

# *Application of Phenomenological Method in Buddhist Studies*

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**Abstract:** Using the phenomenological method to interpret and practice Buddhist thought, this approach focuses on explaining core concepts such as dependent origination and emptiness theory, and their deepening impact on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. It aims to establish a dialogue framework between phenomenology and Buddhist thought. Through literature review and theoretical comparison, it particularly highlights the potential connection between the phenomenological subtraction and Buddhist meditation practices. By accurately depicting the positions of perception and consciousness in both philosophical systems, it interprets Buddhist epistemology from a phenomenological perspective, revealing the similarities and differences in their methodologies for exploring the essence of 'reality.' Additionally, it analyzes how the phenomenological method reinterprets Buddhist practices, which is valuable for enhancing the understanding and development of epistemology in both philosophical identities through cross-cultural and cross-school exchanges. The phenomenological method and Buddhist thought, when analyzed equally in epistemology and praxis, exhibit a remarkable complementarity and the potential for deep integration.

## **1. Introduction**

This discussion centers on the interpretation and application of phenomenological methods in Buddhist thought, aiming to explore how phenomenology can be used to interpret core Buddhist concepts such as dependent origination, emptiness theory, and the deepening influence on the practice of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. First, we clarify the origins and main characteristics of phenomenological methods, then delve into the core concepts of Buddhist thought, gradually building a dialogue framework between phenomenology and Buddhism. Special emphasis is placed on the potential connection between phenomenological subtraction and Buddhist meditation practices, highlighting the differences in the roles of perception and consciousness in these two philosophical systems. Through comparative analysis and comprehensive literature review, we innovatively apply phenomenological perspectives to Buddhist epistemology, revealing the similarities and differences in methodology between the two.

## 2. Comparison between phenomenological method and Buddhist thought

### 2.1 Phenomenological interpretation of perception and consciousness

The application of phenomenological methods in Buddhist thought is most profoundly reflected in the phenomenological interpretation of perception and consciousness. Perception, as the primary channel through which humans interact with the external world, serves as our direct means of perceiving and understanding the external environment. Phenomenological methods emphasize exploring the essence and significance behind perception through intuitive experience, focusing on how observers perceive, understand, and experience various phenomena. <sup>[1]</sup>This process requires a subject-centered approach, recognizing the unique ways individuals perceive and their experiences, as well as the perceptual differences among different subjects.

In phenomenological interpretation, perception is viewed as a subjective experience rather than a mere reflection of objective reality. By employing phenomenological methods, we can delve into the mental structures underlying perception and explore the relationship between perception and cognition. By observing and analyzing individual perceptual experiences, we can gain a deeper understanding of how humans perceive the world and the psychological mechanisms that underlie these perceptions. <sup>[2]</sup>This process helps reveal the complexity and diversity of perception, guiding us to transcend surface-level phenomena and gain a deeper understanding of the essence and significance of perception.

In Buddhist thought, perception is regarded as a crucial pathway to understanding and the foundation of spiritual practice. Buddhist teachings emphasize that through the cultivation of right knowledge and right views, one can transcend superficial appearances and directly confront the essence of the mind. <sup>[3]</sup>The phenomenological approach offers a unique perspective, aiding us in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and function of perception. By interpreting perception through the lens of phenomenology, we can deepen our understanding of the importance of cognition and awareness in Buddhism, and how awareness can help us perceive the various delusions and attachments within the depths of the mind.

The phenomenological method also aids in our study and understanding of consciousness. As the core of human mental activities, consciousness embodies an individual's thoughts, emotions, and will. Through the lens of phenomenology, we can delve into the structure, function, and operation of consciousness, exploring its relationship with reality. <sup>[4]</sup>The phenomenological interpretation of consciousness aims to reveal the diversity and complexity of individual mental activities, as well as the interactions between consciousness and the external world, along with inner experiences.

In Buddhism, consciousness is seen as the root of the cycle of birth and death for all beings. By cultivating and elevating one's consciousness, one can transcend oneself, others, and the world. The phenomenological approach offers a fresh perspective, aiding in a deeper understanding of the essence and functions of consciousness. Through a phenomenological interpretation of consciousness, we can better grasp the core concepts of awareness and liberation in Buddhism, as well as how to use awareness to recognize personal attachments and cultivate wisdom. <sup>[5]</sup> By integrating the phenomenological interpretation of perception and consciousness with the practical aspects of Buddhist practice, individuals can enhance their level of consciousness while achieving inner peace and transcendence.

### 2.2 Buddhist meditation and phenomenological subtraction

Phenomenology and Buddhist meditation share a profound intrinsic connection. By adopting the phenomenological method of subtraction, we can gain a deeper understanding of the practice and significance of meditation. According to phenomenology, subtraction is not merely about

eliminating distracting thoughts and attachments; it involves gradually stripping away the superficial appearances and illusions of the external world to achieve inner purity and tranquility. The essence of meditation practice lies in reducing external disturbances and inner fluctuations through focused attention and awareness, ultimately achieving a state of transcending all phenomena.

Zen meditation, as a form of spiritual practice, is regarded in Buddhism as the path to liberation. Phenomenology offers a profound interpretation and explanation of this concept. Through phenomenological subtraction, practitioners can gradually let go of their attachments to the external world, free themselves from superficial appearances, transcend the distinction between self and other, and ultimately achieve liberation. <sup>[6]</sup>This process of subtraction is not a passive negation but a form of transcendence and salvation, achieving deep inner peace and liberation by transcending surface appearances and the ego.

From a phenomenological perspective, meditation can be seen as a practice of inner experience, where the mind gradually clears by eliminating external distractions. In this process, meditators gradually uncover their true nature, recognizing the illusory boundaries between self and others, and moving towards a state of transcendence beyond all phenomena. This phenomenological subtraction is not only about reducing external distractions but also about reducing inner attachments, helping practitioners transcend their ego to achieve true freedom and liberation.

The difference between Zen practice and phenomenological subtraction lies in the fact that Zen places greater emphasis on actual experience and awareness, cultivating inner peace and purity through concentration and meditation. Phenomenological subtraction, on the other hand, involves gradually stripping away external appearances and illusions through rational thinking and awareness, leading to inner liberation. Although the methods differ, both aim to achieve inner transcendence and liberation, ultimately realizing true freedom and tranquility.

Inspired by the phenomenological method, we can better understand the practice of leaving behind desires and reducing attachments in Zen meditation. Through the phenomenological approach, practitioners can gradually shed their attachments to the external world through awareness, ultimately achieving a profound and transcendent state of mind. <sup>[7]</sup>This integration of phenomenology and Zen not only enhances the practitioner's effectiveness but also offers a new path to balance and liberation in modern society.

Overall, there is an intrinsic connection between the phenomenological approach and Buddhist meditation. Through the phenomenological method of subtraction, we can better understand the practice and significance of meditation. The essence of meditation practice lies in gradually reducing attachment to external objects. By cultivating awareness and concentration, one can transcend the realm of all phenomena, achieving inner purity and tranquility. Phenomenology's interpretation and practical study of Buddhist meditation will undoubtedly enlighten our understanding of inner freedom and liberation, helping us better practice and comprehend the true essence of Buddhism.

### **3. The Buddhist interpretation from the perspective of phenomenology**

#### **3.1 Phenomenology's interpretation of Buddhist epistemology**

Phenomenology, as a methodological approach, is of significant importance in interpreting Buddhist epistemology. Firstly, phenomenology emphasizes the relationship between the subject and the object, advocating for truth through direct experience and observation. In Buddhism, epistemology also focuses on understanding the mind and the world through introspection and meditation, which aligns well with the methods of phenomenology. Consequently, phenomenology offers a new interpretative framework for Buddhist philosophy.

On the other hand, the emphasis on individual experience and perception in phenomenology aligns with the Buddhist concepts of causality and reincarnation. Phenomenology posits that our perceptions and cognition shape our understanding of the world, while Buddhism emphasizes that our actions and mental states influence our fate and rebirth. <sup>[8]</sup>Thus, phenomenology offers a new perspective and interpretation of Buddhist epistemology.

From the perspective of phenomenology, Buddhist epistemology can place greater emphasis on individual experience and practice. Phenomenology emphasizes direct perception and experience, which aligns well with the introspection and meditation practices in Buddhist cultivation. By deeply experiencing and observing one's own feelings and mental states, one can better understand the epistemological concepts in Buddhism.

From another perspective, phenomenology also offers a new interpretive framework for understanding Buddhist concepts. For instance, the examination of the relationship between subject and object in phenomenology can help us better understand the Buddhist theories of causality and emptiness. By examining the core ideas of Buddhism from a phenomenological angle, we can gain deeper insights and a more profound understanding.

Phenomenology can also help us better understand the methods and practices of Buddhist cultivation. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding the world through direct experience and perception, which aligns with the meditation and insight practices in Buddhism.

### 3.2 Phenomenology's interpretation of Buddhist practice

Phenomenology and Buddhist practice methods are closely linked. Phenomenological methods, through the direct observation and depiction of phenomena and experiences, share many similarities with Buddhist practices in terms of insight and meditation. From a phenomenological perspective, we can gain a deeper understanding of the various practical methods and underlying meanings in Buddhist practice.

Phenomenology emphasizes the awareness and depiction of inner experiences. Similarly, Buddhist practices emphasize introspective cultivation, which involves observing one's own emotions, thoughts, and experiences. <sup>[9]</sup>By being aware and observing these inner experiences, practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of their mental and emotional states, gradually freeing themselves from the constraints of negative emotions and achieving inner peace and freedom. This method of inner awareness is considered crucial in both phenomenology and Buddhism.

Phenomenological methods emphasize the direct observation and experience of experiences. Buddhist practices also advocate for personal practice through firsthand experience, rather than passively accepting external information. In these practices, practitioners can personally experience inner changes and directly feel the tranquility and wisdom of the mind through activities such as Zen meditation, silent illumination, or reciting the Buddha's name. This method of gaining experience through practice aligns with the experientialist spirit of phenomenology.

Phenomenology offers a unique perspective on the relationship between the subject and the object, emphasizing the interaction between individual consciousness and objective reality. <sup>[10]</sup>In Buddhist practice, practitioners gain insight into the concept of emptiness through observing various mental phenomena, recognizing the illusory, dependent, and relative nature of the self. <sup>[11]</sup>Buddhist practice emphasizes transcending the identification with the self, achieving liberation and awakening of body and mind by dissolving the boundaries of the self.

Moreover, the phenomenological approach emphasizes the direct description and analysis of phenomena. In contrast, Buddhist practice guides practitioners to transcend their attachment and craving for phenomena through the awareness of cause and effect and the law of birth and death, understanding that all phenomena are impermanent, suffering, empty, and not self. <sup>[12]</sup> Through this

practice, practitioners gradually realize the relativity and illusory nature of all phenomena, transcending their attachment to worldly realities, and achieving inner peace and wisdom.

Therefore, the phenomenological method is of great significance to the interpretation of Buddhist practice methods. Through the perspective of phenomenology, we can have a deeper understanding of the connotation and practical methods of awareness, experience, emptiness and liberation in practice methods, explore the relationship between individual consciousness and objective reality, and transcend the state of self-attachment.

#### 4. Conclusions

Through the phenomenological method, a systematic interpretation of Buddhist thought has been conducted, revealing the potential for deep dialogue between two philosophical systems at both epistemological and practical levels. The 'suspension' in phenomenology and the 'detachment from attachment' in Buddhist meditation share an intrinsic affinity: both aim to reveal the true nature of consciousness by stripping away empirical appearances (phenomenological subtraction) or dissolving conceptual attachments (meditation practice). Husserl's concept of 'returning to things themselves' and Buddhism's 'direct perception' both point to the essential intuition of transcendental consciousness. In the context of dependent origination, the phenomenological theory of intentionality offers a new interpretation of the interdependence of consciousness and its object, suggesting that consciousness is always about something (intentionality), which resonates with the principle of 'all dharmas arise from causes and conditions.' By analyzing the structure of 'noema-noesis' (the structure of entities and their representations), the encounter between the emptiness theory and phenomenological reduction provides a cognitive tool for 'dependent origination and emptiness' within the Western philosophical framework.

The "right mind" in the Eightfold Path has a new dimension from the perspective of phenomenology. Merle-Ponty's "body schema" theory reveals that the awareness in Zen meditation is a body-oriented intentional activity, and the deep concentration state of "right determination" is isomorphic with the "pre-reflexive consciousness" described by phenomenology.

This article aims to construct a dialogue framework, hoping that phenomenology can serve as a methodological tool for the conceptual refinement of Buddhist philosophy. It also seeks to expand the boundaries of phenomenology's study of consciousness through Buddhist mind-nature theory, particularly by opening new territories in the phenomenological description of the 'no-self' state. The shared focus on the 'lifeworld' and the 'worldly truth' in both theories provides a research perspective for reconstructing meaning in the context of modernity's challenges.

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