

# Utilizing Buddhist Psychology to Alleviate Stress and Depression among the Younger Generation

**D. Dilhani Indrachapa**

Assistant Lecturer, Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya

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**\*Corresponding Author:** D. Dilhani Indrachapa

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

The rapid development of technical power and globalization in the twenty first century have enabled mankind to enjoy unprecedented material comforts but at the same time have presented him with complex social and psychological problems. Young people are experiencing significant mental health issues, mainly stress and depression, in a very competitive society today. This paper investigates Buddhist psychology as a practical and scientific approach to psychology, not only as a metaphysical or religious philosophy, and how it provides rich answers to these modern psychological afflictions. Unlike modern western psychology which deals with symptom management of mental suffering, Buddhist psychology is a psychology that examines mental suffering and the ignorance (*Avijjā*) and attachment to impermanence (*Anicca*) as two main causes of mental suffering. This study shows how ancient Buddhist therapeutic approaches can help to break the negative thoughts and rumination that are contributing to these problems by exploring the cognitive tools of Mindfulness (*Sati*), and the Four Noble Truths analytical framework. These principles are observed to be applicable when combined with the current clinical practice, for example Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). The study finally finds that Buddhism psychological concepts are crucial for educating and socializing people since it is a necessity for the society in view of nurturing resilience and ensuring mental health of the youth generation.

**Keywords:** *Buddhist Psychology, Depression, Stress, Mindfulness, 4 Noble Truths, Cognitive Therapy, Youth Well-being.*

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## Introduction

The world, through technological progress and globalization, is at a paradox in the twenty first century, being increasingly connected and the standard of living has risen yet at the same time there is a global epidemic of psychological distress. Young people are today under a different form of stress: the constant speed of a very competitive lifestyle, which is particularly challenging for mental health. Chief among these are chronic stress and clinical

depression. Current psychological statistics and sociological findings indicate that the psychological disorders that are currently affecting the youth are directly linked with the extreme competitiveness of education, the rapidly changing and unpredictable nature of the global job market and the significant psychological effects of social media (Samarasinghe, 2018). Young people often compare what they see in their real lives to the idealized version of themselves shown on digital platforms this kind of comparison



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can create toxic behaviors and a sense that they are not living up to the expectations of their shadow personalities.

New technologies have brought the world closer than ever before, but the feeling of isolation and mental unrest in the minds of the young has also increased at an exponential rate. This crisis is mainly attributed to the neglect of the people to develop their inner man and man's soul. In response to this crisis, Buddhist psychology appears as a viable alternative, but also a better, highly analytical system. Buddhist psychology is not religiously metaphysical or devotional, but rather a philosophy that is both scientific and empirical, in that it analyzes the nature of the human cognitive continuum (Bodhi, 2011).

In contrast to modern western psychiatry and psychology, which often try to control and suppress the symptoms with drugs and behavioural modifications, Buddhist psychology focuses on the ultimate cause of the problem. It deeply investigates the working mechanism of the mind, the nature of feelings (*Vedanā*), the nature of perceptions (*Saññā*) and leads the people to understand where their mental agony originated. Buddhist philosophers believe that ignorance (*Avijjā*) is the root cause of all mental diseases, and it is an erroneous understanding of one's self and the external world. A person who tries to hold on to and see impermanent (*Anicca*) phenomena as permanent and stable, gives rise to craving (*Taṇhā*) and holding on to (*Upādāna*). The cognitive dissonance is the basis for mental stress and depression (Dhammarathana, 2020).

Buddhist psychology offers methods to overcome this paralyzing state, such as the use of 'Mindfulness' (*Sati*) which has recently become very well known in the field of modern psychotherapy. By practicing staying in the present moment and training the mind to notice thoughts that arise without judgment, the young people can experience a dramatic decrease in feelings of severe anxiety, panic and remorse (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Thus, the promotion of mental health of the younger generation using the Buddhist psychological principles goes beyond the religious matters, it is a pressing socio-scientific need.

## Materials and Methods

The methodology of this study is qualitative, textual and analytical, with the basis of the comparative study of the primary scriptures of Buddhism and the current psychological literature. The main sources for this dissertation are drawn from the *Sutta Piṭaka* of the Pali Canon, in particular the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and the *Dhammapada*. The following is a set of the "canonical" texts that are used as the source foundation for the Buddhist psychological principles that include theories on the nature of the mind (*Citta*), mindfulness (*Sati*) and the analytical problem solving matrix of the Four Noble Truths.

The technique is based on a hermeneutic approach to interpreting these ancient texts to uncover their psychological messages, and then to compare and contrast these with existing contemporary clinical psychological practices, such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). The author compares and contrasts the traditional Pali understanding of human suffering (*Dukkha*) with the modern definitions of stress and depression in clinical practice and systematically identifies appropriate therapeutic practices that can be applied to the youth today.

## Results and Discussion

To offer a contextualized analysis of the textual findings and how they can be practically applied in a psychological context, it has been decided for the authors to merge the results and the discussion in one section. This methodological approach enables a more cohesive and cohesive discussion of the application of classical Buddhist philosophical frameworks in today's context, which is particularly relevant to the current challenges in youth mental health.

## The Nature of the Mind is a mental stress in a hyper-connected era

In today's complex world, when looking at the difficult experiences that young people encounter in

their lives, it is important to consider the need to meet educational goals, to find secure jobs after graduation and to deal with social issues involving interpersonal relationships. A "hustle culture", a turbulent gig economy and the pervasive social media interaction all contribute to putting a new cognitive strain on young people. Uncontrolled and unmanageable pressure from these external socioeconomic factors inevitably leads to a number of extreme psychological disorders in many young people such as anxiety, chronic stress and clinical depression.

Buddhist Psychology states that the mind (*Citta*) is not a solid, unified mass; rather it is an extremely dynamic, fleeting and very fickle energy that keeps changing all the time according to what it encounters (*Ārammaṇa*). In higher philosophical teachings of Buddhism (*Abhidhamma*), the mind is said to be a series of cognitive occurrences (*Citta-vīthi*) which come-and-go and pass with an immeasurable speed. It is just this state of the human mind that is beautifully described in the *Citta Vagga* (The Chapter on the Mind) of the *Dhammapada*:

*"Phandanam capalam cittaṃ -  
dūrakkham dunnivārayam, Ujum karoti  
medhāvī - usukārova tejanam."*  
(*Dhammapada* Pali, 2006, Stanza 33)

The meaning of this stanza is: 'The mind is reticent, hard to keep, hard to tame, the wise takes it up, like an archer straightens a bow'.

This is a deep psychological insight which reveals that the untrained mind (*Puthujjana*) is naturally chaotic, weak and easily susceptible to stimulus from the environment. Young people have no philosophical training to understand the transient, impermanent nature of their thoughts and ideas or the object of their activities, the external world, and therefore they have very strong and rigid expectations of everything that exists in the world. They are trained to look for permanent happiness in temporary things, with a perfect career, an idealized relationship, or a perfect digital image.

As a result, they suffer severe psychological shock and trauma when things fail, are rejected or their expectations are dashed. This dissonance of thought

between what is expected to be permanent and what is not is what is the root cause of clinical depression and acute stress (Bodhi, 2011). Moreover, this is what gives rise to *Vipallāsa* (cognitive distortions), the youth starts to think that the unsatisfactory is satisfactory, and the non-self is self. Without the ability to manage thoughts, any slight nuisance in the external world – a criticism on the social network, a small failure in school – can lead to a complete psychological breakdown.

This Buddhist paradigm shift focuses on a radical shift of the point of control away from the outside world which is deemed inherently uncontrollable and towards the inside world, the cognitive landscape which is to be straightened, mastered and regulated. Mindfulness (*Sati*) and focused effort (*Viriya*) are understood by the youth to be like the fletcher's heat and tension, used to straighten a crooked arrow, to straighten their cognitive distortions.

### The Buddhist Psychological Approach to Therapy: Mindfulness as a Cognitive Anchor

The most useful and effective weapon given by Buddhist psychology to overcome depression and stress is the development of 'Mindfulness' (*Sati*). *Sati* is not just to attend, it is a very active, clear awareness of the present moment, as well as the capacity to remember one's ethical and cognitive supports. The *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* states that practicing strict neutrality and equanimity (*Upekkhā*) towards the physical and mental mechanisms gives a person the power to break the vicious cycle of rumination.

Rumination is a characteristic symptom of depression, obsessing about past negative experiences and worrying about an uncertain future. In Buddhist parlance, this out-of-control proliferation of thoughts is referred to as *Papañca* or conceptual proliferation. The youthful mind is led by the way of 'what-ifs' and worst case scenarios by *Papañca*.

Buddhism teaches that the way to escape this mental suffering is the ultimate and the final way: the way of mindfulness. The Buddha declared:

*Ekāyano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā, Sokaparidevānaṃ samatikkamāya, dukkdadomanassaḥ atthaṅgamāya, (Dīgha Nikāya 2, 2004, p. 504)*

*(Monks, it is the direct way for the purification of beings, the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, the disappearance of pain and grief...)*

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* presents the following four sets of foundations that are all highly relevant for current therapeutic psychology:

- **Kāyānupassanā** (Contemplation of the Body): The highly anxious mind can be held in the present moment through the sensations of the body, like the breath. This immediately eliminates the future-oriented worries!
- **Vedanānupassanā** (Contemplation of Feelings): Observing pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings as arising and passing sensations in the body (e.g. “Anxiety is arising,” as opposed to “I am an anxious person”).
- **Cittānupassanā** (Contemplation of the Mind): Without harsh condemnation, noticing the state of mind (its contracted, distracted or depressed nature).
- **Dhammānupassanā** (Contemplation of Mental Phenomena): Discerning the contents of the mind, recognizing the hindrances (*Nīvaraṇa*) and diligently practicing the antidotes.

Remarkably, both evidence-based therapeutic programs developed to relieve mental stress, including Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), were directly inspired by these same Buddhist sources (Dhammarathana, 2020). The youth are actively taught the ability to be mindful, giving them the much needed "cognitive space" to observe their emotions intelligently, rather than being enslaved by them.

They are taught to observe the coming and going of feelings (*Samudaya*) and thoughts (*Vaya*) as

impermanent biochemical and mental phenomena, not as fixed, enduring facts about their identities. Such cognitive distancing (decentering) is very effective at breaking the links of negative thinking and cognitive distortions that make up the architecture of depressive episodes (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The mindful youth does not get pinned against the wall of depression and instead stands on the shore of equanimity and simply watches the waves as they roll over and recede.

### The Four Noble Truths that serve as the ultimate clinical diagnostic model

The Buddhist scientific approach to any psychological dilemma is based on the art of problem solving mastered and included in the Four Noble Truths (*Cattāri Ariya Saccāni*). This ancient model is a perfect clinical diagnostic and therapeutic model taking parallels to the most advanced psychiatric methodology of the modern times:

The first step in healing is to recognise the pathology - *Dukkha Sacca* - The Truth of Suffering. The first step for young people is to recognise and accept the nature and reality of their mental distress/depression. Toxic positivity is the idea of trying to hide symptoms and vulnerabilities in modern society, and the idea that young people have to appear happy at all times. This suppression just makes the disease worse. *Dukkha Sacca* requires complete honesty. It invites young people to recognize that the experience of suffering, stress, and dissatisfaction (*Dukkha*) is part and parcel of an untrained human being. Don't think that accepting something is losing; in fact, it is the first and essential step in cognitive behavioral therapy. The psychological resistance is destroyed by accepting the pain and not running from it.

Secondly, stress or depression should be analyzed for its true root cause (2nd step *Samudaya Sacca* The Truth of the Cause - Etiology). In Buddhism this is known as *Taṇhā* (craving or thirst) and *Avijjā* (ignorance). This etiology has a very specific socio-economic form among the modern youth generation. Often it is related to social media comparison, the sense of inadequacy derived from it, the elevation of

self-esteem (*Māna*) in search of self-worth through 'likes' and other digital metrics, or the catastrophic fall of unrealistic academic and romantic ideals (Samarasinghe, 2018). The young ones desire (*Bhava-taṇhā*) to have an ideal, permanent identity which cannot be achieved, and to destroy (*Vibhava-taṇhā*) any "displeasing afflictions or imperfections". Separating these particular cravings as the source of the problem, the young will be able to start to untether the sense of self from the outside.

Once the root causes have been understood, one must develop a healthy scientific mindset and positive attitude towards the healing of the mind and liberation from this particular distress. *Nirodha Sacca* is related to the psychological ability to overcome suffering, and the final state of mental health (*Nibbāna*). It instills profound hope. It teaches the youth that depression and stress are conditioned phenomena (due to specific causes) and thus they may be unconditioned (cured) by removing their causes. The mind is not permanently damaged; it is only hurt, and by training your mind and giving it your attention, it is possible to end the psychological suffering.

Lastly, the systematic, practical road to mental health is followed by *Magga Sacca* (The Noble Eightfold Path - *Ariya Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*). This is the treatment program. It is divided into three key areas of mental growth:

- ***Sīla*** (Ethical Conduct): Setting boundaries through digital detoxes and right speech online and ethical living will automatically lower external conflict and internal guilt that can cause depression.
- The 5th *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 2006 *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* details the elements of *samādhi* (Mental Discipline): Right Effort (*Sammā Vāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*Sammā Sati*), and Right Concentration (*Sammā Samādhi*). This includes daily meditations that strengthen the youth's divided focus and calm a hyperactive nervous system.

- ***Paññā*** (Wisdom): Cultivating 'Right View' (*Sammā Diṭṭhi*) and 'Right Intention' (*Sammā Saṅkappa*) to help the youth overcome their cognitive biases and to see the world in terms of impermanence and non-attachment.

In this structural approach, the younger generation is given the mental and intellectual strength to consider the problems in a logical and scientific way. Through this whole-psychological framework, Buddhist psychology, youth not only become more capable of managing their emotions and controlling their surroundings, but also start to take charge of their mental wellness themselves and eliminate the emotional overwhelm that is common in modern crises.

## Conclusion

In totality, Buddhist psychology can be identified as a comprehensive life philosophy that provides highly successful, pragmatic solutions to the complex psychological dilemmas, such as stress and depression, faced by the modern youth. Buddhist teachings provide the essential foundation not merely to conquer the external world, but to achieve accurate self-realization and develop an unshakable psychological resilience in the face of any challenging circumstance. To prevent the destabilization of the mind amidst the turbulent impulses and pressures of youth, comprehending the nature of the mind and mastering its regulation is absolutely imperative.

According to the *Sukha Vagga* (Chapter on Happiness) of the *Dhammapada*, while the world suffers from the diseases of defilements (*Kilesa*), true happiness can only be achieved by maintaining mental purity, free from these psychological ailments:

*"Susukhaṃ vata jīvāma - ātūresu anāturā, Ātūresu manussesu - viharāma anāturā."* (Dhammapada Pali, 2006, Stanza 198)

(Ah, happily do we live without disease among the ailing; among humans who are ailing, we live

without disease.)

In this sense, the word 'Anatura' (without disease/health) is used more for psychological health than physical health. The systematic development of noble qualities, like mindfulness, loving-kindness (*Mettā*) and equanimity (*Upekkhā*) can safeguard the youth from serious psychiatric illnesses like depression and anti-social coping strategies like substance abuse, behavioral addictions etc. Adolescents who practice mindfulness can learn to respond to their emotions with intelligence, and those who practice loving-kindness can learn to deal with relational issues less intensely and more empathetically.

In the end, Buddhist psychology is not a storehouse of knowledge from a distant past; it is a science of the mind that is very relevant to the present age and can be a key factor in achieving mental health in modern society. Thus, there is an urgent and urgent need to mainstream the Buddhist counselling approaches and psychological frameworks in the formal educational system and public social service programs to heal a generation suffering from depression and stress. We can make this generation of youth resilient, creative, and fearless and give them the ability to regulate their thinking.

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