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Preface

The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS), Vol. 5, No. 2, July–December 2025, is committed to enhancing the quality of English-language academic articles in accordance with TCI criteria and international journal standards. The journal emphasizes originality, appropriate academic language, verifiable references, and publication ethics. Every manuscript is screened for plagiarism and evaluated by three qualified peer reviewers.

The editorial board invites academics, researchers, lecturers, and students to submit English-language research or academic articles in religious studies, the humanities, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies for dissemination to national and international audiences. No fees are charged for submission, peer review, or publication.

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From Receiving Influences to Creating Identity : The Synthesis of Dvāravatī, Śrīvijayan, Lopburi, and Sri Lankan Traditions in Sukhothai Buddhist Art

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Abstract

Sukhothai Buddhist art has frequently been celebrated as the first distinctively “Thai” artistic tradition and as evidence of a cultural golden age. Such an interpretation, however, may obscure the complex processes through which Sukhothai artists and patrons selected, adapted, and recombined earlier forms. This article examines the formation of Sukhothai Buddhist art through its interaction with four major cultural traditions: the Mon-Buddhist culture conventionally designated Dvāravatī, the maritime artistic networks classified as Śrīvijayan, the Khmer-related architectural and sculptural heritage called Lopburi, and the Theravāda Buddhist traditions associated with Sri Lanka. Dvāravatī supplied established modes of Buddha representation, monastic space, and Pāli Buddhist symbolism. Śrīvijayan networks transmitted Mahāyāna imagery and peninsular architectural forms. Lopburi contributed Khmer construction techniques, sanctuary plans, monumental forms, and iconographic conventions. Sri Lanka provided prestigious models of relic worship, stupa architecture, monastic lineage, and religious legitimacy. Sukhothai art did not merely copy these traditions. Through such innovations as the lotus-bud stupa, the walking Buddha, and the integration of Khmer monuments into Theravāda ritual landscapes, it transformed inherited elements into a new visual language. The article argues that Sukhothai artistic identity was relational rather than culturally pure: its originality emerged precisely through its capacity to synthesize diverse traditions.

Keywords: Sukhothai art, Dvāravatī, Lopburi art, Sri Lanka, Buddha images

Introduction

Sukhothai occupies a privileged position in the conventional history of Thai art. Its Buddha images are praised for spiritual serenity, harmonious proportions, and graceful movement. Its lotus-bud stupas are considered distinctive symbols of Thai architectural creativity. In modern national narratives, the period has often been represented as the moment when a uniquely Thai artistic identity emerged after centuries of Mon, Khmer, and Indian influence.

This interpretation contains a genuine art-historical insight: sculptures and monuments produced in the Sukhothai cultural sphere developed recognizable characteristics. Nevertheless, the language of a purely Thai artistic awakening can create an artificial contrast between foreign influence and indigenous originality. It may imply that Dvāravatī, Śrīvijayan, Khmer, and Sri Lankan traditions were merely preliminary stages that disappeared once Sukhothai artists discovered their national identity.

The archaeological record suggests a different process. Sukhothai was a cultural crossroads whose communities inherited artistic practices from the Chao Phraya basin, the Khorat Plateau, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. The city had a significant Khmer-associated history before it became the center of a Thai-speaking polity. Mon Buddhist traditions continued to influence religious institutions and artistic forms. Maritime and overland networks brought objects and ideas from southern Thailand and across the Bay of Bengal. During the fourteenth century, connections with Sri Lanka became particularly important for monastic authority, relic worship, and architecture.

These traditions did not operate as sealed cultural packages. The terms *Dvāravatī*, *Śrīvijaya*, *Lopburi*, and *Sukhothai* are themselves modern archaeological and art-historical classifications. “*Dvāravatī* art” encompasses considerable regional and chronological diversity. “*Śrīvijaya* art” often describes objects distributed across a maritime network rather than products of a territorially unified state. “*Lopburi* art” is a Thai art-historical term commonly applied to Khmer-related objects and monuments. “*Sri Lankan influence*” may refer to direct contact, an ordination lineage, or forms transmitted through Southeast Asian intermediaries.

The formation of Sukhothai art should therefore be understood as cultural translation. Artists and patrons did not simply receive finished models. They selected elements, altered their proportions and meanings, combined them with existing practices, and situated them within new political and religious environments.

From the “Influence” Model to Cultural Synthesis

1. The problem of one-directional influence

Traditional art history frequently explains stylistic change through influence: an older or supposedly more advanced center transmits a form to a younger peripheral culture. Under this model, Indian art influenced *Dvāravatī*; *Dvāravatī*, *Śrīvijaya*, and Khmer art influenced Sukhothai; and Sukhothai subsequently transmitted its mature Thai forms to later kingdoms.

The model helps identify similarities and possible routes of transmission, but it has several limitations. First, similarity does not prove direct borrowing. Two regions may share a source, communicate through an intermediary, or independently adapt a common religious text.

Second, the influence model gives excessive agency to the transmitter. It describes what Sri Lanka or Khmer civilization gave Sukhothai but says less about why Sukhothai patrons selected particular forms or how local craftspeople transformed them.

Third, stylistic labels can be mistaken for ethnic identities. A Khmer-style sanctuary does not prove that every builder or worshipper was ethnically Khmer. A Sri Lankan-style stupa does not necessarily mean that Sinhalese artisans constructed it. Styles could travel through sketches, portable objects, monks, merchants, itinerant craftspeople, and regional workshops.

A synthesis model asks different questions: 1) Which elements were selected from an earlier tradition? 2) Through which networks did they travel? 3) How were they technically and visually transformed? 4) What new religious or political meanings did they acquire? 5) Why did some imported forms endure while others disappeared?

2. The modern construction of Thai art history

The familiar division of Thai art into *Dvāravatī*, *Śrīvijaya*, *Lopburi*, *Sukhothai*, *Lan Na*, *Ayutthaya*, and *Rattanakosin* periods was systematized during the development of modern museums and national historiography. Peleggi (2013) demonstrates that the classification of antiquities was connected with the formation of cultural nationalism and with intellectual assumptions linking art, territory, race, and nation.

This does not make stylistic classification useless. It remains necessary for organizing material and discussing broad patterns. The problem arises when modern categories are projected backward as if they represented self-contained ancient national schools.

Sukhothai identity was itself constructed retrospectively. Modern historiography elevated the kingdom as the beginning of Thai national civilization and interpreted its art as an expression of essential Thai characteristics. Krairiksh (1993) shows that the chronology and interpretation of Sukhothai monuments have changed significantly and that some conventional attributions depend upon contested readings of inscriptions and styles.

A critical approach therefore recognizes the aesthetic distinctiveness of Sukhothai art without treating it as the spontaneous expression of an unchanging national spirit.

The Dvāravatī Heritage

1. Dvāravatī as a Buddhist cultural network

Dvāravatī conventionally refers to Mon-associated Buddhist cities and cultural networks that flourished in central and northeastern Thailand, particularly from approximately the sixth to eleventh centuries. Important material remains include stone Buddha images, wheels of the Dhamma, stupas, *sīmā* stones, votive tablets, inscriptions, and narrative reliefs.

The political organization of Dvāravatī remains debated. It may not have been a single centralized kingdom. Its artistic culture nevertheless established lasting Buddhist practices in regions that later interacted with Sukhothai.

Dvāravatī communities transmitted more than sculptural forms. They contributed to the development of sacred urban centers, relic monuments, monastic boundaries, Pāli formulas, and public Buddhist symbolism. Brown (1996) argues that Dvāravatī wheels of the Dhamma should not be regarded merely as Indian copies. They demonstrate local reinterpretation of Buddhist symbols within Southeast Asian ritual and political environments.

This earlier example of cultural adaptation is relevant to Sukhothai. Sukhothai artists inherited not an untouched Indian model but a long history of localized Buddhist forms.

2. Buddha imagery and bodily representation

Dvāravatī Buddha images often possess broad faces, continuous eyebrows, prominent eyes, relatively full lips, and robust bodies. Standing images may raise both hands in related gestures, a configuration that became particularly characteristic of Mon-Dvāravatī art.

Sukhothai Buddha images differ considerably in proportion and surface treatment. Their faces are generally more oval, bodies more attenuated, and contours more fluid. Nevertheless, the long-standing production of monumental standing images in the central Thai and Mon cultural spheres created an important precedent.

The Dvāravatī heritage should therefore not be sought only through exact formal resemblance. It also lay in the established assumption that the Buddha's body could organize public religious space. Monumental Buddha images at Sukhothai and related cities continued this tradition while transforming its aesthetic language.

Images of the Buddha protected by the *nāga* Mucalinda also demonstrate the movement of forms among Dvāravatī, Sri Lankan, and Khmer traditions. Gaston-Aubert (2010) shows that free-standing *nāga*-protected Buddha images circulated across these regions. Their distribution cannot be explained through one direct line of influence. It reflects a shared and evolving Buddhist iconographic field.

3. Monastic boundaries and sacred landscapes

Dvāravatī-related *sīmā* stones from northeastern Thailand and central Laos marked areas in which formal monastic acts could be performed. Their significance extended beyond architecture. They transformed ordinary ground into legally recognized monastic space.

Sukhothai's later Theravāda institutions inherited the importance of valid ritual boundaries, relic centers, and monasteries integrated into urban and natural landscapes. The continuity was institutional as well as visual.

Mon traditions may also have mediated relations among central Thailand, Hariphunchai, Lower Myanmar, and Sukhothai. Sukhothai's access to earlier Theravāda practices did not depend upon direct contact with Sri Lanka alone. The Mon Buddhist world was an important part of the regional environment from which Sukhothai religious culture developed.

Śrīvijayan and Peninsular Contributions

1. The problem of "Śrīvijaya art"

Śrīvijaya was a maritime political and commercial formation centered in Sumatra from approximately the seventh century. It participated in networks extending through the Strait of Malacca, the Malay Peninsula, Java, the South China Sea, and the Bay of Bengal.

The category "Śrīvijaya art" has often been applied to Mahāyāna Buddhist images and architectural remains from southern Thailand. Yet stylistic similarity does not prove that all such works were produced by a centralized Śrīvijayan administration. Southern Thailand contained multiple port settlements and political communities connected by commerce, pilgrimage, diplomacy, and artistic exchange.

The term is therefore most useful when it identifies a maritime field of cultural interaction rather than a uniform imperial style. Miksic and Goh (2017) emphasize that ancient Southeast Asian societies actively participated in networks of cultural fusion. They did not passively receive finished religious civilizations from India or from major regional courts.

2. Mahāyāna imagery and artistic mobility

Southern Thailand has produced images of Avalokiteśvara, Buddha images, votive tablets, and other objects associated with Mahāyāna and esoteric Buddhist traditions. These works demonstrate connections with Sumatra, Java, the Malay Peninsula, northeastern India, and other Buddhist centers.

The direct effect of Mahāyāna Śrīvijayan iconography upon Sukhothai is more difficult to demonstrate than the Khmer or Sri Lankan contributions. Sukhothai court culture was strongly associated with Theravāda Buddhism, and its best-known sculptures focus upon the historical Buddha rather than elaborate bodhisattva pantheons.

Nevertheless, southern artistic networks contributed in at least three ways.

First, they connected Sukhothai's wider region with maritime routes through which bronze-casting technologies, portable images, relics, texts, and ritual objects circulated.

Second, peninsular centers such as Nakhon Si Thammarat functioned as intermediaries between Sri Lanka and the northern mainland. A form described as "Sri Lankan" in Sukhothai might have arrived through a southern Southeast Asian community already shaped by Śrīvijayan and local traditions.

Third, certain multi-level monuments, stupa arrangements, and images reflect broader regional vocabularies rather than a single source. What older scholarship classified as Śrīvijayan influence may sometimes represent the continuation of shared Southeast Asian artistic practices.

3. Transmission through Nakhon Si Thammarat

The Ram Khamhaeng Inscription describes a learned senior monk associated with Nakhon Si Thammarat. Although the inscription's interpretation and dating have generated debate, its narrative reveals the religious prestige of the south in Sukhothai historical memory (Griswold & Prasert na Nagara, 1971).

Nakhon Si Thammarat was linked to both maritime Buddhist culture and Sri Lankan Theravāda networks. It illustrates why artistic traditions cannot be assigned to single geographical sources. Southern Thailand was simultaneously local, peninsular, maritime, Indian Ocean-oriented, and connected with Sri Lanka.

The movement from southern centers to Sukhothai therefore carried layered traditions. Sukhothai received not “pure Sri Lankan art” separated from Southeast Asian history, but forms already translated within the peninsula.

Lopburi and the Khmer Architectural Inheritance

1. Sukhothai before the Sukhothai kingdom

Before becoming the center of a Thai-speaking polity, Sukhothai was connected with the Khmer cultural and political world. Monuments such as Wat Phra Phai Luang and Wat Si Sawai demonstrate Khmer-related architectural traditions. Laterite construction, tower sanctuaries, architectural decoration, and urban planning reveal the depth of this inheritance.

“Lopburi art” is the conventional Thai designation for Khmer-influenced art produced or found in central, eastern, and northeastern Thailand. It is not synonymous with the modern province of Lopburi, nor does it represent a single ethnic community.

The rise of Sukhothai did not erase the Khmer-built environment. Existing monuments were reused, modified, or incorporated into new ritual systems. The resulting landscape contained physical memories of changing political and religious affiliations.

2. The *prāṅ* and the transformation of the sanctuary

The Khmer tower sanctuary or *prāsāda*, represented in Thai development by the *prāṅ*, was originally associated with a sacred central chamber. In Brahmanical temples it could house a *liṅga* or deity image; in Mahāyāna contexts it could house Buddhist images and ritual deposits.

Sukhothai artists retained and transformed this vertical architectural form. The *prāṅ* could be incorporated into a Theravāda monastery, associated with relics, or surrounded by image halls and other Buddhist structures. The form’s religious meaning was not permanently fixed by its origin.

Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat at Si Satchanalai illustrates the complex development of Khmer-derived architecture within a later Thai Buddhist setting. Restoration and rebuilding make its chronology difficult to reconstruct, but the monument demonstrates continuity through transformation.

This process was an act of appropriation rather than simple inheritance. By converting an earlier sanctuary into a Theravāda sacred center, new patrons claimed both the site’s accumulated sacredness and the authority to reinterpret it.

3. Materials, construction, and monumentality

Khmer architecture contributed technical knowledge concerning laterite, brick, stucco, corbelled structures, axial planning, and monumental enclosure. Sukhothai builders did not abandon these techniques when political authority changed.

The legacy of Khmer monumentality was especially important. Large sanctuaries shaped movement and established hierarchical relations among central and peripheral spaces. Sukhothai monasteries similarly organized movement around principal stupas and images, but they adapted these spatial principles to Theravāda practices such as circumambulation, relic worship, preaching, and monastic ordination.

The transition was therefore not simply from Khmer architecture to Thai architecture. It was a shift in patronage, ritual use, visual emphasis, and political meaning within a partially continuous material environment.

4. Sculptural transformation

Khmer - related sculpture favored strong frontal presence, compact bodily mass, elaborate crowns in royal or bodhisattva images, and clearly articulated garments and jewelry. Sukhothai Buddha images moved toward increasingly simplified surfaces, elongated proportions, and rhythmic contours.

Yet Sukhothai's aesthetic cannot be understood without this contrast. Its artists worked in a world where monumental Khmer images and architectural sculpture remained visible. The decision to minimize ornament and emphasize the smooth, unadorned body of the Buddha was itself meaningful. It distinguished the awakened body from the jeweled bodies of kings, gods, and bodhisattvas.

Sukhothai art thus transformed the visual language of power. Instead of representing sacred authority primarily through mass, regalia, and frontal immobility, it increasingly expressed authority through balance, serenity, and controlled movement.

Sri Lankan Theravāda and the Authority of Laṅkā

1. More than an artistic style

Sri Lankan influence differed from Dvāravatī, Śrīvijayan, and Lopburi traditions because it was associated not only with form but with monastic legitimacy. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Sri Lanka was widely regarded as an authoritative center of Theravāda ordination, scriptural learning, and relic culture.

Sukhothai monks traveled to Sri Lanka or belonged to lineages claiming descent from its Saṅgha. Eminent monks associated with Laṅkā received royal patronage. Relics, texts, titles, and ritual knowledge traveled through the same networks.

Sri Lankan forms consequently possessed institutional authority. A bell-shaped stupa did not merely imitate an attractive foreign building. It could visually announce that a monastery or patron was connected with the prestigious Laṅkā lineage.

2. Relics and Wat Mahathat

Relic worship was central to Sukhothai sacred geography. Wat Mahathat, the “Monastery of the Great Relic,” occupied a principal position near the political center of Sukhothai. Its central monument, surrounding stupas, image halls, and monumental Buddha images created an integrated royal and religious complex.

Sukhothai Inscription II, associated with Śrī Sraddhā, records relic-related activity and a journey connected with Sri Lanka. Although scholars disagree about the precise identification of several places and monuments in the text, it demonstrates the prestige that the acquisition and restoration of relics could confer (Gosling, 1981).

Sri Lankan association enhanced the genealogy of sacred objects. A relic believed to come from Laṅkā connected Sukhothai with a transregional history of Buddhist transmission. The king or monk who acquired it became an agent in the preservation of the Buddha's dispensation.

3. Bell-shaped stupas and elephant bases

The round or bell-shaped stupa became an important expression of Sri Lankan architectural connections. Sukhothai examples commonly include a square base, bell-like dome, harmikā-like upper element, diminishing rings, and finial. Yet no Sukhothai monument should be assumed to reproduce a Sri Lankan model exactly.

Elephant-supported monuments such as Wat Chang Lom at Si Satchanalai recall Sri Lankan stupas whose bases were associated with elephants. The elephant could signify strength, royal power, cosmic support, and Buddhist sovereignty. In Sukhothai, the form was reworked through local construction methods and decorative preferences.

The result was neither entirely Sri Lankan nor entirely independent. Its authority depended upon recognizable connection, while its effectiveness in Sukhothai depended upon adaptation.

4. Bodhi trees, monasteries, and sacred geography

Sri Lankan Buddhist culture also transmitted models of Bodhi-tree worship, relic enshrinement, monastic organization, and sacred topography. Planting a Bodhi tree could reproduce the place of enlightenment and connect a local monastery with Bodhgayā through Sri Lanka.

Forest monasteries outside the city gained prestige from ideals of renunciation and disciplined practice. The relationship between urban royal centers and forest monks was particularly significant: rulers provided material support to monks whose ascetic reputation enabled them to appear independent of worldly authority.

Sri Lankan influence thus helped reorganize Sukhothai space. It affected not only the shapes of stupas but the distribution and hierarchy of monasteries, relic centers, Bodhi trees, and ritual communities.

The Lotus-Bud Stupa as Architectural Synthesis

The lotus-bud stupa is conventionally regarded as the most distinctive architectural emblem of Sukhothai. It usually rises from multiple bases through a tall central body to a lotus-bud-shaped finial. Important examples occur at Wat Mahathat in Sukhothai and Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo at Si Satchanalai.

Older scholarship attempted to identify a single source for the form, proposing Sri Lankan, Khmer, Burmese, Śrīvijayan, or even Chinese origins. Such explanations underestimate its composite character.

The monument incorporates several visual principles: the verticality and tower-like presence associated with Khmer sanctuaries; the relic function and symbolic structure of the Buddhist stupa; base and terrace forms with precedents in Mon, Burmese, and peninsular architecture; the lotus as an established Buddhist symbol of purity and awakening; local preferences for slender proportions and upward rhythmic movement.

The lotus-bud stupa is therefore an exemplary synthesis. Its originality does not depend upon the absence of precedents. It lies in the transformation of several precedents into a coherent form recognizable as Sukhothai.

The same principle applies to the surrounding complex at Wat Mahathat. Subsidiary monuments display different formal affiliations, including Khmer-like and Mon-related features. Rather than representing stylistic inconsistency, the complex materializes a Buddhist polity's claim to inherit and coordinate several sacred traditions.

The Sukhothai Buddha and the Creation of a New Sacred Body

1. Sources and transformation

Sukhothai Buddha images share elements with earlier and neighboring traditions: the smooth robes and spiritualized bodies of Indian and Sri Lankan models, the monumentality of Dvāravatī and Khmer images, and features associated with Pāla, Pagan, and Lan Na art.

Wisetchat (2013) identifies Dvāravatī, Lopburi, Pāla, Sri Lankan, Pagan, and Lan Na traditions among the possible sources contributing to the development of the Sukhothai Buddha. Yet the final form cannot be reduced to the sum of borrowed features.

The characteristic Sukhothai Buddha generally possesses an oval face, arched brows, downcast eyes, elongated fingers, broad shoulders, narrow waist, and flame-like *uṣṇīṣa*. The robe is often indicated by a limited number of lines rather than rendered as a heavy garment. The body appears both sensuous and immaterial.

These features translate scriptural concepts of the Buddha's extraordinary body into a local aesthetic. The image is human enough to be visible but removed from ordinary anatomy through idealization.

2. The flame-like *uṣṇīṣa*

The flame rising from the head became a distinctive feature of Sukhothai images. It may be interpreted as an extension of the cranial protuberance, a sign of spiritual radiance, or the visible energy of enlightenment.

Whatever its precise textual derivation, the flame intensifies the vertical movement of the image. In seated figures, it draws the eye upward from the stable base. In standing and walking images, it completes the rhythmic curve of the body.

This formal solution illustrates Sukhothai synthesis. Earlier Buddhist traditions supplied the *uṣṇīṣa* and halo, but Sukhothai artists transformed them into an elongated flame that became central to the new style's identity.

3. The walking Buddha

The walking Buddha is perhaps the clearest example of Sukhothai artistic invention through adaptation. Representations of movement were not entirely unknown in earlier Buddhist art, but Sukhothai artists developed the independent walking image into a major sculptural type.

One heel is raised, the other foot advances, one hand offers reassurance, and the opposite arm follows the movement of the body. The torso bends gently, but the face remains composed. Movement and stillness coexist.

The image embodies several meanings: the Buddha traveling to teach; the descent from the *Trāyastriṃśa* heaven; meditative walking; compassionate entry into the human world; the active movement of the Dhamma.

The form departs from the heavy frontality of many Khmer images and the static monumentality of earlier standing Buddhas. Yet it depends upon the technical and iconographic knowledge inherited from those traditions. The innovation lies in making the enlightened body both transcendent and active.

4. Bronze casting and workshop culture

Sukhothai became an important center of bronze production. Technical skill allowed artists to create smooth surfaces, delicate limbs, and balanced standing or walking figures. The development of a style therefore depended not only upon religious ideas but upon workshops, materials, patronage, and the movement of craftspeople.

Artists were not passive executors of royal or monastic instructions. Their practical knowledge determined how an iconographic concept could be cast, supported, polished, and visually balanced. Cultural synthesis occurred inside workshops as much as in courts and monasteries.

Wat Si Chum as a Composite Sacred Environment

Wat Si Chum demonstrates how architecture, sculpture, narrative, and ritual movement were integrated. Its monumental seated Buddha, Phra Achana, occupies a massive *maṇḍapa*. The narrow visual frame intensifies the image's scale and presence.

Within the double walls, a passage contained engraved *Jātaka* slabs. These images narrated the Buddha's previous lives and the accumulation of perfections required for Buddhahood. Their arrangement connected bodily movement through architecture with progress through the bodhisattva's moral history.

Woodward (2009) argues that Wat Si Chum must be understood through its iconographic and architectural relationships rather than as an isolated giant image. The monument combines several traditions: the enclosed, tower-like mass recalls Khmer architectural principles; the monumental Buddha belongs to a long regional history of sacred

images; the Jātakas communicate Theravāda textual culture; the spatial experience reflects local ritual and artistic planning; possible Sri Lankan parallels participate in the wider Laṅkā-oriented environment.

Wat Si Chum is therefore not evidence that one foreign style replaced another. It is a designed synthesis in which inherited forms perform new functions together.

Artistic Synthesis and Buddhist Kingship

Sukhothai art was produced within relationships among rulers, monks, artisans, local elites, and lay communities. Its synthesis was not merely aesthetic. It participated in the construction of political and religious legitimacy.

By patronizing Laṅkā-associated monks and stupas, rulers presented themselves as protectors of authoritative Theravāda Buddhism. By reusing Khmer monuments, they appropriated the sacred geography of earlier political power. By preserving Mon and Dvāravatī Buddhist conventions, they connected the new polity with the region's established Buddhist past. By receiving forms and personnel through southern networks, they positioned Sukhothai within a broader commercial and religious world.

Art made these claims visible. A monument could say, without using words, that Sukhothai possessed: relics linked to the transregional Buddhist world; monks belonging to respected lineages; authority over ancient sacred sites; artisans capable of mastering several architectural traditions; sufficient resources to construct images and monasteries; a new aesthetic suited to the polity's religious ideals.

The ruler did not become legitimate simply because an object was beautiful. Legitimacy arose from the relationships materialized through that object—between king and Saṅgha, capital and subordinate towns, local community and distant sacred centers, and present rule and inherited Buddhist history.

Cultural Identity without Cultural Purity

Sukhothai art became distinctive, but distinctiveness should not be confused with purity. Its identity was relational. The lotus-bud stupa was recognizable because it transformed tower and stupa traditions. The walking Buddha was innovative because it reworked an inherited iconography of the Buddha's body. Sri Lankan forms gained new meanings when combined with Khmer-built landscapes and Mon Buddhist institutions.

The quest for cultural purity is largely a modern concern. Premodern patrons were often interested in sacred effectiveness, prestigious genealogy, merit, and political authority rather than in proving that an artistic form was ethnically unmixed.

Indeed, the ability to gather multiple traditions could itself signify power. A ruler who acquired relics from Sri Lanka, patronized monks from the south, controlled former Khmer sanctuaries, and commissioned a locally distinctive Buddha image demonstrated that his court could become a center where several sacred geographies converged.

The most accurate description of Sukhothai art is therefore neither “foreign imitation” nor “pure Thai genius.” It is creative localization: the process by which transregional forms became meaningful within a particular environment.

Conclusion

Sukhothai Buddhist art emerged through sustained interaction with Dvāravatī, Śrīvijayan, Lopburi, and Sri Lankan traditions. Each contributed different but overlapping resources.

Dvāravatī supplied an established mainland Buddhist culture of images, relic monuments, Pāli symbolism, and monastic space. Śrīvijayan and peninsular networks connected the region with maritime Mahāyāna art, bronze production, southern religious

centers, and routes to Sri Lanka. Lopburi and the Khmer world contributed architectural technologies, tower sanctuaries, monumental planning, and a material landscape that Sukhothai patrons inherited and transformed. Sri Lanka provided prestigious models of relic worship, stupa architecture, monastic discipline, and transregional Theravāda legitimacy.

Sukhothai did not merely accumulate these elements. It reorganized them. Khmer sanctuaries became parts of Theravāda landscapes. Sri Lankan stupa concepts acquired local proportions and decoration. Earlier Buddha types were transformed into attenuated figures expressing serenity and controlled energy. The lotus-bud stupa and walking Buddha emerged as recognizable innovations precisely because artists worked creatively with inherited conventions.

Sukhothai artistic identity was consequently a product of synthesis. Its originality lay not in isolation from other cultures but in the ability of its patrons, monks, and craftspeople to select among multiple traditions and produce a coherent sacred environment.

This conclusion also requires reconsideration of modern national art history. The categories Dvāravatī, Śrīvijaya, Lopburi, and Sukhothai remain useful, but they should not be mistaken for closed ethnic or national schools. They describe overlapping historical fields connected by migration, trade, pilgrimage, warfare, patronage, and artistic labor.

From receiving influences to creating identity was therefore not a movement from dependence to purity. It was a process through which cultural relationships became sources of creativity. Sukhothai art was distinctive because it stood at a crossroads—and because it transformed that crossroads into a center.

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Mindfulness between Therapy and Liberation : An Analysis of the Secularization of Buddhist Mindfulness in Contemporary Clinical Psychology

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Abstract

Mindfulness has become one of the most influential concepts transferred from Buddhist traditions into contemporary clinical psychology. Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy employ mindfulness-related practices to reduce stress, prevent depressive relapse, regulate emotion, and increase psychological flexibility. This transfer has made contemplative practices accessible to diverse clinical populations and has generated substantial empirical research. However, it has also transformed the meaning, context, purpose, and ethical orientation of Buddhist mindfulness. In early Buddhist thought, sati is not merely nonjudgmental present-moment awareness but a component of the Noble Eightfold Path operating together with Right View, Right Effort, ethical discipline, concentration, and wisdom. Its ultimate purpose is not symptom reduction but liberation from greed, hatred, delusion, and attachment. This article analyzes the secularization of Buddhist mindfulness as a process of selection, translation, psychological reinterpretation, institutional adaptation, and scientific legitimation. It argues that clinical mindfulness should neither be dismissed as an inauthentic distortion nor equated with the complete Buddhist path. Its therapeutic value can be recognized while acknowledging the elements altered or excluded during secularization. The article proposes an ethically integrated model that distinguishes therapeutic mindfulness from liberating mindfulness while encouraging dialogue between them.

Keywords: mindfulness, clinical psychology, Buddhist ethics

Introduction

Mindfulness has travelled remarkably far from its historical Buddhist settings. Once cultivated primarily within Buddhist ethical, meditative, and monastic traditions, it is now taught in hospitals, psychotherapy clinics, universities, schools, prisons, workplaces, military institutions, and smartphone applications. In clinical psychology, mindfulness has become part of structured interventions for stress, depression, anxiety, chronic pain, emotional dysregulation, addiction, and other conditions.

This transformation is commonly described as the secularization of mindfulness. Secularization does not simply mean removing religious terminology. It involves a more complex process in which practices are selected from Buddhist traditions, translated into psychological categories, modified for institutional settings, standardized into treatment protocols, and evaluated through clinical research.

Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) retain recognizable contemplative practices, including

awareness of breathing, body scanning, sitting meditation, and observation of thoughts and emotions. Nevertheless, their immediate objectives differ from those of the Buddhist path. MBSR seeks to assist participants in responding more effectively to stress, pain, and illness, while MBCT aims particularly to reduce depressive relapse by changing relationships with negative thoughts and feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Segal et al., 2013).

The clinical transformation of mindfulness has produced both benefits and controversy. Supporters emphasize increased accessibility, reduced religious barriers, therapeutic innovation, and growing empirical evidence. Critics argue that mindfulness has been detached from Buddhist ethics, wisdom, community, and liberation. In its most commercialized form, it may become a tool for helping individuals tolerate unhealthy social conditions rather than question them.

The term “McMindfulness” has been used to criticize the rapid packaging and commercialization of mindfulness as a universally beneficial technique. Purser (2019) argues that mindfulness may be appropriated by corporations and institutions to increase productivity or personal resilience while leaving structural causes of distress unexamined.

A balanced analysis should avoid two extremes. Clinical mindfulness should not be dismissed merely because it differs from traditional Buddhist practice. Adaptation can create genuine therapeutic benefits. At the same time, clinical programs should not be presented as scientifically validated versions of the complete Buddhist path. Therapeutic mindfulness and liberating mindfulness overlap, but they differ in their conceptual foundations, ethical contexts, and ultimate purposes.

The Meaning of Sati in Buddhist Thought

1. Mindfulness as Remembering and Sustained Awareness

The English word “mindfulness” is conventionally used to translate the Pāli *sati* and Sanskrit *smṛti*. These terms are associated with memory, recollection, remembering, and keeping something in mind. In Buddhist practice, mindfulness includes the capacity to remember the object and purpose of practice rather than allowing the mind to drift into distraction.

Modern descriptions commonly define mindfulness as nonjudgmental awareness of present-moment experience. This definition captures an important element of many contemplative practices, but it does not exhaust the Buddhist meaning. Mindfulness is not simply passive observation of whatever occurs. It remembers the framework through which experience is to be understood and maintains attention to ethically and spiritually relevant qualities.

Sharf (2015) cautions against identifying traditional *sati* solely with a modern ideal of bare, nonconceptual, and nonjudgmental awareness. Buddhist mindfulness operates within doctrinal and ethical structures. It assists practitioners in recognizing wholesome and unwholesome mental states, remembering teachings, and investigating the conditions that produce suffering.

2. Right Mindfulness in the Noble Eightfold Path

Mindfulness becomes “Right Mindfulness” because it is integrated with the other factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is guided by Right View, motivated by Right Intention, supported by ethical speech and action, energized by Right Effort, and developed alongside Right Concentration.

This integration is crucial. Attention by itself is ethically neutral. A hunter may attend carefully to an animal, a thief to the movements of a victim, and a manipulator to another person’s vulnerabilities. Such attention is concentrated but does not constitute Right Mindfulness.

Right Effort gives mindfulness an ethical direction. The practitioner endeavors to prevent unwholesome states, abandon those already arisen, cultivate wholesome qualities, and sustain them. Mindfulness remembers and observes these tasks.

The Buddhist path therefore does not separate awareness from moral evaluation. It does not require impulsive condemnation of experience, but it does distinguish states rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion from those rooted in nonattachment, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom.

3. The Four Establishments of Mindfulness

The four establishments of mindfulness involve contemplation of: The body; Feelings or affective tones; States of mind; and Categories of phenomena relevant to the Dhamma.

The practitioner observes arising and passing, relinquishes attachment, and recognizes the conditioned character of experience. The purpose is not merely to become more aware of the present moment. It is to understand impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, dependent origination, and non-self.

Mindfulness of feelings, for example, identifies an experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This recognition creates an opportunity to observe whether craving, aversion, or ignorance develops. The practice is therefore connected to the causal analysis of suffering.

Mindfulness within the Buddhist Path to Liberation

Buddhist mental cultivation is traditionally organized through ethical discipline (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Mindfulness participates in all three dimensions.

Ethical discipline reduces harm and creates mental conditions conducive to concentration. A person who habitually deceives, exploits, or harms others is likely to experience fear, guilt, agitation, and defensive thinking. Ethical restraint is therefore not an optional religious addition to meditation but part of the psychological conditions supporting mental clarity.

Concentration stabilizes attention and reduces distraction. Mindfulness monitors the meditation object and recognizes when hindrances arise. Nevertheless, concentration alone does not guarantee liberation. A highly concentrated mind may remain governed by attachment or wrong view.

Wisdom investigates the impermanent, conditioned, and non-self nature of phenomena. Mindfulness supplies the continuity of observation required for insight. Liberation occurs not merely when a practitioner becomes calm but when ignorance and appropriation are uprooted.

The traditional goal of mindfulness can consequently be summarized as liberation from suffering through the transformation of conduct, attention, understanding, and attachment. Stress reduction may occur, but it is neither the complete path nor its final objective.

The Emergence of Secular Mindfulness

1. Historical Transformation rather than Simple Extraction

It is tempting to narrate secular mindfulness as a direct movement from ancient Buddhist monasteries into modern clinics. The historical process is more complicated.

Modern mindfulness was shaped not only by early Buddhist texts but also by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Buddhist reform movements, colonial encounters, lay meditation movements, Asian teachers, Western practitioners, psychology, medicine, and scientific culture. The forms of mindfulness transmitted globally were already products of interpretation and modernization.

McMahan (2008) describes “Buddhist modernism” as a transformation in which Buddhist teachings were reinterpreted through modern discourses of science, individual experience, rationality, and psychology. Meditation was increasingly emphasized as a universal experiential practice, sometimes at the expense of ritual, cosmology, merit, devotional practices, and monastic institutions.

The clinical secularization of mindfulness should therefore not be imagined as taking a pure and unchanged ancient technique and stripping away its religious covering. It is one phase in a longer history of adaptation.

2. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

Jon Kabat-Zinn established MBSR in a medical context for people experiencing chronic pain, stress, and illness. The program adapted practices such as sitting meditation, body scanning, mindful movement, and awareness of everyday activities.

Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as awareness arising from paying attention intentionally, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally. This operational definition made mindfulness accessible within health care because it did not require participants to accept Buddhist metaphysics or identify as Buddhists.

MBSR did not simply present meditation as a relaxation exercise. It encouraged participants to develop a different relationship with pain, stress, thoughts, and bodily experience. Yet its explicit institutional purpose was therapeutic rather than soteriological (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

3. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

MBCT integrated mindfulness practices with cognitive approaches to depressive relapse. It trains participants to recognize negative thoughts and moods as passing mental events rather than facts requiring automatic acceptance or reaction.

A person vulnerable to depression may interpret sadness as evidence of failure, which triggers rumination and deepens the mood. MBCT develops decentering: the capacity to recognize “I am having the thought that I am a failure” instead of treating “I am a failure” as an unquestionable identity.

This bears a structural resemblance to Buddhist nonattachment and observation of mental states. However, MBCT’s primary goal is prevention of depressive relapse, not realization of non-self or nirvāṇa (Segal et al., 2013).

4. Mindfulness in ACT and DBT

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) uses mindfulness-related processes to develop psychological flexibility. Its concept of cognitive defusion helps individuals experience thoughts as verbal and mental events without being dominated by them. ACT emphasizes values and committed action rather than eliminating all distressing experiences (Hayes et al., 2012).

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) includes mindfulness skills alongside distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness. Its central goal is to help individuals build a life worth living, particularly when emotional dysregulation and self-destructive behavior are present.

These therapies demonstrate that clinical mindfulness is not one standardized practice. It functions differently according to the psychological model and population in which it is used.

What Is Changed during Secularization?

The movement from Buddhist sati to clinical mindfulness involves several transformations.

Dimension	Buddhist mindfulness	Clinical mindfulness
Primary context	Noble Eightfold Path and Buddhist community	Health care and psychotherapy
Immediate goal	Abandoning unwholesome states and cultivating wisdom	Symptom reduction and psychological flexibility
Ultimate goal	Liberation from suffering and rebirth	Improved functioning and well-being
Ethical basis	Explicitly grounded in sīla and Right View	Professional ethics and therapeutic values
Understanding of self	Investigation of non-self	Flexible or decentered sense of self
Teacher's role	Spiritual guide within a lineage or community	Clinician or trained intervention provider
Evaluation	Ethical transformation, insight, and liberation	Clinical symptoms, behavior, and quality of life
Time horizon	Potentially lifelong cultivation	Often a structured program of several weeks

These distinctions do not imply that clinical mindfulness has no ethical dimension. Health professionals work under principles such as beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, confidentiality, and justice. Therapies also promote values such as compassion and acceptance.

However, clinical ethics and Buddhist ethics are not identical. Professional ethics governs treatment relationships, whereas Buddhist ethics is part of a comprehensive analysis of intention, action, suffering, karma, and liberation.

What Is Retained?

Despite its changes, secular mindfulness retains important features of Buddhist practice.

First, it preserves the systematic training of attention. Participants repeatedly direct attention toward breathing, bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts.

Second, it retains observation of experience without immediate reaction. This helps interrupt automatic cycles of avoidance, craving, rumination, and emotional escalation.

Third, it preserves an experiential method. Participants are invited to observe mental processes directly rather than merely accept a theoretical explanation.

Fourth, many programs retain compassion, patience, non-harming, and acceptance implicitly through the teacher's conduct and instructional language.

Fifth, clinical mindfulness often challenges rigid identification with thought. Although it does not necessarily teach the doctrine of non-self, it encourages participants to see that thoughts are events rather than permanent identities.

Monteiro et al. (2015) argue that contemporary mindfulness may retain ethically significant elements even when explicitly Buddhist language is absent. The ethical quality of a program can be conveyed through the teacher, therapeutic relationship, participant safety, and orientation toward reducing harm.

What Is Removed or Reinterpreted?

1. Karma, Rebirth, and Nirvāṇa

Clinical mindfulness usually excludes karma across multiple lives, rebirth, Buddhist cosmology, and nirvāṇa. This enables religiously diverse participants to engage in treatment without being required to adopt Buddhist beliefs.

The removal is understandable in clinical settings, but it changes the practice's horizon. Traditional mindfulness is part of a path addressing the entire cycle of saṃsāra, whereas clinical mindfulness addresses specific forms of distress within a person's present life.

2. Right View

Buddhist mindfulness is guided by Right View, including understanding of intentional action, impermanence, suffering, dependent origination, and non-self. Clinical programs may employ a more limited theoretical framework based on stress physiology, cognitive processes, emotional regulation, or relapse prevention.

Without Right View, mindfulness becomes a flexible attentional method that can serve different purposes. This adaptability increases accessibility but also permits its use for goals that may conflict with Buddhist values.

3. Explicit Ethical Training

Most clinical programs do not require observance of the five precepts or teach a systematic Buddhist ethics. Ethical considerations may remain implicit in attitudes such as compassion, nonjudgment, and non-harming.

Critics fear that implicit ethics is insufficient. Mindfulness may strengthen attention without examining whether the practitioner's goals are exploitative or harmful. Monteiro et al. (2015), however, caution that secular programs can incorporate ethical intentions without becoming religious instruction.

4. The Saṅgha and Lifelong Practice

Buddhist cultivation traditionally occurs within communities involving teachers, monastics, lay practitioners, rituals, texts, and long-term relationships. Clinical mindfulness is frequently delivered through limited-duration programs and evaluated through outcomes measured shortly after treatment.

An eight-week course may produce meaningful change, but it cannot be assumed to reproduce the depth of lifelong ethical, contemplative, and communal training.

Clinical Evidence and Therapeutic Value

Secularization has made mindfulness accessible to empirical evaluation. Research indicates that mindfulness-based interventions can benefit some participants and conditions. Goyal et al. (2014) found moderate evidence that meditation programs improve anxiety, depression, and pain. The review did not support extravagant claims that meditation is superior for every health outcome.

An individual-participant meta-analysis by Kuyken et al. (2016) found that MBCT can reduce the risk of depressive relapse, particularly among individuals with greater vulnerability. MBCT should nevertheless be understood as one evidence-based option rather than a universal replacement for medication or other psychological treatments.

A meta-analysis by Goldberg et al. (2018) concluded that mindfulness-based interventions show efficacy across several psychiatric conditions, but their comparative advantage varies according to the control condition and disorder.

These findings support the clinical legitimacy of appropriately delivered mindfulness-based programs. They do not prove that mindfulness works for everyone, that all applications are equally effective, or that Buddhist liberation has been scientifically verified.

From Liberation to Adaptation

The most significant difference between Buddhist and clinical mindfulness concerns their ultimate aims.

Clinical psychology typically seeks adaptation. It assists individuals in managing symptoms, maintaining relationships, participating in work, and improving quality of life. These aims are important and ethically valuable.

Buddhist mindfulness seeks a more radical transformation. It investigates the craving, ignorance, and self-grasping through which suffering is continually reproduced. The goal is not simply to function more comfortably within saṃsāra but to become free from the conditions that sustain it.

This distinction may be represented as follows: The paths may overlap. Reduced anxiety can support meditation, while Buddhist insight may improve emotional well-being. Nevertheless, therapeutic benefit does not automatically constitute liberation, and liberation should not be reduced to a clinical measure of low symptom severity.

The “McMindfulness” Critique

The term “McMindfulness” criticizes the commodification of mindfulness into a standardized, rapidly consumed product. The critique is directed particularly at programs marketed as tools for productivity, concentration, leadership, or resilience without examining the values and institutions that produce distress.

If employees suffer because of excessive workloads, job insecurity, or unjust management, offering mindfulness alone may relocate responsibility from the institution to the individual. Workers are taught to regulate their stress while organizational causes remain unchanged.

Purser (2019) argues that mindfulness can become compatible with neoliberal individualism when social suffering is framed primarily as a failure of personal self-management. The mindful individual is expected to adjust to conditions rather than participate in transforming them.

This criticism is important but should not be applied indiscriminately. A hospital program for chronic pain, an MBCT course for recurrent depression, and a corporate performance workshop are not ethically equivalent simply because each uses the word mindfulness.

The relevant questions include: Who is providing the program? What goal does it serve? Are participants adequately informed? Does it address or conceal structural sources of suffering? Is participation voluntary? Are adverse experiences monitored?

Does the program cultivate compassion and responsibility or only performance? “McMindfulness” is most useful as a critical question rather than a label automatically applied to every secular adaptation.

Mindfulness, Social Structures, and Responsibility

Buddhist teachings often emphasize transformation of individual intention, but dependent origination also implies that suffering arises through interconnected conditions. Social institutions, economic inequality, discrimination, violence, and environmental destruction shape mental health.

Clinical mindfulness may help individuals respond to difficult conditions, but it cannot replace social reform. Meditation cannot by itself provide safe housing, eliminate workplace exploitation, or correct discriminatory policies.

At the same time, the opposition between individual practice and structural change should not be made absolute. Individuals need psychological resources to participate

effectively in social transformation. Mindfulness may strengthen awareness, reduce impulsive hostility, and support compassionate action.

An ethically mature model should therefore operate at two levels: Personal cultivation that transforms reactivity and suffering; and Social analysis that addresses the external conditions producing avoidable distress.

This combination is closer to dependent origination than either exclusive individualism or exclusive structural determinism.

The Problem of Nonjudgment

“Nonjudgment” is one of the most popular features of contemporary mindfulness definitions. It encourages participants to observe sensations, thoughts, and emotions without immediately labeling them as good, bad, acceptable, or unacceptable.

This attitude is therapeutically valuable when excessive judgment intensifies anxiety, shame, or avoidance. A person may learn to experience an anxious sensation without adding the judgment that anxiety demonstrates weakness or impending catastrophe.

Nevertheless, nonjudgment should not be confused with the suspension of all ethical discernment. Buddhist practice distinguishes wholesome from unwholesome states and conduct that reduces suffering from conduct that increases it.

A more precise formulation would distinguish nonreactive observation from ethical indifference. One may observe anger without self-condemnation while still recognizing that acting violently from anger is harmful. Acceptance of an experience does not require approval of every behavior motivated by it.

Traditional Buddhist mindfulness combines receptive awareness with clear comprehension and ethical evaluation. Clinical programs can benefit from making this distinction explicit.

Mindfulness and the Construction of Self

Clinical mindfulness often helps participants loosen identification with thoughts. A thought such as “I am worthless” can be recognized as a mental event rather than an objective definition of the self. This process is described as decentering, defusion, or metacognitive awareness.

Buddhism goes further by questioning whether any permanent and independent self can be found within bodily and mental processes. Non-self is not simply the creation of a more positive self-concept; it is insight into the conditioned character of all self-construction.

The clinical and Buddhist approaches can support each other without being conflated. A more flexible self-concept may be necessary for psychological stability. For some individuals, prematurely attempting to “eliminate the self” could create confusion, dissociation, or avoidance of legitimate personal needs.

Therapeutic work may first strengthen a coherent and safe conventional identity. Buddhist insight subsequently investigates attachment to that identity. Conventional psychological health and realization of non-self are not necessarily opposites, but they operate at different levels.

Risks and Adverse Experiences

Mindfulness is often marketed as harmless because it does not require medication or complex equipment. However, meditation can produce challenging experiences, including anxiety, depersonalization, disturbing memories, altered perception, sleep disruption, or intensified emotional distress.

Lindahl et al. (2017) documented diverse meditation-related difficulties among Western Buddhist practitioners. The study does not demonstrate that meditation is generally unsafe, but it challenges universal claims that everyone will benefit from intensive practice.

Van Dam et al. (2018) argue that mindfulness research and public communication require greater conceptual precision, stronger methodology, and more realistic presentation of benefits and risks.

Clinical programs should therefore include: Appropriate participant screening; Teachers trained to recognize psychological difficulties; Clear informed consent; Adaptation for trauma and severe mental illness; Monitoring and reporting of adverse events; Referral pathways when additional care is required; and Avoidance of claims that distress during meditation always represents spiritual progress.

Traditional Buddhist settings also require safeguards. Religious authority does not guarantee clinical competence, and severe psychological symptoms should not automatically be interpreted as failures of faith or meditation.

Scientific Legitimation and Its Limits

Scientific research has contributed to the acceptance of mindfulness by health institutions. Randomized trials, systematic reviews, psychological scales, and neuroimaging studies translate contemplative practices into forms recognized by modern medicine.

This translation has practical value, but it also changes what counts as evidence. Clinical science prioritizes measurable outcomes such as symptom scores, relapse rates, attention performance, or quality of life. Buddhist traditions may evaluate practice through ethical conduct, reduced attachment, wisdom, compassion, and progress toward liberation.

Neither system of evaluation should be treated as complete for every purpose. Subjective spiritual claims should not replace clinical evidence when mindfulness is offered as treatment. Conversely, a lower depression score cannot exhaust the religious meaning of mindfulness.

Neuroscientific findings also require caution. Changes in brain activity associated with meditation do not prove non-self or nirvāṇa. All mental practices have neural correlates; the presence of a correlate does not determine the philosophical meaning of the experience.

Cultural Appropriation and Religious Ownership

The secularization of mindfulness raises questions about cultural appropriation. Buddhist practices have been reformulated, marketed, and commercialized in settings that may give little acknowledgment to Asian teachers, communities, or intellectual traditions.

However, Buddhist mindfulness has never been historically uniform. Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions interpret mindfulness differently, and Asian Buddhist modernists actively participated in its global transmission. It would therefore be inaccurate to imagine a single unchanged Buddhist original owned by one community.

Ethically responsible adaptation should nevertheless acknowledge historical sources, avoid claiming that a modern clinical definition represents all Buddhism, and respect the communities whose traditions contributed to the practice.

Acknowledgment does not require religious conversion. It requires intellectual honesty about genealogy, difference, and transformation.

Toward an Ethically Integrated Clinical Mindfulness

Clinical mindfulness need not reproduce the entire Buddhist path, but it can address ethical concerns without becoming sectarian. An ethically integrated model could include five elements.

1. Clear Definition of Purpose

Programs should state whether they aim at stress reduction, relapse prevention, emotional regulation, workplace performance, or spiritual development. Different goals require different methods and safeguards.

2. Non-Harming

Mindfulness should be taught in ways that prioritize participant welfare rather than institutional productivity. Teachers should recognize limitations and avoid imposing practice on unwilling participants.

3. Compassion

Awareness should be connected with care for oneself and others. Without compassion, attention can become cold observation or a tool for performance.

4. Contextual Awareness

Participants should be encouraged to recognize social and environmental contributors to distress. Mindfulness should not imply that all suffering results from incorrect individual reactions.

5. Epistemic Humility

Teachers and researchers should distinguish evidence-based findings from philosophical interpretation. They should avoid claiming that clinical trials validate the whole Buddhist tradition.

These principles can be presented in secular ethical language while remaining compatible with important Buddhist values.

A Two-Horizon Model of Mindfulness

The relationship between therapeutic and liberating mindfulness can be clarified through a two-horizon model.

Element	Therapeutic horizon	Liberating horizon
Problem addressed	Stress, symptoms, rumination, dysregulation	Ignorance, craving, attachment, and saṃsāra
Immediate method	Present-moment awareness and decentering	Right Mindfulness integrated with the path
Ethical structure	Clinical ethics and personal values	Sīla, karma, compassion, and non-harming
Understanding of self	Flexible and less rigid self-concept	Insight into non-self
Desired outcome	Improved functioning and quality of life	Nirvāṇa and cessation of suffering
Evidence	Clinical and behavioral measures	Ethical transformation and liberating knowledge

The horizons are neither identical nor completely unrelated. Therapeutic mindfulness may create stability that supports deeper practice. Liberating mindfulness may have therapeutic effects. Problems arise when one horizon is falsely presented as the whole of the other.

Discussion

The secularization of Buddhist mindfulness is best understood as cultural translation rather than simple preservation or corruption. Translation necessarily selects, interprets, and modifies. The relevant question is not whether clinical mindfulness is identical to ancient Buddhist practice—it clearly is not—but whether the adaptation is effective, ethically responsible, historically honest, and appropriate to its stated purpose.

Clinical psychology has preserved important mechanisms: attentional training, nonreactivity, awareness of bodily experience, and decentering from thought. These practices can reduce suffering and increase psychological flexibility.

At the same time, secularization often removes explicit Buddhist ethics, karma, rebirth, monastic community, Right View, and nirvāṇa. The result is a different practice with a more limited but legitimate objective.

The McMindfulness critique correctly identifies risks of commercialization, individualization, and institutional misuse. Yet it can become reductive if it treats every secular program as a corporate instrument. Clinical applications should be judged according to their design, evidence, ethical orientation, and context.

A productive middle position recognizes that therapeutic mindfulness is not the complete Buddhist path but can still be a meaningful form of care. It also recognizes that traditional Buddhism may learn from clinical research concerning trauma, participant safety, adverse events, and psychological diversity.

Conclusion

The movement of mindfulness from Buddhist traditions into contemporary clinical psychology has expanded access to contemplative practice and contributed valuable therapeutic methods. MBSR, MBCT, ACT, DBT, and related approaches demonstrate that mindful awareness can help some individuals change their relationships with stress, pain, thought, emotion, and habitual reactivity.

Nevertheless, Buddhist sati cannot be reduced to nonjudgmental present-moment awareness. Right Mindfulness operates within the Noble Eightfold Path and is inseparable from Right View, Right Effort, ethical conduct, concentration, and wisdom. Its ultimate purpose is the abandonment of greed, hatred, delusion, and attachment.

Clinical secularization retains selected practices while transforming their language, evidence, authority, and goals. Symptom reduction replaces nirvāṇa as the primary outcome; professional ethics replace the full Buddhist ethical framework; and psychological flexibility replaces complete liberation from self-grasping.

These transformations should be acknowledged rather than concealed. Clinical mindfulness need not claim to be the complete Buddhist path in order to possess therapeutic value. Equally, empirical evidence for mindfulness-based treatment should not be treated as scientific proof of Buddhist liberation.

The most responsible approach lies between uncritical celebration and wholesale rejection. It recognizes clinical benefits, strengthens research methodology, monitors risks, restores ethical reflection, acknowledges Buddhist sources, and addresses social as well as individual causes of distress.

Mindfulness can thus operate across two legitimate but distinct horizons: therapy and liberation. Therapy asks how people may suffer less and function more effectively within their lives. Buddhist liberation asks how the fundamental conditions of suffering and self-grasping may be brought to an end. The horizons may support each other, but neither should be mistaken for the whole of the other.

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One Reality, Multiple Definitions: A Comparative Study of Nibbāna, Tathatā, Śūnyatā, and Dharmadhātu in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist Philosophy

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Abstract

Buddhist traditions employ several terms to describe the realization of reality and the culmination of the religious path. Among the most influential are *nibbāna* or *nirvāṇa*, *tathatā* (suchness), *śūnyatā* (emptiness), and *dharmadhātu* (the realm or sphere of dharmas). These concepts are sometimes treated as synonyms for a single ultimate reality. Such an interpretation, however, can obscure their different historical settings, philosophical functions, and soteriological implications. This article comparatively examines these four concepts in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. It argues that they converge in rejecting substantialism, attachment, and conceptually constructed views of reality, but they should not be reduced to interchangeable names for a metaphysical absolute. In Theravāda, *nibbāna* primarily signifies the cessation of craving, suffering, and rebirth, while *tathatā* refers principally to the invariability of dependent conditionality. In Mahāyāna thought, *tathatā* describes phenomena as they are when no longer distorted by conceptual fabrication; *śūnyatā* identifies the absence of intrinsic existence in all phenomena; and *dharmadhātu* denotes the comprehensive field in which the nature and interdependence of all dharmas are realized. Their relationship is therefore best understood as a pattern of functional convergence combined with conceptual plurality.

Keywords: Nibbāna, śūnyatā, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Buddhist reality

Introduction

The question of ultimate reality presents a distinctive problem in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism seeks liberating knowledge of reality, yet it consistently warns against transforming such knowledge into belief in an eternal substance, self, or metaphysical foundation. The Buddhist quest for truth is therefore inseparable from the practical project of overcoming ignorance, craving, and suffering. Reality is not merely an object of theoretical speculation; it is what must be understood for liberation to occur.

Different Buddhist traditions developed different vocabularies for expressing this liberating realization. Theravāda sources place particular emphasis on *nibbāna*, the cessation of suffering and the end of the cycle of rebirth. Mahāyāna literature frequently employs *tathatā*, *śūnyatā*, and *dharmadhātu* to describe the nature of phenomena as apprehended by awakened wisdom. These terms sometimes overlap, and certain Mahāyāna texts present them as related descriptions of the same nondual realization. Nevertheless, their meanings vary according to textual, philosophical, and historical contexts (Buswell & Lopez, 2014).

It is therefore misleading either to regard the four terms as entirely unrelated or to treat them as exact synonyms. The former position exaggerates the division between Buddhist traditions, whereas the latter erases important doctrinal differences. A more

balanced interpretation must ask three questions: What problem does each term address? What mistaken view does it correct? What kind of liberating realization does it seek to articulate?

This article adopts a comparative philosophical approach. It examines the four concepts in selected Pāli discourses, Mahāyāna texts, and modern scholarly interpretations. Its central argument is that nibbāna, tathatā, śūnyatā, and dharmadhātu display a significant soteriological convergence, but their conceptual functions remain distinct. Their unity lies less in describing a single metaphysical entity than in articulating different dimensions of reality as disclosed through the overcoming of ignorance.

The Problem of “Ultimate Reality” in Buddhist Philosophy

The expression “ultimate reality” must be used cautiously in Buddhist studies. In many Western philosophical systems, ultimate reality suggests an independently existing substance underlying the changing world. Buddhist philosophy generally rejects such an ontological foundation. Conditioned phenomena arise through causes and conditions, lack a permanent self, and cannot provide lasting satisfaction. Even the highest Buddhist concepts must not be reified into an eternal essence.

Buddhist teachings are oriented toward the diagnosis and cessation of suffering. The Four Noble Truths connect an understanding of existence with a transformative path: suffering is to be understood, its origin abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path developed. Consequently, Buddhist accounts of reality are simultaneously descriptive and therapeutic. They explain how things occur while exposing the cognitive and affective errors that sustain attachment.

This soteriological orientation means that apparently abstract concepts perform practical functions. Nibbāna answers the question of whether suffering can cease. Tathatā concerns how things are apart from distortion and fabrication. Śūnyatā undermines the belief that phenomena possess independent and intrinsic existence. Dharmadhātu presents reality as the comprehensive sphere in which all dharmas and their true nature are understood. None should be separated from the cultivation of ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom.

Nibbāna: Cessation, Freedom, and the Unconditioned

1. Nibbāna in the Pāli discourses

In Theravāda Buddhism, nibbāna is the final goal of the path. The term is associated with the extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion and with release from suffering and rebirth. The Saṃyutta Nikāya describes nibbāna as the destruction of lust, hatred, and delusion and also uses such designations as the unconditioned, the deathless, the peaceful, and the cessation of craving (Bodhi, 2000).

The Udāna declares that there is an “unborn,” “unmade,” and “unconditioned”; without it, escape from what is born and conditioned would not be possible (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012). This passage establishes that liberation is not simply a temporary psychological condition. Nibbāna is not produced by craving, volitional construction, or other conditioned causes. At the same time, describing it as unconditioned does not necessarily make it a metaphysical substance.

Theravāda interpretations commonly distinguish between nibbāna experienced by an arahant during life and final nibbāna at death. During life, the arahant remains subject to the results of bodily existence, but greed, hatred, delusion, and the causes of future rebirth have been extinguished. At death, no further rebirth occurs. These distinctions concern the liberated person’s relationship to the aggregates rather than two different kinds of nibbāna (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013).

2. Is nibbāna an ultimate entity?

Theravāda Abhidhamma classifies nibbāna as an unconditioned reality, distinguishing it from conditioned mental and material phenomena. This classification can sound ontologically substantial. However, nibbāna is not an eternal self, cosmic consciousness, creator, or place to which a permanent person travels. Its principal significance remains the cessation of the conditions that generate suffering.

Collins (1998) identifies two prominent modes of nibbāna discourse. One speaks of nibbāna negatively as the cessation of craving, suffering, and rebirth. The other employs positive imagery such as peace, security, purity, and the highest happiness. These modes are complementary. Negative language prevents reification, while positive language communicates the liberating value of nibbāna.

Nibbāna therefore has both doctrinal and practical meanings. Doctrinally, it is unconditioned and beyond the cycle of dependent becoming. Practically, it is realized through the complete abandonment of greed, hatred, and delusion. Any comparison with Mahāyāna concepts must preserve this emphasis on cessation and emancipation.

Tathatā: Reality “Just as It Is”

1. Tathatā in early Buddhist discourse

Tathatā is commonly translated as “suchness” or “thusness.” The term points to the character of something being “thus”—the way it actually is rather than the way it appears through ignorance and conceptual distortion.

The concept is not exclusively Mahāyāna. In the Pāli discourses, related terminology describes the regularity and invariability of dependent origination. In Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta (SN 12.20), dependent conditionality remains the case whether or not a Buddha appears. The discourse characterizes this principle through such expressions as stability, lawfulness, specific conditionality, “suchness” (tathatā), non-falsity, and non-otherwiseness (Sujato, 2018a).

In this context, tathatā does not primarily denote an absolute substance beyond phenomena. It denotes the dependability of the causal structure through which phenomena arise and cease. The Buddha discovers and teaches this structure; he does not create it. Early Buddhist suchness is thus closely associated with seeing dependent origination correctly.

2. Tathatā in Mahāyāna thought

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, tathatā acquired a broader philosophical meaning. It came to signify the true mode of phenomena as apprehended when conceptual proliferation, subject–object duality, and false attribution have been overcome. It does not necessarily refer to a reality located behind appearances. Instead, it indicates the same phenomena understood without projecting intrinsic existence, permanence, or selfhood upon them.

The Awakening of Faith, an influential East Asian Buddhist treatise, describes suchness in relation to the “one mind” and distinguishes the aspect of suchness from the aspect of arising and ceasing. Its language gave tathatā an affirmative and comprehensive role in East Asian Mahāyāna thought (Hakeda, 2005). The text’s Indic authorship has long been disputed, however, and its account should not be treated as representative of all Indian Mahāyāna traditions.

Tathatā can perform at least three functions: It identifies the undistorted mode of phenomena. It indicates the object of nonconceptual wisdom. It provides positive language for a realization that emptiness terminology might otherwise make appear nihilistic.

Nevertheless, “suchness” must not be interpreted as the permanent essence of things. In Madhyamaka, the suchness of phenomena is precisely their absence of intrinsic nature. In Yogācāra-related traditions, it may be associated with the nondual nature disclosed when

imagined subject–object divisions are removed. The precise meaning therefore depends upon the philosophical system in which it appears (Williams, 2009).

Śūnyatā: Emptiness and Dependent Origination

1. Emptiness as the absence of intrinsic existence

Śūnyatā is one of the most influential and frequently misunderstood concepts in Mahāyāna philosophy. It does not mean that nothing exists or that ethical actions have no consequences. Rather, it means that phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*: independent, self-established, or intrinsic existence.

Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* develops the philosophical implications of dependent origination. If something arises in dependence upon causes, parts, conditions, concepts, and relations, it cannot exist entirely through its own nature. Nāgārjuna consequently identifies dependent origination with emptiness, dependent designation, and the middle way (Garfield, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013).

This argument avoids two extremes. Eternalism treats things as possessing permanent and independent essences. Nihilism concludes that nothing exists and that causal or ethical distinctions are meaningless. *Madhyamaka* maintains that phenomena exist conventionally through dependent relations while being empty ultimately of intrinsic nature. The middle way therefore preserves causality precisely because it rejects immutable essences.

2. The emptiness of emptiness

A crucial feature of *Madhyamaka* is that emptiness itself is empty. It is not a hidden substance replacing the essences that *Madhyamaka* criticizes. If śūnyatā were treated as an independently existing absolute, it would become another object of attachment. Nāgārjuna warns that emptiness is intended to relinquish fixed views, not to establish a new metaphysical view.

The doctrine of two truths helps explain this position. Conventional truth concerns the functioning world of persons, language, causality, and moral responsibility. Ultimate truth is the absence of intrinsic existence discovered through analysis. Yet ultimate truth cannot be separated from conventional reality as another world. Without conventional discourse, the ultimate cannot be taught; without understanding the ultimate, liberation cannot be attained (Thakchoe, 2022).

Śūnyatā therefore differs from *nibbāna* in immediate philosophical function. Emptiness is predicated of all phenomena: persons, mental events, physical objects, doctrines, and even *nirvāṇa*. *Nibbāna*, by contrast, primarily identifies the cessation of defilement and rebirth. Nevertheless, the two converge soteriologically because realization of emptiness removes the ignorance and attachment that sustain suffering.

Dharmadhātu: The Realm and Nature of Dharmas

Dharmadhātu combines *dharma* with *dhātu*, meaning element, sphere, realm, or domain. Its meaning varies considerably across Buddhist traditions. In some contexts, it simply denotes the sphere of mental objects. In Mahāyāna philosophy, it may denote the total field of phenomena, the ultimate nature of all dharmas, or reality as comprehensively realized by a Buddha (Buswell & Lopez, 2014).

The concept became especially important in Huayan Buddhism, which drew inspiration from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. Huayan interpretations describe *dharmadhātu* as a world of interdependence in which phenomena remain conventionally distinct while being mutually related. This culminated in accounts of the non-obstruction of principle and phenomena and the interpenetration of phenomena with one another (Cook, 1977).

Dharmadhātu should not be imagined as a cosmic container existing separately from its contents. Nor does interpenetration imply that all distinctions simply disappear. Rather,

the concept provides a relational vision of reality: no phenomenon exists in complete isolation, and the identity of each phenomenon depends upon a wider network of conditions.

The term thus emphasizes a dimension less explicit in the other three concepts. Nibbāna emphasizes release, tathatā undistorted suchness, and śūnyatā the absence of intrinsic nature. Dharmadhātu emphasizes the comprehensive field in which the nature and relationships of phenomena are realized. In certain Mahāyāna traditions, it also becomes associated with dharmakāya, Buddha knowledge, and the universal accessibility of awakening.

Convergences among the Four Concepts

Despite their differences, nibbāna, tathatā, śūnyatā, and dharmadhātu share several philosophical and practical concerns.

1. The rejection of substantial selfhood

All four concepts are compatible with the denial of a permanent self. Nibbāna cannot be possession of an eternal soul because liberation requires abandoning identification with the aggregates. Tathatā is seen when phenomena are no longer interpreted as “I” or “mine.” Śūnyatā explicitly denies intrinsic nature to persons and phenomena. Dharmadhātu places beings and events within a field of conditioned relationships rather than grounding them in self-sufficient identities.

2. Dependence and the cessation of ignorance

Dependent origination supplies a common framework. In early Buddhism, insight into dependent origination reveals the arising and cessation of suffering. In Madhyamaka, dependence establishes emptiness. Tathatā can describe the invariability of this conditional structure or its undistorted apprehension. Dharmadhātu extends the relational perspective into a comprehensive account of phenomena.

Ignorance consists not merely in lacking information but in systematically misapprehending conditioned, impermanent, and selfless phenomena. Liberating wisdom transforms this mode of cognition. Thus, the four concepts concern reality as it becomes evident when ignorance is overcome.

3. Freedom from conceptual reification

The concepts also resist the tendency to mistake names and concepts for independently existing realities. Nibbāna cannot be adequately reduced to an ordinary object. Tathatā concerns reality free from conceptual distortion. Śūnyatā exposes the emptiness of conceptual constructions, and dharmadhātu represents a totality that cannot be fragmented into absolutely independent entities.

This does not require rejecting language. Buddhist teachings use concepts as practical instruments. The problem begins when provisional designations are treated as self-grounding realities. Language can direct practitioners toward insight, but it cannot substitute for contemplative realization.

4. Soteriological orientation

Finally, all four concepts belong to paths of transformation. Their purpose is not the construction of an abstract ontology alone. Understanding them should weaken craving, hostility, delusion, and self-centred attachment. A theory that produces intellectual pride without transforming conduct fails to fulfil their Buddhist purpose.

Irreducible Differences

The similarities do not justify calling all four concepts exact synonyms. Several differences must be preserved.

Concept	Principal emphasis	Primary problem addressed	Soteriological function
Nibbāna	Cessation and the unconditioned	Craving, defilement, suffering, and rebirth	Final liberation from saṃsāra
Tathatā	Suchness or reality as it is	Conceptual distortion and dualistic construction	Nonconceptual apprehension of phenomena
Śūnyatā	Absence of intrinsic nature	Substantialism and attachment to views	Wisdom that avoids eternalism and nihilism
Dharmadhātu	The sphere and true nature of dharmas	Fragmentation and the belief in isolated existence	Comprehensive realization of relational reality

First, the concepts arise from different textual environments. Nibbāna occupies a central position in early Buddhist and Theravāda soteriology. Tathatā has an early meaning connected with the invariability of conditionality but assumes expanded meanings in Mahāyāna. Śūnyatā is present in early Buddhist discourse but becomes systematically central in Prajñāpāramitā and Madhyamaka. Dharmadhātu develops especially comprehensive meanings in Mahāyāna cosmology and East Asian philosophy.

Second, they have different grammatical and philosophical ranges. Nibbāna names the cessation constituting liberation. Emptiness is a property—or more carefully, an absence—applicable to all phenomena. Suchness indicates their undistorted mode. Dharmadhātu designates their sphere or comprehensive nature. These functions overlap but are not identical.

Third, different Buddhist schools disagree about how they should be interpreted. Theravāda understands nibbāna as unconditioned but rejects identifying liberation with a permanent self. Madhyamaka refuses to establish even emptiness as an independent ultimate entity. Some Yogācāra and tathāgatagarbha texts employ more affirmative language, although scholars and traditions disagree over whether this language is ontological, experiential, or pedagogical (Williams, 2009).

Consequently, the claim that there is “one reality” should be treated as a comparative hypothesis rather than an uncontested Buddhist doctrine. The concepts may point toward convergent liberating insights, but the traditions do not always formulate the object, structure, or culmination of those insights in the same way.

A Model of Plural Convergence

A suitable comparative model can be called plural convergence. According to this model, the four concepts converge without becoming interchangeable.

Their convergence is principally practical and apophatic. They identify what becomes evident when craving, ignorance, self-grasping, and conceptual reification cease. Each prevents reality from being understood as a collection of permanent, independent substances. Each also supports a path through which the practitioner’s perception and conduct are transformed.

Their plurality is conceptual and historical. Nibbāna answers the soteriological question of cessation. Tathatā answers the phenomenological question of how things are when apprehended without distortion. Śūnyatā answers the analytical question of whether phenomena possess intrinsic existence. Dharmadhātu answers the holistic question of how the nature and relational field of all phenomena may be conceived.

The four concepts can therefore illuminate one another. Emptiness prevents suchness and dharmadhātu from being reified. Suchness prevents emptiness from being mistaken for mere negation. Dharmadhātu emphasizes the relational and comprehensive implications of

emptiness. Nibbāna ensures that discussion of reality remains connected to the cessation of suffering.

Plural convergence also protects comparative studies from two errors. The first is sectarian reduction, in which the terminology of one tradition is treated as the only authentic Buddhist vocabulary. The second is uncritical perennialism, in which doctrinal differences are dismissed as insignificant expressions of an assumed universal mystical experience. Responsible comparison should recognize both shared Buddhist concerns and genuine philosophical diversity.

Conclusion

Nibbāna, tathatā, śūnyatā, and dharmadhātu represent four major ways of articulating reality and liberation in Buddhist philosophy. They are united by their opposition to ignorance, attachment, substantial selfhood, and distorted conceptualization. They also share a practical purpose: transforming the way persons understand themselves and the world so that suffering can cease.

Nevertheless, they are not simply four names for a single metaphysical object. Nibbāna principally signifies cessation and liberation from conditioned becoming. Tathatā indicates the suchness of phenomena or their undistorted mode. Śūnyatā reveals that all phenomena lack intrinsic existence because they arise dependently. Dharmadhātu presents the comprehensive sphere and nature of dharmas, especially as understood in Mahāyāna traditions.

The most defensible conclusion is therefore neither absolute identity nor complete separation. These concepts exhibit functional and soteriological convergence while retaining conceptual, textual, and historical differences. “One reality” may consequently be understood not as a single substance concealed beneath Buddhist vocabularies but as the liberating disclosure of conditioned, selfless, and nonappropriable reality. The plurality of definitions reflects the diversity of philosophical methods through which Buddhist traditions attempt to guide practitioners beyond ignorance and suffering.

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The Threefold Training and Vijjācaraṇasampadā: A Framework for Holistic Human Development in Buddhist Educational Philosophy

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Abstract

Buddhist educational philosophy understands human development as the coordinated cultivation of conduct, mind, and wisdom rather than the accumulation of information or vocational competence alone. Two doctrinal frameworks are especially relevant to this vision: the threefold training (tisikkhā) and the accomplishment in knowledge and conduct (vijjācaraṇasampadā). The threefold training consists of higher ethical discipline (adhisīla-sikkhā), higher mental cultivation (adhicitta-sikkhā), and higher wisdom (adhipaññā-sikkhā). Vijjācaraṇasampadā refers to the integration of liberating knowledge with disciplined conduct and is also one of the standard qualities attributed to the Buddha. These frameworks are closely related but not identical. The threefold training describes the educational process, whereas accomplishment in knowledge and conduct describes the integrated qualities produced through that process. This article argues that their synthesis offers a Buddhist model of holistic development encompassing bodily and verbal responsibility, emotional regulation, attentional stability, causal understanding, ethical judgment, and freedom from ignorance. The model challenges educational systems that separate knowledge from character or use concentration solely for productivity. At the same time, its application to contemporary education requires careful translation: Buddhist wisdom cannot be reduced to intelligence, morality to conformity, meditation to stress management, or liberation to psychological well-being. Properly interpreted, the framework seeks the formation of persons whose knowledge, conduct, and mental qualities contribute to both individual freedom and social welfare.

Keywords: threefold training, Buddhist education, holistic development, wisdom

Introduction

Education is often understood as the process through which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, qualifications, and capacities for employment. These goals are important, but they do not by themselves ensure that educated persons will use their abilities responsibly. Scientific expertise, technological competence, and economic success can serve either human welfare or exploitation, depending upon the motivations and values directing them.

Buddhist educational philosophy begins from a different diagnosis. The central problem of human life is not merely insufficient information. It is ignorance (avijjā), understood as a distorted relationship to experience that sustains craving, attachment, harmful action, and suffering. Education must consequently transform the learner's conduct, mental habits, motivations, and understanding.

Two Buddhist frameworks are particularly valuable for constructing such a model. The first is the threefold training: higher ethical discipline, higher mind, and higher wisdom. The second is vijjācaraṇasampadā, accomplishment in knowledge and conduct.

These frameworks overlap but should not be treated as complete synonyms. The threefold training describes a coordinated process of cultivation. Vijjācaraṇasampadā characterizes the integration achieved when understanding and conduct support one another. The former functions primarily as a curriculum of human transformation; the latter functions as an educational ideal and a criterion of mature development.

This article examines the relationship between the two frameworks and their significance for holistic human development. It argues that Buddhist education integrates at least five dimensions: Responsible bodily and verbal conduct, Healthy social relationships, Emotional and attentional cultivation, Wisdom concerning causes, consequences, and reality, Liberation from the mental conditions that produce suffering.

The model has relevance beyond explicitly monastic education, but contemporary applications must preserve its ethical and soteriological depth.

Buddhist Education as Sikkhā

1. Training rather than information transfer

The Pāli term sikkhā means training, learning, or discipline. It is related to the verb sikkhati, “to train” or “to learn.” Education in this sense is not something that a teacher simply gives to a passive student. It is a process the learner repeatedly undertakes.

The language of training emphasizes habit formation. A person becomes truthful by repeatedly refraining from deception and practicing honest communication. Mindfulness develops through repeated recollection and attention. Wisdom matures through learning, reflection, observation, and the direct examination of experience.

The teacher provides instruction, correction, example, and encouragement, but the learner must enact the training. Buddhist education therefore combines relational support with personal responsibility.

2. The problem of ignorance

Avijjā is usually translated as ignorance, but it does not mean the absence of all forms of knowledge. A person may possess extensive technical or academic expertise while remaining ignorant of suffering, its causes, and the consequences of craving.

The Vijjā Sutta connects knowledge with understanding suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation (Walshe, 2009). Buddhist education is therefore oriented toward the Four Noble Truths.

Its purpose is not to reject conventional knowledge. Medicine, language, agriculture, technology, and social sciences can contribute greatly to welfare. The Buddhist question is how such knowledge is acquired, directed, and used. Knowledge becomes educationally complete when joined with ethical conduct and wisdom.

The Structure of the Threefold Training

The threefold training consists of: Higher ethical discipline (adhisīla-sikkhā), Higher mental training (adhicitta-sikkhā), Higher wisdom (adhipaññā-sikkhā).

The word adhi, meaning higher or advanced, indicates that these are not merely conventional forms of good behaviour, concentration, and intelligence. They are cultivated within a path leading to liberation.

The Aṅguttara Nikāya connects the three trainings with progressive stages of awakening and the abandonment of the fetters binding beings to saṃsāra (Bodhi, 2012). They are also related to the Noble Eightfold Path:

Threefold training	Factors of the Noble Eightfold Path
Ethical discipline	Right speech, right action, right livelihood
Mental cultivation	Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration
Wisdom	Right view, right intention

This arrangement does not imply a completely rigid sequence. Ethical discipline supports concentration, concentration supports wisdom, and wisdom deepens ethical motivation. The three operate as an integrated and reciprocal system.

Higher Ethical Discipline: Training Conduct and Relationships

1. More than obedience to rules

Sīla includes moral discipline, virtue, habit, and the orderly quality of conduct. It is expressed through bodily and verbal actions that refrain from harm and support trust.

For lay Buddhists, the five precepts provide a basic framework: refraining from killing, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants that produce heedlessness. Monastic training is regulated by a more extensive Vinaya.

Ethical discipline should not be reduced to obedience imposed by authority. The precepts are training principles that develop awareness of intention and consequence. Their educational purpose is to weaken greed, hatred, negligence, and exploitation.

A learner should gradually understand why harmful conduct causes suffering rather than merely fear punishment. Ethical maturity occurs when restraint becomes grounded in empathy, causal understanding, and internal responsibility.

2. Social dimensions of sīla

Ethical conduct creates conditions for social trust. Truthful speech supports reliable communication. Nonviolence protects physical security. Respect for property reduces exploitation, while sexual responsibility protects dignity and consent.

Sīla is therefore both personal and relational. A person's conduct affects families, institutions, communities, and environments. Buddhist education does not view self-development as isolated from the welfare of others.

Positive virtues complement restraint. Generosity counters possessiveness, loving-kindness counters ill will, compassion responds to suffering, and appreciative joy resists envy. Ethical education should cultivate these capacities rather than limit itself to prohibitions.

3. Ethical discipline as the basis of learning

Misconduct destabilizes the mind through fear, remorse, defensiveness, and conflict. Ethical discipline supports mental tranquillity because the learner has fewer actions to conceal or regret.

This does not mean morally disciplined people never experience guilt or psychological difficulty. It means that habitual non-harming creates conditions more favourable to concentration and honest self-observation.

Ethical discipline also protects education from becoming morally neutral. Without it, intelligence can be used to rationalize selfish aims. Sīla gives knowledge a responsible direction.

Higher Mental Training: Cultivating the Quality of Mind

1. The meaning of adhicitta

Adhicitta-sikkhā means training in the higher mind. It is often represented through samādhi, but it includes more than narrow concentration. It involves right effort, mindfulness, stability, emotional balance, and the cultivation of wholesome mental qualities.

The mind is not treated as a fixed essence. Mental states arise according to conditions and can be developed. Anger, anxiety, distraction, compassion, and attentional stability are not unchangeable identities. Training modifies the conditions that support them.

2. Tranquillity and insight

The Vijjā-bhāgiya Sutta identifies tranquillity (samatha) and insight (vipassanā) as qualities contributing to clear knowledge. When tranquillity is developed, the mind develops

and passion is abandoned; when insight is developed, discernment develops and ignorance is abandoned (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1998).

Tranquillity provides stability and clarity. Insight examines the impermanent, conditioned, and selfless nature of phenomena. Neither should be treated as entirely sufficient in isolation.

Concentration without wisdom may produce calm while leaving mistaken views intact. Intellectual analysis without mental stability may remain superficial and easily overwhelmed by emotion. Buddhist mental education integrates steadiness and investigation.

3. Emotional development

Although Buddhist texts do not use the modern expression “emotional intelligence,” mental training includes capacities relevant to emotional development: Recognizing mental states, Interrupting impulsive reactions, Cultivating patience, Developing loving-kindness and compassion, Reducing resentment and envy, Maintaining balance amid gain and loss, Responding without immediate identification with feelings.

Mindfulness enables learners to observe feeling before it develops into craving, hostility, or harmful speech. Right effort encourages the prevention and abandonment of unwholesome qualities and the cultivation and maintenance of wholesome ones.

4. Concentration is not merely productivity

Contemporary institutions sometimes adopt mindfulness to increase performance, reduce stress, or improve concentration. These outcomes may be beneficial, but they do not exhaust *adhicitta-sikkhā*.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, concentration is “right” because it is supported by right view, right intention, and ethical conduct. A highly concentrated mind serving exploitation does not represent Buddhist mental development.

Mental training must therefore be assessed according to both psychological quality and moral direction.

Higher Wisdom: Knowing Reality and Acting Responsibly

1. Wisdom and right view

Adhipaññā-sikkhā is the training of higher wisdom. *Paññā* includes discernment, understanding, and the capacity to distinguish causes, consequences, wholesome states, and unwholesome states.

Right view provides its initial orientation. At a basic level, right view acknowledges moral causation and the significance of intentional action. At a higher level, it directly understands the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

Wisdom is not identical with information or intelligence. A person may solve complex problems while failing to recognize harmful motivations. Buddhist wisdom combines cognitive clarity with freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion.

2. Causal and conditional understanding

Wisdom examines phenomena through causes and conditions. Harmful behaviour is not explained by an eternal evil essence but by ignorance, craving, habits, social influences, and present choices.

Such analysis avoids both fatalism and simplistic blame. Recognizing conditions does not eliminate responsibility; it shows where transformation is possible. Education can modify attention, habits, relationships, and environments that contribute to conduct.

Wisdom consequently supports effective compassion. Rather than merely condemning a harmful person, it asks how harm can be stopped, responsibility established, and its supporting conditions changed.

3. Insight into non-self

Non-self has significant educational implications. Learners often construct identity around success, failure, intelligence, social class, profession, religion, or nationality. These identities can provide practical orientation but become sources of insecurity when treated as permanent essence.

Insight into non-self does not deny personal continuity or responsibility. It reveals that identity is conditioned, relational, and transformable. Failure need not become “I am permanently a failure,” and harmful habits need not become immutable identity.

This insight supports development because it makes change intelligible. At the same time, it weakens conceit based on academic achievement.

Vijjācaraṇasampadā: Accomplishment in Knowledge and Conduct

1. Meaning and canonical importance

The compound vijjācaraṇasampadā combines three elements: Vijjā: knowledge, clear knowing, or liberating knowledge, Carāṇa: conduct, practice, or way of life, Sampadā: accomplishment, fulfilment, or endowment.

A vijjācaraṇasampanna person is accomplished in knowledge and conduct. The expression is one of the standard qualities attributed to the Buddha. It indicates not merely that the Buddha possesses knowledge, but that his knowledge and way of life are perfectly integrated (Anālayo, n.d.).

The precise contents of vijjā and carāṇa vary among textual contexts. In some discourses, knowledge includes recollection of past lives, knowledge of beings passing away and reappearing according to kamma, and the destruction of the mental influxes. Conduct may include ethical restraint, sense restraint, moderation in eating, wakefulness, confidence, conscience, concern for consequences, learning, energy, mindfulness, wisdom, and meditative absorption.

The expression should therefore not be translated simply as “educated and well-behaved.” It describes a highly developed integration of liberating understanding and disciplined life.

2. The Sekha Sutta

The Sekha Sutta presents a detailed model of a trainee’s development. The practitioner possesses ethical discipline, guards the sense doors, eats in moderation, is committed to wakefulness, possesses qualities such as faith, conscience, prudence, learning, energy, mindfulness, and wisdom, and gains the four meditative absorptions. These qualities support the three knowledges culminating in the destruction of defilements (Sujato, 2018).

The discourse shows that knowledge is not separated from conduct. Liberating knowledge arises from a trained way of life. Ethical and contemplative qualities are not external decorations added after intellectual attainment; they form the conditions through which clear knowledge develops.

3. Knowledge without conduct and conduct without knowledge

The relation between vijjā and carāṇa can be clarified through two incomplete educational types.

The first possesses knowledge without conduct. Such a person may be articulate, technically competent, and capable of explaining moral principles while acting dishonestly. Knowledge becomes disconnected from motivation and habit.

The second possesses conduct without sufficient knowledge. Such a person may behave conventionally well but rely upon unexamined rules, fear, or conformity. Without wisdom, good intentions may be ineffective or manipulated.

Buddhist education seeks their integration. Conduct stabilizes the conditions for knowledge; knowledge clarifies, deepens, and liberates conduct.

The Relationship between the Two Frameworks

The threefold training and vijjācaraṇasampadā can be related as process and integrated outcome.

Educational process	Developed capacity	Relation to vijjā–caraṇa
Higher ethical discipline	Responsible bodily and verbal conduct	Central dimension of caraṇa
Higher mental training	Mindfulness, emotional balance, and concentration	Contemplative dimension of caraṇa
Higher wisdom	Right view and liberating insight	Development of vijjā
Integration of all three	Consistency of knowledge, motivation, and action	Vijjācaraṇasampadā

The correspondence is not exact. Caraṇa may encompass qualities that cross all three trainings, including wisdom, while vijjā can refer to specific higher knowledges rather than education in a general sense. Nevertheless, the model is philosophically useful if its limits are acknowledged.

The threefold training answers the question: How should a person be educated? Vijjācaraṇasampadā answers: What kind of integrated person should the education produce?

Holistic Human Development

1. Behavioural development

The model trains bodily and verbal action. Learners develop restraint, honesty, responsibility, and respect for others. Behaviour is not treated as separate from mental intention; outward discipline and inward motivation interact.

2. Psychological development

Mindfulness and concentration cultivate attentional stability, emotional awareness, patience, and the capacity to pause before reacting. The learner becomes less controlled by immediate impulses.

3. Intellectual development

Wisdom examines evidence, causality, context, assumptions, and consequences. It includes but surpasses analytical intelligence because its aim is to correct ignorance and attachment.

4. Social development

Ethical conduct, compassion, and right speech support trust and cooperation. Holistic development does not mean the perfection of an isolated individual. The individual develops within relationships and contributes to the welfare of others.

5. Spiritual and liberating development

The highest aim is freedom from greed, hatred, delusion, and rebirth. This soteriological dimension distinguishes Buddhist holistic education from models directed only toward psychological adjustment or social functionality.

The five dimensions are interconnected. Ethical relationships support mental health, mental stability supports learning, wisdom improves ethical judgment, and insight weakens the self-centredness that damages relationships.

An Educational Model Based on the Synthesis

A contemporary educational model inspired by the two frameworks may include five stages.

1. Ethical orientation

Learners examine the purposes and consequences of knowledge. Codes of conduct are explained through non-harming, fairness, and responsibility rather than imposed without discussion.

2. Attentional cultivation

Mindfulness and reflective pauses help students recognize distraction, emotion, and impulsive judgment. Participation should be inclusive and psychologically appropriate.

3. Critical and causal inquiry

Students investigate causes, systems, evidence, long-term consequences, and alternative perspectives. Wise attention connects analytical inquiry with ethical evaluation.

4. Applied practice

Knowledge is used in relationships, community projects, professional situations, and environmental responsibility. Learners observe whether understanding changes their conduct.

5. Reflective integration

Students examine the consistency among what they know, intend, say, and do. Assessment attends not only to correct answers but also to responsible application and reflective growth.

This model can be represented through four educational questions: What does the learner know? How does the learner attend and respond? How does the learner act? Does the learning reduce or intensify harm?

Applications to Contemporary Problems

1. Digital education

Digital competence without ethical discipline can support misinformation, harassment, surveillance, or exploitation. Sīla provides principles for responsible communication, samādhi helps regulate compulsive attention, and paññā evaluates sources and consequences.

2. Professional education

Medicine, engineering, business, law, and technology require specialized knowledge. Vijjācaranasampadā suggests that professional competence should be joined with integrity. An excellent professional is not merely effective but responsible for how expertise affects others.

3. Environmental education

Dependent origination and non-self challenge the assumption that human welfare is independent of ecological systems. Ethical restraint limits harmful consumption, mental cultivation addresses compulsive desire, and wisdom reveals interdependence.

4. Conflict resolution

Ethical conduct prevents harmful speech, mindfulness recognizes anger before reaction, and wisdom examines the causes sustaining conflict. Compassion does not require passive acceptance of injustice; it seeks to prevent harm without dehumanizing those involved.

Critical Limitations

The application of these frameworks requires several qualifications.

First, the threefold training is a Buddhist path to liberation, not merely a generic wellness program. Secular adaptation may be useful but should acknowledge what has been omitted.

Second, sīla should not become cultural conformity. Ethical training must be interpreted through non-harming and wisdom, especially when inherited customs preserve inequality.

Third, *samādhi* should not be used solely to make individuals tolerate harmful institutions. Mental resilience must be accompanied by structural analysis and responsible action.

Fourth, *paññā* should not be reduced to critical thinking or academic intelligence. Its strongest Buddhist meaning concerns direct insight into suffering, impermanence, non-self, and *nibbāna*.

Fifth, *vijjācaraṇasampadā* is traditionally a quality of the Buddha and advanced practitioners. Its use as a general educational ideal is an interpretive application, not an assertion that ordinary academic graduates possess the Buddha's knowledge and conduct.

Finally, holistic development should not become an excuse for intrusive moral assessment. Educational institutions can evaluate responsible conduct and reflective learning, but they should not claim authority to measure private spiritual attainment.

Conclusion

The threefold training and *vijjācaraṇasampadā* together provide a coherent Buddhist framework for holistic human development. The threefold training describes the coordinated cultivation of ethical discipline, mental quality, and wisdom. *Vijjācaraṇasampadā* expresses the integration of knowledge with a disciplined way of life.

Higher ethical discipline develops responsible conduct and trustworthy relationships. Higher mental training cultivates attention, emotional stability, and freedom from impulsive reaction. Higher wisdom reveals causes and consequences and ultimately penetrates the Four Noble Truths, impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

The relationship among the three is reciprocal. Ethical conduct supports mental stability; mental stability supports wisdom; wisdom clarifies ethical action. Their integration produces a person whose knowledge is embodied rather than merely verbal.

This framework challenges education that produces expertise without integrity, concentration without ethical purpose, or moral compliance without understanding. Its holistic ideal is neither the accumulation of skills nor the private pursuit of tranquillity. It is the formation of persons capable of knowing clearly, acting responsibly, cultivating their minds, and contributing to the reduction of suffering.

In its fullest Buddhist meaning, this development culminates in liberation. In contemporary educational application, it offers a demanding but valuable principle: knowledge becomes complete only when it transforms how human beings conduct themselves, relate to others, and understand reality.

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Kamma, Moral Responsibility, and Liberation: Intention, Conditionality, and the Transformation of Action in Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

This article examines the doctrine of kamma in Theravāda Buddhism by integrating materials from the supplied document with relevant canonical texts and contemporary scholarship. It argues that Buddhist kamma is best understood as intentional action operating within a complex network of conditions rather than as fate, supernatural judgment, or a mechanical system of reward and punishment. Intention (*cetanā*) gives bodily, verbal, and mental activity its karmic character, while *vipāka* denotes the maturation or result of action. The article analyzes the wholesome and unwholesome roots of action, the relation between kamma and inequalities among living beings, the later Theravāda classification of twelve kinds of kamma, and the continuity between kamma and rebirth without positing a permanent self. It also distinguishes early canonical teachings from classifications systematized in the commentarial and Abhidhamma traditions. Although previous action conditions present experience, the Buddha rejects the claim that everything one experiences is caused exclusively by past kamma. Present intentions, bodily processes, environmental conditions, and other causal factors remain significant. Kamma therefore supports moral responsibility without determinism. The ultimate purpose of understanding kamma is not merely to obtain favorable rebirth but to transform intention, abandon the roots of suffering, and bring the karmic process to cessation through the Noble Eightfold Path.

Keywords: kamma, moral responsibility, rebirth, Theravāda Buddhism

Introduction

The doctrine of kamma is central to Buddhist explanations of ethical action, personal transformation, rebirth, and liberation. The Pāli word kamma, corresponding to Sanskrit karma, literally means action, work, or deed. In ordinary Indian usage it can refer to activity in general, but in Buddhist ethical discourse it has a more specific meaning: action shaped by intention.

Kamma is sometimes interpreted as fate, cosmic justice, or a predetermined result of actions performed in past lives. These interpretations are misleading. The Buddha did not teach that every event is caused by past kamma or that an invisible judge assigns happiness and suffering according to a supernatural moral code. Kamma operates through causal conditionality, and its ethical significance derives primarily from the quality of intention underlying bodily, verbal, and mental conduct.

The supplied document, “The Doctrine of Kamma: A Buddhist Perspective,” identifies several important dimensions of the doctrine: the meaning of kamma, its psychological roots, its classifications, its results, its relation to rebirth, and its cessation. Nevertheless, a critical academic treatment must distinguish between ideas found directly in the early discourses and classifications developed in later Abhidhamma and commentarial

literature. It must also avoid interpreting every physical, social, or psychological condition as a karmic result.

This article argues that the Theravāda doctrine of kamma combines three important principles: causal continuity, moral responsibility, and the possibility of transformation. Human beings inherit conditions influenced by previous intentions, but their lives are not absolutely determined by the past. Present choices become new conditions capable of modifying habits, relationships, future experiences, and the direction of spiritual development.

The Meaning of Kamma: Intention as Moral Action

One of the clearest canonical definitions occurs in the Nibbedhika Sutta, where the Buddha identifies intention as kamma and explains that, having intended, a person acts through body, speech, or mind (Sujato, 2018a). This definition places *cetanā*, or volition, at the center of Buddhist moral psychology.

Intention is not necessarily a fully articulated plan. It is the mental direction that organizes consciousness toward an object and motivates a response. A bodily movement caused by accident does not have the same karmic quality as a deliberate act because the intention to produce the relevant result is absent. Similarly, words spoken knowingly to deceive differ ethically from an inaccurate statement made through an innocent misunderstanding.

The emphasis on intention explains why externally similar actions can possess different ethical qualities. Giving money may be motivated by compassion, the desire for public recognition, fear of criticism, or an intention to manipulate the recipient. The observable act is similar, but the kamma differs because the motivational roots differ.

This does not mean that consequences are irrelevant. Buddhist ethics requires attention to motivation, method, context, and likely effects. A benevolent intention combined with serious negligence may still cause harm, while harmful motivation remains unwholesome even when its intended result fails to occur. Intention is the defining element of kamma, but wise ethical judgment considers the whole causal situation (Keown, 2005).

Kamma should also be distinguished from *vipāka*. Kamma is intentional action, whereas *vipāka* is its maturation or result. Treating these terms as identical obscures the temporal and conditional relationship between what a person intentionally does and what later arises when the relevant supporting conditions are present.

The Three Channels and Six Roots of Action

Intentional action occurs through three channels: 1. bodily action (*kāya-kamma*); 2. verbal action (*vacī-kamma*); 3. mental action (*mano-kamma*).

Bodily and verbal actions normally begin with mental processes. An intention directs the body or speech toward an object, although external circumstances may prevent its complete expression. Mental action is therefore foundational, but Buddhist ethics does not disregard outward behavior. Internal motivation and external conduct influence one another.

The Abhidhamma analyzes morally significant consciousness in relation to six psychological roots. The three unwholesome roots are greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). Their wholesome opposites are non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*) (Bodhi, 2000).

Greed includes possessiveness, attachment, and the desire to acquire or control. Hatred includes anger, resentment, cruelty, and the wish to injure. Delusion refers to confusion about reality and failure to understand actions and their consequences. These roots frequently operate together: delusion misrepresents an object, greed seeks to possess it, and hatred arises when possession is obstructed.

Non-greed is expressed through generosity, contentment, and freedom from possessiveness. Non-hatred appears as loving-kindness, patience, and compassion. Non-delusion is associated with wisdom and clear understanding. A wholesome action is therefore not simply one that conforms externally to a rule; it is an action grounded in healthier mental qualities.

This analysis gives kamma an immediate psychological dimension. Hatred does not become harmful only when it produces a future rebirth. It already distorts perception and reinforces a hostile character. Generosity likewise produces an immediate transformation by weakening attachment. Kamma concerns the formation of the agent in the present as well as consequences that may mature later.

Wholesome and Unwholesome Courses of Action

Early Buddhist teachings commonly identify ten unwholesome courses of action. Three are bodily: killing, taking what has not been given, and sexual misconduct. Four are verbal: false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and purposeless or irresponsible speech. Three are mental: covetousness, ill will, and wrong view (Bodhi, 2012).

Their wholesome counterparts include abstaining from those actions and cultivating respect for life, generosity, sexual responsibility, truthfulness, reconciliation, gentle communication, meaningful speech, non-covetousness, goodwill, and right view.

The ethical analysis should not be reduced to a rigid list of punishments. These courses reveal recurring ways in which greed, hatred, and delusion become embodied in social life. Killing expresses disregard for life, theft violates trust and ownership, and false speech damages the shared informational environment on which communities depend.

Mental actions are particularly important because repeated covetousness and hostility prepare the conditions for verbal and bodily misconduct. However, Buddhism does not equate every passing thought with a completed outward action. The strength, duration, endorsement, planning, and execution of an intention affect its moral seriousness.

Kamma Is Not Fate

A responsible interpretation of kamma must reject karmic determinism. In the *Sīvaka Sutta*, the Buddha explicitly criticizes the view that every pleasant, painful, or neutral feeling is caused entirely by previous action. The discourse identifies other causes of painful experience, including bodily disorders, changes in climate, physical stress, assault, and the maturation of kamma (Sujato, 2018b).

This teaching has important implications. Illness, poverty, disability, natural disasters, and social oppression should not automatically be explained as deserved karmic results. Such interpretations cannot normally be verified and may become instruments of victim-blaming. They also ignore biological, environmental, economic, and political causes.

The doctrine of kamma recognizes a morally significant causal order but does not claim that moral causation is the only form of causation. Later Theravāda literature discusses several regularities or *niyāmas*, including physical, biological, mental, karmic, and general conditional processes. This fivefold classification became prominent in later explanatory literature and should not be presented as a single systematic list directly taught in the early discourses (Crosby, 2014).

The practical point remains valid: human experience arises through multiple interacting conditions. Kamma is one important condition, not an exhaustive explanation of everything that occurs.

Kamma, Human Difference, and the Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta

The supplied document draws extensively on the Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta, which discusses the relationship between conduct and differences such as longevity, health, appearance, influence, wealth, social status, and wisdom. The discourse states that beings are owners and heirs of their actions and that kamma differentiates them in various ways (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Sujato, 2018c).

Examples include the contrast between killing and abstaining from killing, harming and compassion, anger and patience, jealousy and appreciative conduct, miserliness and generosity, arrogance and respect, and refusal or willingness to seek instruction. These pairs connect dispositions with corresponding forms of experience.

Such passages require careful interpretation. They present moral causal patterns within the Buddhist cosmological framework, but they should not be converted into a simple formula according to which every disadvantaged person deserves their condition. The discourse identifies tendencies and karmic possibilities; it does not authorize observers to diagnose the unknown past kamma of particular individuals.

The Mahākammavibhaṅga Sutta further warns against drawing universal conclusions from isolated cases. A person who acts badly may appear to encounter favorable circumstances, while a virtuous person may suffer. Results can be affected by earlier and later actions, the state of mind at death, and other supporting conditions (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Sujato, 2018d). Karmic causation is morally structured but complex, temporally extended, and not always immediately visible.

The Later Classification of Twelve Kinds of Kamma

The source document presents a twelvefold classification of kamma organized into three groups: four according to function, four according to priority or strength, and four according to time of maturation. This system is useful, but it belongs primarily to later Theravāda Abhidhamma and commentarial analysis rather than appearing as a complete classification in a single early discourse (Bodhi, 2000).

Classification by Function

Four kinds of kamma are distinguished according to their role: productive kamma (janaka-kamma), which produces a new mode of existence; supportive kamma (upatthambhaka-kamma), which sustains the result of another action; obstructive kamma (upapīḷaka-kamma), which weakens or interferes with an existing result; destructive kamma (upaghātaka-kamma), which terminates the force of another kamma and produces its own result.

This classification seeks to explain why lives contain combinations of favorable and unfavorable conditions rather than one uniform consequence.

Classification by Priority

The second group includes: weighty kamma (garuka-kamma), such as powerful meditative attainments or extremely grave offenses; habitual kamma (āciṇṇa or bahula-kamma), repeatedly performed actions that shape character; death-proximate kamma (āsanna-kamma), an action performed or remembered near death; accumulated kamma (kaṭattā-kamma), other actions capable of producing results when stronger kamma does not intervene.

The category of habitual kamma has particular ethical importance. Repetition transforms isolated choices into dispositions. A person becomes compassionate not through a single generous action but through the repeated cultivation of generosity, empathy, and restraint.

Death-proximate kamma should not be interpreted to mean that one final thought simply erases an entire lifetime. Later Theravāda systems give the final cognitive process a particular role, but it remains connected to previously developed habits and dispositions.

Classification by Time of Result

Kamma may also be described as: effective in the present life; effective in the next life; effective in later lives; ineffective or defunct when the opportunity for maturation has passed.

This scheme highlights the conditional nature of karmic results. An action is not an independent object mechanically waiting to deliver punishment. It produces a causal potential that requires appropriate conditions. If those conditions do not occur within the relevant period, the specific potential may become ineffective.

The Variable Weight of Kamma

The *Loṇakapalla Sutta* uses the analogy of a crystal of salt placed in a small cup or in a large river. In a small quantity of water, the salt makes the water undrinkable; in a great river, the same amount has little noticeable effect. Similarly, the result of an unwholesome action may be experienced differently depending upon the broader development of the individual's body, ethics, mind, and wisdom (Bodhi, 2012; Sujato, 2018e).

This analogy shows that kamma is neither mathematically mechanical nor entirely fixed. The moral and spiritual character of the person forms part of the conditions under which results mature. Present cultivation cannot necessarily erase every previous deed, but it can alter the context in which past causal tendencies operate.

This principle provides a foundation for repentance and rehabilitation. If people were permanently defined by their worst actions, Buddhist moral training would be impossible. Acknowledging wrongdoing, making amends where possible, restraining future conduct, and developing wholesome qualities can transform the person's ongoing causal continuum.

Kamma and Rebirth without a Permanent Self

The relation between kamma and rebirth creates a philosophical difficulty: if Buddhism denies a permanent self, who performs an action and who receives its result?

Theravāda Buddhism answers by distinguishing causal continuity from numerical identity. The person who receives a result is neither an entirely unchanged self nor someone completely unrelated to the previous agent. Mental and physical processes arise in dependence upon preceding processes, just as one moment of consciousness conditions another without an immutable substance passing between them.

Rebirth is therefore not the migration of an eternal soul. It is the continuation of a conditioned process driven by ignorance, craving, clinging, and kamma. The doctrine of dependent origination explains how one event can condition another without requiring a permanent metaphysical entity (Gethin, 1998).

Moral responsibility does not require an unchanging self. It requires a sufficiently continuous causal relationship between intention, action, character, and consequence. A person at age fifty is not physically or psychologically identical in every respect to that person at age twenty, yet the later person may remain responsible for commitments and actions performed earlier because an appropriate causal and conventional continuity exists.

Freedom within Conditionality

The doctrine of kamma avoids both absolute free will and complete determinism. Intentions do not arise independently of conditions. They are influenced by habits, education, social relationships, bodily states, previous choices, and present circumstances. Nevertheless, conditioned intentions can themselves become causes that modify the future.

This is why Buddhist practice is possible. Mindfulness enables practitioners to recognize mental states before they become speech or action. Right effort prevents and abandons unwholesome states while cultivating and maintaining wholesome ones. Right view

corrects distorted interpretations, and concentration makes the mind less vulnerable to impulsive reaction.

Freedom in this framework is gradual rather than absolute. A person dominated by addiction, anger, or delusion has a restricted range of responses. Ethical discipline, mindfulness, and wisdom expand the capacity to respond without simply repeating habitual patterns. The highest freedom is not the ability of an independent self to choose without causes; it is freedom from the greed, hatred, and delusion that constrain intention.

The Cessation of Kamma

The ultimate Buddhist objective is not endless production of good kamma. Wholesome action is indispensable because it produces favorable conditions, purifies character, and supports the path. Yet even wholesome kamma remains within conditioned existence when accompanied by attachment and the construction of identity.

The Nibbedhika Sutta connects the cessation of kamma with the Noble Eightfold Path (Sujato, 2018a). Through right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, the practitioner removes ignorance and craving—the conditions sustaining karmic becoming.

An awakened person can still act bodily, verbally, and mentally, but such action is no longer driven by greed, hatred, and delusion and does not generate the same kind of future rebirth-producing potential. This distinction is sometimes expressed by saying that liberated action is functional rather than accumulative.

The progression may therefore be summarized in three stages: 1. abandoning unwholesome kamma; 2. cultivating wholesome kamma; 3. transcending the production of rebirth-sustaining kamma through wisdom and non-attachment.

Good kamma is not rejected. It functions like a raft that makes liberation possible but is not itself the final destination.

Contemporary Ethical Implications

Properly understood, kamma supports responsibility without fatalism. It encourages individuals to examine the intentions shaping their actions while recognizing that people live within biological, social, economic, and historical conditions.

The doctrine should not be used to justify inequality by claiming that disadvantaged people deserve their suffering. Such claims exceed available knowledge and contradict compassion. A person who witnesses suffering has a present ethical responsibility to respond. The other person's unknown past kamma does not excuse indifference.

Kamma is also relevant to institutional ethics. Although canonical discussions often focus on individuals, organizations develop habitual patterns through repeated decisions. Policies rooted in greed, hostility, or misinformation produce harmful consequences for employees, communities, and environments. Institutions can likewise cultivate transparency, compassion, restraint, and responsible use of resources.

In digital society, intentional sharing, deception, harassment, and manipulation are forms of bodily or verbal conduct mediated by technology. The scale and persistence of digital communication can magnify their consequences. Buddhist ethical reflection therefore asks users to examine intention, verify information, anticipate foreseeable harm, and consider whether communication weakens or strengthens greed, hatred, and delusion.

Conclusion

Theravāda Buddhism understands kamma as intentional action expressed through body, speech, and mind. Its ethical quality depends principally upon whether it is rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. Kamma should be

distinguished from vipāka, the result that emerges when appropriate conditions permit an action's causal potential to mature.

The doctrine is neither divine judgment nor fatalistic predestination. The Buddha rejects the view that all experience is exclusively caused by past deeds. Biological, environmental, psychological, social, and immediate physical conditions also shape experience. Past kamma influences the present, but present intention remains causally effective.

The twelvefold classification found in later Theravāda analysis provides a systematic account of the functions, priorities, and times of maturation of kamma. It should, however, be identified as a commentarial and Abhidhamma system rather than attributed as a complete scheme to a single early discourse.

Kamma makes moral transformation intelligible. Repeated actions form habits, habits shape character, and character influences future experience. Because neither persons nor dispositions are immutable, present cultivation can interrupt unwholesome patterns and establish healthier ones. Moral responsibility is therefore compatible with conditionality and non-self.

Ultimately, the Buddha's teaching on kamma does more than explain unequal experiences or future rebirth. It identifies intention as a field of training. Through the Noble Eightfold Path, the practitioner moves from unwholesome action to wholesome action and from wholesome karmic formation toward liberation from the conditions that perpetuate rebirth and suffering.

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- Usage of appropriate methodology, presentation of evidences and synthesizing of findings
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3. The article is neither under review nor published elsewhere. The article must be in the form of an academic essay, presenting the discussion of the research in an objective way.

4. Elements of the article:

- Title in English
- name of the author(s)
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- Content of the article:

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- ☐ Abstract
- Introduction
- Research methodology
- Results
- Discussion
- References

Academic Article, Review Article:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Content
- Conclusion
- Suggestions
- References

5. An original article should range between 3000 and 7000 words excluding abstract, references, diagrams and data sets.

File format: Microsoft Word (*.doc or *.docx), Times New Roman 12, in (English) journal.

The submitted file which includes graphs, charts and images should be located at appropriate locations in the text, between paragraphs, not within them. All figures should have figure numbers and titles (title case) and should be referred to by figure number in the text. A figure's number and the title should be placed above and outside the figure, for example, table 1 or image 1 and Figure. Figures need to be clear and the author must have the original copyright.

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Author's name, (publish year). Title. (Edition). Place of publication: name of press. etc.

- Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. (1996). Thai Tipitakas. Bangkok: MCU Press.
- Wasee, P., (2007). Sufficient Economics and Civil Society if Social Economic Revived Way. (2nd ed.). Bangkok: Pimdee.

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- Dhillon, K. (2001). Challenges and strategies for improving the quality of the information in a university setting: A case study. Total Quality Management, 12(2), 167-177.
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