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REVIEW ARTICLE

Buddhism and Disability: Addressing Superstitions and Incorporating Essential Buddhist Teachings in Therapeutic Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intersection of early Theravāda Buddhism and disability, examining how foundational principles can enhance therapeutic practices, especially within the context of cultural superstitions in traditional Chinese society. By applying key Theravāda teachings, i.e., the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and insights into the nature of suffering (*dukkha*), the author aims to provide Buddhist-informed educational therapists with strategies to navigate and alleviate superstitions surrounding disability. These strategies, grounded in Buddhist teachings, aspire to create an inclusive and compassionate therapeutic environment that supports individuals with disabilities without stigma or judgment.

Keywords: *Chinese society, Disability, Educational therapy, Theravāda Buddhism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The author of this article delves into the intersection of early *Theravāda* Buddhism and disability, offering a unique lens through which to examine therapeutic practices aimed at supporting individuals with disabilities. In particular, it explores how key Buddhist principles, rooted in the earliest *Theravāda* traditions, can provide valuable insights for addressing and alleviating the cultural superstitions surrounding disability in traditional Chinese society. The author draws on foundational teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Buddhist understanding of suffering (*dukkha*), proposing that these core aspects of the Buddhist worldview can offer therapeutic strategies for Buddhist educational therapists. These strategies seek to foster a more inclusive and compassionate

environment, one in which individuals with disabilities are met with understanding and support, free from stigma or judgment. By applying these teachings in therapeutic settings, the paper aims to offer practical tools for dispelling the harmful cultural myths and superstitions that often surround disability in East Asian cultures. The ultimate goal is to create a space where individuals are empowered to confront suffering in a constructive way, grounded in the compassion and wisdom of the Buddhist tradition (Harvey, 1995, 2012; Gethin, 1998).

Utilizing the framework of the Threefold Training - morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) -educational therapists, who draw on Buddhist teachings or integrate Buddhist principles into their practice, can adopt an ethical, focused, and insightful approach that aligns with the essential values of *Theravāda* Buddhism. This integrated approach promotes a holistic form of care that addresses both spiritual and therapeutic needs, fostering a supportive atmosphere that upholds the dignity and well-being of clients with disabilities.

2. SUPERSTITIONS IN EAST ASIAN WITHIN THE PRACTICE OF EDUCATIONAL THERAPY

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), superstition is defined as “*a belief or practice stemming from ignorance, fear of the unknown, reliance on magic or chance, or a mistaken understanding of cause and effect*” (para. 1).

In the East Asian countries, cultural beliefs often include a complex mix of practices involving Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Shamanistic, Shintoism and other Eastern religious beliefs. These superstitions reflect a deep integration of religious and cultural elements, passed down through generations, where each tradition contributes to a unique set of practices and meanings attributed to supernatural forces. Cultural sensitivity is crucial when addressing superstitions that may affect individuals with disabilities.

Educational therapists in this part of the world working with clients who have special needs have to be well-informed or being sensitively aware in terms of their specific socio-cultural competence, empathy, and a focus on fostering understanding and collaboration to ensure effective support and care with rational or scientific perspectives. However, it is also noteworthy that in the *Psychology and the East* (1978), Carl Jung delved into the nature of rituals and superstitious practices as they appeared in Eastern religions and how they impacted the psyche. Jung (1978) highlighted the value of respecting Eastern rituals and symbols rather than dismissing them as mere superstition. He believed that, when understood correctly, these practices can inform Western psychological theories and provide insights into universal aspects of the human psyche, which embraces cross-cultural appreciation and respect.

To be culturally competent and sensitive is akin to the wisdom of *The Art of War* (Tzu, 5th Century BCE/2005, 2013; Chia & Camulli, 2020): 知己知彼, 百战百胜 – “*Know yourself and know others, and you will win a hundred battles without defeat*” (Chia & Camulli, 2020, p. 6). Just as in strategy, understanding both oneself and others is essential for success. In socio-cultural competence, this means having awareness of one’s own cultural background and biases, while also understanding and respecting the cultures of others. Mastering this balance allows for meaningful, respectful interactions and fosters stronger, more harmonious relationships across cultural divides.

Buddhism, originating in India around the 5th Century BCE with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), spread widely through missionary activities, royal support, trade, and cultural adaptation. Emperor Ashoka’s (c. 268-232 BCE) patronage played a vital role in this expansion, sending missionaries to places like Sri Lanka and Central Asia (Lopez, 1995). As Buddhism entered different regions, it integrated with local traditions, seen particularly in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, which incorporated indigenous deities and Taoist and Confucian influences (Lopez, 2005; Williams, 2009). Trade routes,

especially the Silk Road, helped Buddhism reach China, Korea, and Japan, enriching its diversity with new schools such as *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna*, each reflecting unique cultural contexts (Beckwith, 2009; Gethin, 1998). Together, these elements fostered a globally diverse Buddhist tradition.

As competent Buddhist-informed educational therapists, it is important to distinguish between folk practices and early Buddhist teachings to ensure clarity in therapeutic and educational settings, especially when dealing with cultural integration or religious contexts.

3. DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND EARLY *THERAVĀDA* BUDDHISM

Theravāda Buddhism, being the oldest Buddhist tradition, is primarily practiced in the Southeast Asia, adheres to the teachings of the historical Buddha as recorded in the *Tipiṭaka* (*Pāli Canon*), which comprises three main sections: the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Sutta Piṭaka*, and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (see Fung, 2003, for detail). The *Vinaya Piṭaka* outlines the ethical rules and conduct for monks and nuns, crucial for morality. The *Sutta Piṭaka* contains discourses on meditation and moral teachings, while the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* offers deep philosophical insights into the nature of mind and matter (Lay, 2001). Together, these texts form the *Tipiṭaka*, or 'three baskets,' emphasizing that understanding the Buddha's teachings is more essential than clinging to rituals, which can hinder achieving *sotāpanna* (stream-entry) in the *Acela Kassapa Sutta* (Piya, 2014). There are several distinctions between cultural traditions and early *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings elaborated as follows:

3.1 Superstition vs. rational practice:

Cultural traditions may involve superstitious practices, such as spirit offerings and fortune-telling, reflecting beliefs in supernatural influences. In contrast, early *Theravāda* Buddhism emphasizes understanding suffering and practicing mindfulness, prioritizing direct insight over reliance on mystical interpretations (Dhammananda, 2002).

3.2 Ritual offerings vs. moral intentions:

Folk practices often include ritualistic offerings (e.g., food, incense) aimed at appeasing spirits or ensuring good fortune. *Theravāda* Buddhism, however, views offerings as expressions of respect and gratitude, not as transactions for divine favour. (Dhammananda, 2002). In *Theravāda* Buddhism, offerings of food, flowers, and water go beyond their physical forms, symbolizing values like generosity, impermanence, and purity. Food offerings support the monastic community and encourage detachment from possessions, while flower offerings remind practitioners of life's impermanence, fostering wisdom and detachment. Water offerings represent purity and clarity, encouraging the cultivation of a clear mind and compassionate actions. Together, these symbolic acts help practitioners deepen their mindfulness, selflessness, and spiritual growth.

3.3 Cultural symbolism vs. core teachings:

Many cultural practices incorporate symbolic gestures that diverge from core Buddhist principles, such as local deities as protective figures. In contrast, *Theravāda* teachings focus on self-liberation through the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and etc without invoking intermediary supernatural entities (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 1995).

3.4 Socio-cultural context awareness:

Buddhist-informed educational therapists should recognize the difference between cultural adaptations and core Buddhist teachings in their professional practices with the clients. For example, folk rituals for protection should not be confused with mindfulness practices emphasized in early Buddhism.

3.5 Addressing superstitions:

Therapy may involve guiding clients to distinguish between mindfulness-based practices and superstitions, which may diverge from Buddhism's core teachings. The essence of mindfulness is universal and is foundational in cognitive therapy, aiding in behavioral and cognitive transformation (Segal, 2002).

In East Asia, socio-cultural practices often center on filial piety, particularly in Chinese traditions, which prioritize ancestor prosperity. In contrast, Buddhism emphasizes mental and spiritual development. In Buddhism, offerings serve as symbolic acts that promote virtues rather than providing material benefits. Buddhism emphasizes mental and spiritual growth, viewing offerings as symbolic acts that cultivate virtues rather than trading for material benefits or offsetting *kamma* (action driven by intention *cetanā* which leads to future consequences) (SuttaCentral Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2024). The Buddha's teachings in the *Kālama Sutta* encourage evaluating traditions for their reasonableness and their contributions to happiness, allowing harmless customs to coexist with Buddhism if they align with universal principles (Bodhi, 2000). Rites and rituals may enhance religious appeal and provide psychological support, but Buddhism teaches that true spiritual development should not rely on such practices (Dhammananda, 2002).

4. ESSENTIAL BUDDHIST TEACHINGS ON DISABILITY

Buddhism across all traditions emphasizes core teachings that highlight compassion, wisdom, and the path to liberation from suffering. Key concepts such as the 'Three Marks of Existence' (*Tilakkhaṇa*), the 'Four Noble Truths' (*Cattāri Ariyasaccāni*), the 'Noble Eightfold Path' (*Ariya Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*), and the 'Twelve Links of Dependent Origination' (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*) provide a framework for understanding reality and fostering ethical living (Bodhi, 2000; Lay, 2001). These principles guide practitioners toward self-awareness and alleviation of suffering. Regardless of tradition, these teachings unify the basic essence of the Buddhist path, stressing the importance of ethical conduct (*sīla*), mindfulness and concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*).

In this section, the author has chosen to provide a summary for each of the three key Buddhist teachings related to disability. They are the 'Three Marks of Existence', the 'Four Noble Truths', and the 'Noble Eightfold Path.'

4.1 The 'Three Marks of Existence'

Viewing disability through the lens of the 'Three Marks of Existence' highlights the transient and interconnected nature of all experiences. These three marks are:

- (a) Impermanence (*Anicca*): Recognizing that all conditions, including disability, are temporary and subject to change can foster acceptance and reduce suffering.
- (b) Suffering (*Dukkha*): Understanding that suffering is a universal experience encourages compassion for oneself and others facing challenges, including disabilities.
- (c) Non-Self (*Anattā*): Realizing that there is no permanent, unchanging self helps individuals detach from labels associated with disability, promoting a more holistic view of identity.

These teachings collectively support a compassionate and understanding approach to disability. The three marks underscore that all phenomena, including disability, are transient and interconnected. Liberation arises from detachment from physical and mental recognition and suffering, understanding the impermanence of existence and the non-existence of a permanent, unchanging self. This perspective fosters compassion, wisdom and understanding for all individuals, regardless of disability, emphasizing that suffering is a shared human experience.

4.2 The ‘Four Noble Truths’

The ‘Four Noble Truths’ are the foundational teachings in all schools of Buddhism that outlining the nature of suffering and the path to liberation. ‘*Dukkha*’ encompasses various meanings beyond mere suffering, including ‘dissatisfaction’ and ‘stress,’ reflecting the unsatisfactory nature of existence itself (Harvey, 1995, 2012). Bodhi (1999) describes *dukkha* as not merely suffering but as "a subtle, pervasive sense of unease that accompanies all conditioned phenomena," a concept directly tied to the teachings in the *Khandha-samyutta* (SN 22) of the *Samyutta Nikaya*. This section explains that clinging to the five aggregates (*khandhas*) —form (*Rūpa*), feeling (*Vedanā*), perception (*Saññā*), mental formations (*Sankhāra*), and consciousness (*Viññāṇa*)—leads to *dukkha* due to their impermanent and unreliable nature. According to the Buddha’s teachings in the *Khandha-samyutta* (SN 22), these aggregates are conditioned and thus inherently transient and unstable, which is the root cause of the pervasive unease inherent in all phenomena. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation (Access to Insight, n.d.) emphasizes the importance of understanding the non-self and impermanent qualities of the aggregates, guiding practitioners toward liberation from *dukkha* through insight into the true nature of these phenomena. This understanding encourages a deeper insight into the complexities of human experience and the importance of addressing desires and attachments within Buddhist practice.

The ‘Eight Forms of Suffering’ in Buddhism (see Table 1) elucidates the various forms of *dukkha* that individuals encounter in life. These eight forms serve as a basic concept for understanding the human condition. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (*Samyutta Nikāya*, SN 56.11) that elaborates on the eight forms of *dukkha*:

“Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering, separation from the pleasant is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering” (SN 56.11, Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1999).

Table 1. The Eight Forms of Suffering

| The Eight Forms of Suffering | Description |
|---|---|
| (1) Suffering at birth and thereon (<i>Jāti Dukkha</i>) | This suffering arises from the pains and challenges associated with being born, marking the beginning of life's struggles (Bodhi, 2000). |
| (2) Suffering of aging and subsequent decline (<i>Jara Dukkha</i>) | As individuals age, they face physical decline and loss of vitality, highlighting the impermanence of youth (Khema, 1997). |
| (3) Suffering of poor health and illness (<i>Vyādhī Dukkha</i>) | Illness brings physical pain and mental distress, emphasizing the fragility of health (Harvey, 2012). |
| (4) Suffering of dying and death (<i>Maraṇā Dukkha</i>) | The fear and anxiety surrounding death, as well as the actual experience of dying, constitute significant sources of suffering (Gethin, 1998). |
| (5) Suffering of separation (<i>Pañcakkhandha Dukkha</i>) | This type involves the pain of being separated from loved ones and desired experiences, leading to feelings of loss (Nhat Hanh, 1999). |
| (6) Suffering of association with the unpleasant (<i>Sādhya Dukkha</i>) | Suffering arises from unpleasant situations and relationships, underscoring the importance of skilful engagement in life's challenges. Disabled individuals may frequently encounter social stigmatization or exclusion, resulting in suffering through unpleasant interactions and environments (Walters, 2007). |
| (7) Suffering of not getting what one desires (<i>Upāyāsa Dukkha</i>) | The suffering of unfulfilled desires or the inability to attain what one seeks is a fundamental aspect of |

| | |
|---|---|
| | dukkha. Individuals with disabilities often face limitations in achieving certain life goals, desires, or access to opportunities, which leads to frustration and suffering (Bodhi, 2000). For example, a person with mobility impairments may wish to pursue a career that requires physical ability but find it unattainable due to systemic barriers, highlighting this form of suffering. |
| (8) Suffering of grasping the five aggregates (<i>Pañcupādānakkhandha Dukkha</i>) | Suffering can arise from identifying strongly with one's physical or mental limitations, leading to attachment to the notion of self, compounded by disability (Gethin, 1998). |

In applying this to the context of disability, scholars (e.g., Bhikkhu Bodhi, Damien Keown, Nyanaponika Thera) have noted that these forms of *dukkha* are universal, affecting both disabled and non-disabled individuals alike (see Keown, 1998, for detail). Everyone is subject to physical and mental challenges in life, emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of suffering in Buddhism, which transcends personal conditions and circumstances.

The Truth of the Cause of Suffering, or the Second Noble Truth, identifies the three roots of poisons—greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*)—as the underlying causes of suffering. According to Bodhi (1999, 2000), “The three poisons are the fundamental causes of *dukkha*, as they lead to the cycle of craving and clinging, perpetuating the suffering experienced in life” (transl. from Pali). This understanding emphasizes the importance of addressing these root causes to alleviate suffering and achieve liberation (see Table 2).

Table 2. The Application of the Four Noble Truths to Disabilities

| The Four Noble Truths | Application to Disabilities |
|---|--|
| 1. The Truth of Suffering (<i>dukkha</i>) | Acknowledge and accept the reality of suffering, including physical and emotional pain. |
| 2. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (<i>samudaya</i>) | Understand that suffering arises from greed, hatred, and ignorance; work through attachments to idealized health or abilities. |
| 3. The Truth of the End of Suffering (<i>nirodha</i>) | Recognize that relief from suffering is possible through mindfulness and acceptance. |
| 4. The Truth of the Path to the End of Suffering (<i>magga</i>) | Follow the Eightfold Path with practical and accessible methods to cultivate right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. |

The *Salla Sutta*, or the ‘Discourse on the Two Arrows’ - specifically found in the *Samyutta Nikaya* (SN 36.6) - teaches profound lessons about suffering and the nature of pain, which can be particularly relevant when discussing disability. Below is a summary of its moral conduct in the context of disability:

i. Understanding pain and suffering:

The *Sutta* illustrates that while physical pain (the first arrow) is an inevitable part of life, the mental suffering (the second arrow) that we often add on top of that pain is within our control. For individuals with disabilities, this distinction can be crucial, as they may experience physical limitations or challenges but can learn to manage their mental responses and attitudes toward those challenges.

ii. Mindfulness and acceptance:

The teaching encourages mindfulness and acceptance of one's situation, reminding us that suffering can be exacerbated by our reactions and thoughts. By cultivating a compassionate mindset and

understanding the nature of suffering, individuals with disabilities—and those around them—can foster resilience and emotional well-being.

iii. Empowerment through understanding:

The *Sutta* emphasizes the importance of insight and understanding as tools for alleviating mental suffering. This approach empowers individuals with disabilities to focus on their capabilities, fostering a sense of agency rather than being defined solely by their limitations.

iv. Compassion for self and others:

The moral of the *Salla Sutta* extends to cultivating compassion, both for oneself and for others facing similar challenges. It reminds us to support each other in navigating pain and suffering, promoting a more inclusive and understanding society.

In short, the *Salla Sutta* teaches that while pain may be unavoidable, how we respond to that pain - through mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion - can significantly influence our experience of suffering. This understanding can empower individuals with disabilities to navigate their challenges with resilience and grace. The *Sutta* serves as a reminder that recognizing and separating our responses to pain can lead to a more profound understanding of suffering and ultimately pave the way toward liberation (Analayo, 2018). Additionally, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy can amplify this approach, helping one immerse in its positive effects and transcend suffering (Segal, 2002).

4.3 The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path offers a practical guidance for ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom, which can help individuals, including those with disabilities, to overcome or manage suffering (*dukkha*) and achieve spiritual growth. The Threefold Training, which involves the Noble Eightfold Path, covers moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration/meditation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) to support this spiritual journey by fostering ethical behavior, mental clarity, and insightful understanding, thereby addressing the universal experience of suffering and the quest for liberation (Mahatthanadull, 2018; Piyadassi, 2021).

Table 3. Interrelationship of the Noble Eightfold Path with Morality, Concentration and Wisdom

| Morality (<i>Sīla Maggāṅga</i>) | Concentration (<i>Samādhi Maggāṅga</i>) | Wisdom (<i>Paññā Maggāṅga</i>) |
|---|--|---|
| Right Speech (<i>Sammā-vācā</i>) | Right Effort (<i>Sammā-vāyāma</i>) | Right Understanding (<i>Sammā-ditṭhi</i>) |
| Right Action (<i>Sammā-kammanta</i>) | Right Mindfulness (<i>Sammā-sati</i>) | Right Thought (<i>Sammā-saṅkappa</i>) |
| Right Livelihood (<i>Sammā-ājīva</i>) | Right Concentration (<i>Sammā-samādhi</i>) | |

The threefold training of the Noble Eightfold Path, which involves Morality (*Sīla Maggāṅga*), Concentration (*Samādhi Maggāṅga*), and Wisdom (*Paññā Maggāṅga*), works together with the three key attributes to achieve liberation from suffering. Morality leads to behavioral transformation, concentration in meditation and mindful daily activities enhances mental development and emotional awareness and growth, while wisdom fosters cognitive transformation. True freedom arises from self-exertion rather than reliance on external sources. For further exploration of these concepts, readers are encouraged to study the commentaries and the *Visuddhimaga* (The Path of Purification), which provide a systematic exposition of the practice of the path. (Bodhi, 2000; Mahatthanadull, 2018; Piyadassi, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

Integrating essential Buddhist teachings into therapeutic practices via Buddhist-informed educational therapy for individuals with disabilities can significantly enhance their well-being. The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path provide a framework for understanding and alleviating suffering through ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Threefold Training encourages moral conduct, meditation, and insight, empowering individuals to transcend their challenges. Furthermore, incorporating mindfulness-based cognitive therapy alongside the Four Immeasurables (*appamaññā*), i.e., loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), encourages Buddhist practitioners in educational therapy to cultivate boundless qualities of heart and mind. These virtues nurture unconditional love, deep compassion, and balanced equanimity toward all beings, including educational therapists' self-care and those with disabilities. This fosters a more inclusive and supportive approach to alleviating suffering while promoting holistic spiritual well-being for everyone involved. Overall, this approach nurtures compassion and empathy, cultivating a supportive environment that honors the experiences of individuals with disabilities while fostering inclusive spiritual growth.

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