that meaning to ethical leadership and professional development. IPA is idiographic and hermeneutic in character: it begins from detailed, first-person accounts of individual teachers' experience and interpretation, and it proceeds through a double hermeneutic in which the researcher interprets the teacher's own interpretation of their experience. This design is particularly well suited to the philosophical subject matter of the present study for three reasons. First, Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality are themselves concerned with the structure of first-person experience (the impermanence and non-self-nature of moment-to-moment awareness), making a phenomenological orientation methodologically congruent with the content under investigation. Second, IPA's commitment to idiographic depth over generalisable breadth is appropriate given the study's aim to explore rich, individually varied interpretations rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis about a single correct understanding of ultimate reality. Third, the hermeneutic dimension of IPA allows the researcher to hold in view the broader

philosophical and textual tradition (Pāli canonical sources, Madhyamaka commentary, and the reviewed scholarly literature) as an interpretive horizon against which participants' accounts can be understood without imposing that tradition's categories directly onto participants' own words.

The Variables of Study: The study is organised around one independent variable and two dependent variables, operationalised as follows.

Type	Variable / Concept	Focus
Independent Variable	Buddhist Conceptions of Ultimate Reality	Teachers' understanding and interpretation of impermanence, non-self, dependent origination, emptiness, and related Buddhist philosophical principles
Dependent Variable 1	Ethical Teacher Leadership	Influence of Buddhist philosophical and ethical principles on teachers' integrity, compassion, fairness, mindfulness, responsibility, and wisdom
Dependent Variable 2	Teachers' Professional Growth	Influence/contribution reflected in reflective practice, professional competence, collaboration, ethical commitment, and lifelong learning

Analyses and Interpretation

Teachers' Understanding and Interpretation of Buddhist Conceptions of Ultimate Reality

Philosophically, three interpretive postures are anticipated when teachers engage with ultimate reality, corresponding to the layered structure of the constructs themselves. A first, experiential-affective posture is likely to interpret impermanence primarily through the register of loss, change, and the transience of classroom relationships, cohorts, and curricula—an interpretation consistent with Liem and Paswan's (2023) account of *anicca* as a doctrine that, once accepted, allows adverse circumstances to be met with equanimity rather than resistance. A second, relational-causal posture is likely to interpret dependent origination through the observation that student behaviour, classroom climate, and even a teacher's own reactions arise from webs of prior causes—family background, institutional pressure, developmental stage—rather than from fixed individual essences, an interpretation that dissolves the tendency to label students or colleagues in permanently fixed moral or ability categories. A third, more philosophically demanding posture engages emptiness (*śūnyatā*) directly, following Hanh's (2023) account of emptiness as the recognition that persons and roles—including the teacher's own professional identity—are causally and relationally real without being independently, permanently fixed; teachers who reach this posture are theorised to hold their professional identity more lightly, reducing ego-driven reactivity to student resistance or institutional setbacks. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is expected to reveal that most teachers move between these postures situationally rather than adopting one consistently, and that teachers with limited prior exposure to Buddhist philosophy are more likely to encounter these constructs first through the affective register of impermanence before engaging the more abstract logic of emptiness—an expected finding consistent with the pedagogical sequencing found in canonical sources themselves, in which *anicca* is typically taught prior to *śūnyatā* (Encyclopedia of Buddhism, n.d.).

Teachers' Perceptions of the Influence of Buddhist Philosophical and Ethical Principles on Ethical Teacher Leadership

Drawing on the Eightfold Path's integration of right view, right intention, right speech, and right action (Romano & Chang, 2022), ethical teacher leadership is theorised to be perceived by teachers along five converging dimensions corresponding to the study's conceptual framework. Integrity is theorized to be understood less as rule-conformity and more as the alignment of inner intention and outward conduct that follows from right view—teachers who see the impermanent and dependently originated nature of their own reactions are, in principle, less prone to the self-deception and rationalization that erode integrity under pressure. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is theorized to follow directly from the dissolution of rigid self–other boundaries associated with *anatta* and *śūnyatā*: once a teacher no longer experiences a hard boundary between their own wellbeing and a struggling student's wellbeing, disciplinary and pedagogical decisions are more readily framed around the reduction of suffering (*dukkha*) for all parties rather than around self-protective control (Hanh, 2023). Fairness is theorised to be perceived as a direct consequence of dependent origination: seeing a student's disruptive behaviour as causally conditioned rather than as an expression of fixed character is expected to reduce differential, bias-inflected treatment, an argument closely paralleled in Romano and Chang's (2022) analysis of how right mindfulness can reduce racial and other forms of instructional bias. Mindfulness (*satī*) is theorized to function as the practical, moment-to-moment vehicle through which the other four dimensions are enacted in real time in the classroom. Wisdom-guided responsibility, finally, is theorized to be perceived as the capacity to exercise authority without either authoritarian rigidity or conflict-avoidant permissiveness—a middle path (*madhyamā pratipad*) consistent with Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka orientation and with Sumaryati and Lasiyo's (2024) finding that teachers who accept *dukkha* as an inherent feature of professional life, rather than resisting it, are better able to exercise sustained, even-handed responsibility.

The Contribution of Buddhist Conceptions of Ultimate Reality to Teachers' Professional Growth

Professional growth is theorized to be reframed, rather than merely supplemented, by a lived engagement with ultimate reality. Reflective practice, understood through the lens of *satī-sampajañña* (mindful clear comprehension), is theorised to move from an occasional, appraisal-driven activity toward a continuous, moment-to-moment disposition of self-observation, consistent with Burton et al.'s (2021) argument that spiritual practices grounded in a coherent philosophical foundation cultivate sustained rather than episodic reflective capacity. Professional competence is theorized to be affected indirectly: because impermanence undercuts the assumption that any single pedagogical method or professional identity is fixed and final, teachers oriented by this understanding are expected to display greater adaptive flexibility in updating practice in response to new evidence or changed

classroom conditions. Collaboration is theorized to be grounded philosophically in dependent origination, which frames professional competence itself as arising relationally—through interaction with colleagues, students, and institutional context—rather than as an autonomously possessed trait, a reframing that is expected to reduce competitive individualism and increase collegial knowledge-sharing. Ethical commitment is theorized to be strengthened by the integration of ethics and metaphysics characteristic of the Eightfold Path, in which right view is not separable from right action, such that ethical commitment is experienced less as an external obligation and more as the natural expression of accurate seeing (Sumaryati & Lasiyo, 2024). Lifelong learning, finally, is theorized to be the most direct professional-growth analogue of impermanence itself: a teacher who has internalized the truth that all conditioned phenomena—including their own knowledge and competence—are subject to arising and passing away is, in principle, positioned to treat every career stage as provisional and open to further cultivation (bhāvanā) rather than as a terminal state of mastery.

Cross-Cutting Interpretation

Read across the three research questions, the conceptual analysis suggests that the relationship between ultimate reality and the two dependent variables is neither direct nor mechanical but is mediated by the depth and consistency of a teacher's interpretive engagement with the underlying constructs.. This mediating role of depth of understanding constitutes the central proposition to be tested empirically in subsequent fieldwork guided by the present framework.

Major Findings

As a conceptual-philosophical paper establishing a theoretical framework and research design, the 'findings' presented here are propositions synthesized from philosophical analysis and the reviewed literature, offered as the framework's testable core rather than as results of completed empirical fieldwork.

- Buddhist ultimate reality, properly understood, is a relational and processual construct—constituted by impermanence, non-self, dependent origination, and emptiness—rather than a fixed metaphysical object, and this processual character is philosophically well suited to informing professional constructs (leadership, growth) that are themselves relational and ongoing rather than fixed and terminal.
- The ethical seriousness of Buddhist-informed practice in education depends on maintaining the connection between technique (such as mindfulness) and its philosophical foundation in ultimate reality; detaching technique from foundation, as several reviewed studies caution, risks reducing a potentially transformative ethical resource to an individualized coping mechanism (Romano & Chang, 2022; Burton et al., 2021).
- Each of the five ethical-leadership dimensions examined in this study—integrity, compassion, fairness, mindfulness, and wisdom-guided responsibility—can be traced to a specific philosophical mechanism within the doctrine of ultimate reality, suggesting that ethical teacher leadership is not a loose collection of virtues but a coherent expression of a single underlying philosophical orientation.
- Professional growth is reconceptualised, under a Buddhist framework, from a linear, credential-driven trajectory toward a continuous, non-terminating cultivation (bhāvanā) consistent with impermanence, with direct implications for how reflective practice and lifelong learning are structured in teacher professional development.
- Indian and international scholarship converge on the centrality of Buddhist ethics to teacher conduct but diverge in emphasis: Indian, Buddhist-studies-adjacent scholarship (Liem & Paswan, 2023; Hanh, 2023) offers deeper textual and doctrinal grounding in impermanence and emptiness, while international, education-focused scholarship (Romano & Chang, 2022; Burton et al., 2021) offers a sharper critical analysis of how these constructs are received, secularised, and sometimes distorted within contemporary Western schooling systems—indicating that a study spanning both literatures, as the present framework does, is well positioned to generate a fuller account.
- An Interpretive Phenomenological Design is theoretically well matched to this subject matter because the constructs under study concern the very structure of first-person experience that IPA is designed to elicit, suggesting strong construct-method alignment for the proposed empirical phase of the research programme.

Conclusion

This paper has developed a philosophically grounded conceptual framework and qualitative research design for examining how Buddhist conceptions of ultimate reality—impermanence, non-self, dependent origination, and emptiness—may inform ethical teacher leadership and professional growth. Beginning from the classical Buddhist distinction between conventional and ultimate truth, and drawing on both canonical Sanskrit and Pāli sources and a chronologically organised body of international and Indian scholarship published between 2020 and 2026, the paper has argued that ultimate reality is best understood not as an esoteric metaphysical doctrine but as a practical orientation toward impermanence, relationality, and non-attachment with direct, traceable consequences for how teachers might lead ethically and grow professionally across a career. The proposed Interpretive Phenomenological Design offers a methodologically coherent way of investigating these consequences empirically, honouring both the first-person, meaning-making character of teachers' philosophical understanding and the hermeneutic depth of the Buddhist textual tradition from which the constructs are drawn. The conceptual analysis offered in Section 4, organised around the study's three research questions, generates a set of theoretically grounded propositions—concerning the layered, situational character of teachers' interpretation of ultimate reality; the mediation of ethical leadership dimensions through specific philosophical mechanisms; and the reframing of professional growth as ongoing cultivation rather than terminal mastery—that are offered as the framework's testable core for future empirical research.

The study's significance lies at the intersection of comparative philosophy of education and practical teacher development: it resists both the reduction of Buddhist philosophy to decontextualized technique and the confinement of Buddhist scholarship to purely doctrinal or monastic settings, instead proposing a research programme capable of honoring the philosophical depth of ultimate reality while remaining answerable to the everyday, ethically demanding realities of contemporary classroom practice. As Sumaryati and Lasiyo (2024) observe, Buddhist ethics is universal in scope but requires deliberate elaboration into the normative provisions of specific fields of life; this paper has sought to provide that elaboration for the field of teacher leadership and professional growth, and to furnish the methodological means by which its central propositions can be tested against the lived experience of teachers themselves.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Pompa Biswas (Mandal): Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing; Dr. Ramjee Singh Yadav: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing;

Funding: No

Declaration: The author/s has/have given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

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