

# Eradication of Mental Illness through Buddhism

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**Abstract**—In this modern age, most people in developed and developing countries are affected by mental illness. There are many mental illnesses, and their differing symptoms impact peoples' lives in different ways. These illnesses affect the way people think and feel, as well as how they behave with others. Mental illness results from compound interactions between the mind, body, and environment. New technologies and sciences make the world a better place. These technologies are becoming smarter and are being developed every day to help make daily life easier. However, people suffer from mental illness in every part of the world. The philosophy propounded by the Buddha, Buddhism, teaches that all life is connected, from the microcosm to macrocosm. In the 2,500 years that elapsed since the death of the Buddha, his disciples have spread his teachings and developed sophisticated psycho-therapeutic methodologies. We can find many examples in Buddhist texts and in the modern age where Buddhist philosophy modern science could not solve. The Noble Eightfold Path, which is one of the main philosophies of Buddhism; it eradicates hatred and ill will and cultivates good deeds, kindness, and compassion. Buddhism, as a practice of dialectic conversation and mindfulness training, is full of rich therapeutic tools that the mental health community has adopted to help people. Similarly, Buddhist meditation is very necessary; it purifies thoughts and avoids unnecessary thinking. This research aims to study different causes of mental illness; analyzes the different approaches to eradicate mental illness problems and provides conclusions and recommendations present solutions through Buddhism in this modern age.

**Keywords**—Mental illness, Buddhism, mindfulness, Buddhist practices.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE umbrella term 'mental illness' is used to explain multiple conditions concerning health, as it affects your behavior along with your thought process, and mood swings that are generally associated with this term. The simple scientific answer is that mental illness is an imbalance of chemistry in the brain which causes various forms of dysfunction. While much work needs to be done, it has been determined that there are numerous neurotransmitters, chemical messengers which carry information between the nerves of the brain. Too much of one chemical or too little of another can cause problems in processing information.

A less scientific viewpoint is that somehow a person's humanity has been violated and these violations are the basis for the sometimes strange and mystifying behaviors which are hallmarks of the various mental illnesses.

Sigmund Freud has explained mental health as the capacity [1] to work and to love, which includes an absence of an illness that may restrict you from functioning as a human

being in day-to-day life. In the absence of a mental illness, a person is considered to be emotionally and behaviorally adjusted, reaching high levels of productivity, as well as maintaining healthy relationships with other people.

A very simple mental health definition would be a state of well-being, which allows a healthy individual to be capable of coping with stress, contributing to society, and easily recognizing their own potential in life [2].

British Dictionary definition for mental illness is "any of various disorders in which a person's thoughts, emotions, or behavior are so abnormal as to cause suffering to himself, herself, or other people [3].

According to The American Heritage, Stedman's Medical Dictionary: "Any of various disorders characterized chiefly by abnormal behavior or an inability to function socially, including diseases of the mind and personality and certain diseases of the brain. Also called mental disease, mental disorder" [4].

In the Pali Canon, words like "byādhī", "roga", and "ābādhā" are commonly used as an equivalent to the English words for "illness" or "disease". For the purpose of this paper, these ancient Pali grammarian approved terms will be used to describe what Buddha considered words to fully explain different kind of illnesses. The word "roga" is a representative of the Pali language, which is the reason why this paper uses it as a specific term to explain mental health.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The most common mental illnesses are: anxiety disorders, various forms of depression, as well as schizophrenia, and bipolarity. The symptoms may vary depending on the person and the severity of their mental illness, usually diagnosed through changes in behavioral habits, withdrawal from sociable situations, along with personality differentiations. It is a disease which affects the brain, causes an individual to lose the ability to stick to a routine, and disturbs their thoughts to the point of severe consequences. More than 200 forms of mental illness have been recognized throughout the years of psychological research [5].

Mental health and stability is a very important factor in our everyday life. Social skills, behavioural skills, and someone's way of thinking are just some of the things that the human brain develops at an early age [6]. At the start of teenage years, roughly about 14 symptoms of a mental illness may begin showing, as scientists have already proven this through constant research, according to National Institute of Mental Health, USA [7].

Research shows that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. Scientists are discovering that changes in the body leading to mental illness may start much earlier,

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before any symptoms appear. Scientists are figuring out the development of children's brains [8], which makes it easier to help children of all ages to manage a mental illness that was not treated correctly, or at all. The early stages of a mental illness can develop slowly, symptoms appearing later in life. Since it becomes more or less a regular part of the personality of a child, it is difficult to prevent disorders when children grow into adulthood. Not many children are getting the right treatment.

Many employed people are constantly choosing between hiding their mental health problems, and telling about them to their co-workers, or their boss, which may end in a disaster. This kind of mental health problem and behavior can cause serious misery and depression in those affected, and involves both obsessions and compulsions that take up a lot of time and can get in the way of important activities that a person values, mainly at work. Those who have this kind of problem can find it difficult to handle certain responsibilities in the working classes, as they might be overly concerned with preciseness, order, and neatness that can affect their performance.

Employed individuals may be discouraged from seeking treatment for a mental illness, solely because there is a social stigma against any psychiatric disorder. Employees are afraid of jeopardizing their jobs, or ruining their relationships with their co-workers. Because of the stigma, mental health professionals are caught between helping an individual heal, and treating the patient while trying to provide advice on how to deal with the symptoms during work.

Getting the right treatment sequence, as well as a healthy environment created for a person with mental health issues, would increase productivity at work. Mental disorders are often untreated, reducing job performances, and damaging an individual's health. There needs to be an adequate effort of explaining what mental disorders are, introducing recognition of mental illness symptoms to a workplace may accomplish an improvement, and a shift in attitude, but it takes time.

During a survey-based research to determine the mental health of second, fourth and sixth graders in Miyagi, Japan [9], psychiatrists found some interesting tendencies in the mental health of children and the direct way their environment causes some of the issues. The study showed that those who witnessed the March 2011 tsunami, or were forced to flee a familiar environment afterward, had a higher prevalence of mental illness than elsewhere. The children who experienced the tsunami had a higher count of atopic dermatitis than the students who did not, according to Sendai-based Tohoku University's Medical Megabank Organization. With the living conditions improving, the proportion of children with mental issues was higher in disaster areas [10].

According to Singh and Dixit, [11] mental illness may be closely affiliated with the social values and social context. Scientific understanding of a mental illness is widely different from what societal norms make it out to be. There is a difference how society views mental health issues, compared to a clinical understanding of mental disorders.

A person who cannot function in daily life, because of the change in their way of thinking, or abrupt mood changes, is

considered mentally ill.

Schizophrenia, OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), depression, bipolarity, panic and anxiety disorders, PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder), and BPD (Borderline Personality Disorder) are very serious mental illnesses [12], and these medical conditions may result in inability to cope with simple and ordinary tasks in life, but thankfully, recovery is always possible. These mental health disorders affect individuals of any income, race, age, or even religion. An individual treatment plan is the perfect way to ensure a person can understand that having a mental illness is not a sign of weakness, or poor upbringing. Bringing a diagnosis with an appropriate treatment may relieve symptoms, and help a person heal through participation.

### III. CAUSES OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Demands to work long hours under pressure, or caring for an ill loved-one may cause a mental illness, impacting the behavior of an individual through physical and genetic factors. There is no clear proof of a condition such as epilepsy, or a head injury to be a genetic cause of mental issues, but mental illness is usually a result of many factors in the environment around the mentally ill individual. Personal unsuccessful employment or economic hardships may harm a person's mental health, potentially destroying their will to get better.

The symptoms below indicate problems that should be paid attention to when trying to see any sudden changes in behavior or personality. Any recent medical substance use should not cause any of the symptoms listed in Table I.

TABLE I  
SYMPTOMS OF MENTAL ILLNESS

Adults	Younger Children
Prolonged depression (sadness or irritability)	Changes in school performance
Feelings of extreme highs and lows	Poor grades despite strong efforts
Excessive fears, worries and anxieties	Excessive worry or anxiety (i.e. refusing to go to bed or school)
Social withdrawal	Hyperactivity
Dramatic changes in eating or sleeping habits	Persistent nightmares
Strong feelings of anger	Persistent disobedience or aggression
Delusions or hallucinations	Frequent temper tantrums
Growing inability to cope with daily problems and activities	
Suicidal thoughts	
Denial of obvious problems	
Numerous unexplained physical ailments	
Substance abuse	

### IV. A BUDDHIST WAYS TO ERADICATE MENTAL ILLNESS

#### A. Recognizing the Ultimate Realities

To achieve the right way of extinguishing the suffering of life is advocated by Buddha himself. Buddha preached that life is full of pain, also known as Dukkha, which always has a cause, the Dukkha-samudaya. He believed that there was a way to stop the pain of life, and preached all the aspects of life

that he thought to be true, and right, which is called the Eight Fold Path (astangika-marga).

The ignorance and untrue knowledge has caused the suffering Buddha has said to be the main reason we are sick, living an unfulfilling life. The original meaning of dukkha in English is a 'mental dysfunction', which, according to Huston Smith, gives meaning to the term dukkha, explaining how all of our mental issues and thoughts can never be satisfactory enough. The movement of our thoughts means we can never be truly happy [13].

After Buddha, many psychoanalysts and Buddhist experts or scholars have collaborated to explain the concept of never being happy by combining Buddhism and Western Psychology [14]. In theory, the collaborators have tried to overlap the Psychological aspect of Buddhism with the religious and meditational aspect, which led to successful practices all around the world. This gave enough information to create new branches of Psychological science; humanistic psychology, cognitive, existential psychology as well. Alan Watts has said that in order to understand philosophy and religion, we find the ways Buddhism and Psychology resemble one another.

Buddhism is often seen as the most psychological of the major world religions. It originated in a search for an answer to the problem of dukkha (affliction), the existential suffering that comes from sickness, old age and death. This search led Siddhartha Gautama, who was to become the Buddha and the founder of the faith, into a spiritual journey. It was as a result of this journey that Siddhartha eventually received his transformative experience, his enlightenment.

Clinging to your cravings creates more craving, the cycle continues with relationships that cause you sorrow, or lamentation. It is unwise to attach oneself to a situation that is going to eventually fade away, because suffering, according to Siddhartha, is an unwholesome attachment to the things that cause pain. Siddhartha believed that clinging to temporary things will never leave an individual satisfied with their life, which means there has to be an understanding of how to engage in life without the thirst for faulty rationalizations.

The insight which came from the Buddha's enlightenment underpins a Buddhist approach to mental health. The insights that constitute the Buddha's first teachings offer a basis which has been elaborated and re-formulated in many ways, but still remains the central presentation of the Buddhist position. Detailed interpretation of these primary teachings has fascinated Buddhist scholars through the centuries, but their centrality remains undoubted.

#### *B. Practice Meditation*

Buddhist texts have preserved many meditation techniques, using practices of specific Buddhist meditation in accordance to the philosophy of Buddhism. Through the years, core meditation techniques changed along with student-teacher transmissions, polishing the diversity of the techniques using newfound information between the teacher and the student.

Buddhist meditation encompasses a variety of meditation techniques that aim to develop mindfulness, concentration,

supramundane powers, tranquility and insight.

Meditation principles affect the worldly benefits of mundane life, and individuals who believe in practicing meditation have found that Buddhist meditation is the most productive, and fruitful of all.

Psychologists and psychiatrists use Buddhist meditation as a way to increase the chances of alleviating health conditions such as variations of depression, along with anxiety disorders, and bipolarity.

The healing Buddhist meditation practices have been introduced by a variety of Buddhist meditation teachers from the West, such as, Kornfield, Brach, Salzberg, Sherlock etc. [15]. Buddhist meditation techniques have been tested by integrating the meditation aspect to the psychological problem solving process.

Learning how to meditate is a sure way to build mental power, to take control of your thoughts, soul, and body. The benefits of meditation show on our whole being, as meditation establishes a sense of calmness. As Muangman has stated, the physical benefits include a boost to the immune system, along with better blood pressure, clearer head and skin, the pulse slowing down during stressful situations. Meditation reduces pain in the muscles, headaches, relaxes not only our body, but our mind, too [16].

Wallace and Benson have explained that [17] having control over our mental state is essential when it comes to acquiring a meditation technique to build mental power. In a demonstration of a meditation practice, they have produced proof of the benefits on the body, by reducing stress, and bringing the mind to rest. Sleep and dreaming is a different concept altogether, which is not what meditation does to our minds. It relaxes the negative thoughts Buddha has deemed the sole reason why we are unhappy.

In Buddhism, there is much more Buddhist material on Breath Meditation than that of other traditions. Buddha is quite openly and continually advocated Breath Meditation.

Meditation is often used for treating the diseases of the mind, and specifically, the body. The breath and the mind are interdependent, as is seen from the fact that the breath is calm when the mind is calm, and excited, uncertain, and labored when the mind is excited or disturbed in any way. There are a lot of diseases that one can use meditation to heal. A lot of investing has gone into these diseases and their cures and some form of a connection has already been established between meditations and healing. Buddhadasa thought that since breathing is fundamental to every living being, learning how to breathe is essential when it comes to fighting disease. He stated that breathing affects our nervous system, makes us aware of how the air travels through our liver, kidneys, intestines, stomach and etc., everything is related to breathing [18].

A research by Jitsuwan has found that Buddhadasa was right about the breathing technique used in meditation. [19]. With correct breathing, meditation has been shown to have great effects for relieving anxiety and depression in individuals with kidney failure, or who had a kidney transplant before. The base of this research was a 'quasi experimental

design', which used 45 subjects. There were two groups made out of 21 and 24 subjects. The experimental group of 21 people had multiple visits of pure happiness, with light conversations, they were engaged in mindfulness meditation, and were taught how to breathe correctly. The control group, made out of 24 people, was only engaged in light conversation for six weeks [20].

The experimental group of people passed with flying colors. After being taught mindfulness, and correct breathing, they suffered less depressive moments and severe anxiety than the control group members [21].

Another research on moods that affect our mental health has been conducted between individuals of the age range of 15 years and 25 years. Gasandigun started this research at a Buddhist Center (Pharthamgai Temple) in the Phatumthani province. The group of 156 people engaged in instructed meditation, and then took a test to see how their depression levels changed before and after their meditation sessions. Meditation relieved stress, gave them ability to analyze the situation with a clear head, let them control their emotions and elevated their problem solving skills [22].

Meditation does not cure all diseases, and it is important to note that severe illnesses are treated with medicine or other procedures. But however much medicine helps us, meditation is a productive addition to healing. Using your willpower to add on to psychotherapy is one of the treatments that have been proven to work wonders on patients. A patient may help themselves by practicing meditation, not only depending on the medicine. Our minds can look after themselves, as every physical sickness demonstrates how our minds work towards healing the body when we need it the most. Meditation is used to stay calm and happy, improving our overall state of being, which allows our bodies to be cured of the illnesses more quickly. Low-spirited patients heal slower than the ones who use meditation to achieve cheerfulness. As Dhebhavedhi has said, meditation has many benefits, but the strongest are the will-power, mental stability, altruism, and of course, the changes in one's personality. Once you know how to meditate, how to use the mindfulness to your own advantage, you can achieve perfection in both body and mind. You start knowing yourself, and your limits, as well [23].

All of these studies have been conducted objectively, with the help of medical science. It shows that even in the modern age, psychological conditions of stress and illnesses such as cancer or AIDS can be progressively dealt with through less traditional treatments. Individuals may find their will to heal through different methods of treatment, and Buddhism provides various principles and practices anyone can use in their daily life to achieve mindfulness, and peace. People who have learned how to practice meditation use it to take control of their lives, and leave their bodies healthier.

The progress of medical science is evident in the way it is turning to different treatment possibilities. Modern doctors admit that in order to take care of the body's performance, regular medicine is not enough. Learning how to meditate helps take care of your well-being through positivity, breathing techniques, and taking control of what you think.

Treatment of cancer and other difficult illnesses usually depends on modern technology, such as radiation, or surgery. Thailand has presented a method of treating any disease by listening to the proposal of a meditation treatment made by Dr. Intharakamhaeng. Nature works around us, and listens to what our mind tells it. In Thailand, Dr. Sathit has advised to maintain a correct diet [24], and learning how to meditate to achieve a peaceful way of handling our mental processes.

Many people in the West associate Buddhism especially with its mind training exercises. Undoubtedly meditation in its various forms has played a key role in developing an elaborate and detailed system of understanding the factors of conditioning and in developing methods for unhooking ourselves from the objects of craving. This process of "unhooking" is described in the third and fourth Noble Truths. Meditation and other mental exercises combined with study and analysis of the teachings led to the further collection of Buddhist texts called the Abhidharma, which were compiled shortly after the Buddha's time, and to many later works by philosophers and practitioners in India, China, Tibet and all the other major centers of the Buddhist world. [25]

Cheowit has stated that changing your lifestyle through meditation will reduce the stress in everyday life, which is achieved by adhering to the rules of a holistic belief [26].

Human minds are the same as the concept of a Buddhist teaching that the iron rust can destroy the same iron it comes from. According to Dr. Sathit, we need to learn how to produce positive thoughts by correctly meditating, convincing our bodies and souls to become stronger through a healthy mindset. Negative thoughts are like the rust on the iron - they corrode the body, as well as the mind. Dr. Sathit has stated that bad thinking is the reason why we are so damaged. The holistic point of view explains that if a cancer patient has bad thoughts about their illness, it will cause the cancer to feed on the negativity. To change one's body, a person has to change one's mind [27].

Another great example is AIDS, because unlike some forms of cancer, there is no cure for it, which leaves an opening for a less traditional healing process. There are treatments for cancer, whereas AIDS has been dealt with through various attempts at creating a cure. According to Donald K. Swearer, Thailand has a meditation treatment for patients with AIDS. A team of psychologists, nurses, and care workers have worked on training for utilizing meditation techniques. The care workers have worked directly with HIV and drug dependent patients, earning a good response from them in a matter of weeks [28].

The meditation is not a cure, but it creates an effort to make the patient feel better. The study shows that there was a positive result; bursts of empathy, happiness, and patience among the patients and the workers alike.

The study of how meditation affects the health of the body and the mind has been done by Dr. Benson of the Harvard Medical School. The concept of meditation in America was introduced in "The Relaxation Response" by Benson himself. It explains how meditation may be used to release tension, encourages the individual to search for a will to end

depression, loneliness, and despair. The psychological problems that westerners endure day-to-day may be alleviated by meditating to deal with the issues [29].

Meditation has been known to help with high blood pressure, and heart illnesses. There is a study on getting help conceiving children by meditating. According to Dr. Benson [30], practicing meditation will help an unhappy and hot-tempered person to control their emotions in order to create an aura of happiness used to successfully have children. Dr. Benson uses examples of silent repetitive mantra, which helps with bringing out tranquility and peace. This type of meditation is called 'insight meditation'.

#### V. A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO MENTAL WELL-BEING

One way of understanding a Buddhist approach to mental health is to look at another of its key teachings. Buddhism is described as having three pillars, or key elements. These are Sila, Samadhi, and panna, and we can use this formulation to understand characteristic aspects of the approach.

Sila is generally understood to mean the discipline or ethical framework of a person's life. The Buddha taught much about life style. His teachings can all be taken as practical advice on how to live well. The lifestyle which he prescribed for his disciples, which still forms a model for practitioners today, is one that is morally sound, concerned for others, grounded in sober living and respect for living things. This lifestyle is seen as foundational for the cultivation of healthy mental states. In keeping with teachings on the conditioned nature of mind, ethical, non-indulgent life forms the ground upon which mental health can rest.

Samadhi as the second pillar of Buddhism is generally understood to mean the state of mind that arises when a person is spiritually grounded. Often this is specifically linked to meditation and concentration, but it is also well translated as a state of rapture, and can result from any visionary or inspirational experience. In the experience of samadhi, we see both the state of calm and peace which is associated with spiritual alignment and the more ecstatic states that can arise through spiritual practice which have the power to offer lasting change.

Panna as the final element means understanding or wisdom. Literally the word means "seeing through" or seeing deeply. It is cognate with the western term diagnosis. In panna we experience a deep integration of the knowledge which the Buddhist teachings offer. This includes insight into the impermanence of mental constructs, the *samskaras*, and the conditioned nature of our thinking.

From these three pillars and the other Buddhist teachings a number of points can be identified which are significant in the Buddhist understanding of mental well-being.

#### VI. SUMMARY

Happiness is a relevant topic when it comes to differentiating developed and still developing countries. Studies have shown that economic growth plays a huge part in developed countries, as it brings prosperity, but lessens the

chances of being happy. An abundance of individuals who can afford a comfortable life through economic success can be harmful to mental health. Underdeveloped countries seem to be happier than developed ones.

The health issues in underdeveloped countries are a direct result that comes from poverty, trauma, and lack of good education.

Developing countries with a growing population experience the gratitude for the life they have worked hard for. This is an issue of economic growth differences between developed and still developing countries and the situation of the unhappiness in developed countries may be explained through viewing how the still developing countries operate under extreme stress.

The population of a developing country does not have the attachment to a better life, because they know that their life can be much harder than it is now. It does not matter how difficult it is to live in hard conditions, the population will never complain about the stress they feel. A simple way of approaching this happiness is to understand that these people are not as spoiled by a successful economy growth plan, or the waves of capitalism in richer countries. The less developed countries have religion as their savior, as well. Teaching Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam helps people through their hardships by teaching them about detaching oneself from the free good things in life. Religion teaches them that to get good conditions and a happy life is to work hard, and have a limit to your needs.

Admitting that the economic factor is not the only reason why western countries have severe mental health issues is the first step, even though people there have a better living situation. The process of people having more of what they have already achieved is a never-ending cycle of suffering, usually leading to a side effect of depression. Striving to get more than you already have is what is making individuals vulnerable to mental health problems. Violence, constant fear, medical pills that make people dependent on medication, is making the process of a mental illness even harder to stop.

The numerous possibilities for spiritual growth through concentrating on art, music and literature, is hard work that demands effort from the person who has only ever thought about the material side of life. It is worth growing spiritually through detaching yourself from the cycle of paying attention to only the things you own, instead of the things you could learn about to change the course of your life.

By meditation we can enlarge our intellect and develop our power of knowing or seeing things as they truly are. Meditation is very necessary, it purifies the thoughts, and otherwise they are mixed with many things, especially with ignorance. We cannot see anything properly when we are hypnotized by ignorance. By meditation we see the object as it really is; our thoughts become pure and we develop wisdom.

Buddha is originally known for his spiritual guidance, but he was a psychotherapist, as well. During the time he was alive and led people toward inner peace, Buddha developed many therapeutic methods that are used even today.

The Eightfold Path is a practical and systematic way out of ignorance, eliminating *dukkha* (sufferings) before it causes

more damage to our thoughts. Achieving peace of the mind has to be implemented into our lifestyle, in order to reach complete mindfulness and happiness. The path is an essential part of reaching equanimity.

Equanimity (the peace of mind) can only be achieved through ending the difficult cycle of suffering (dukkha). Pursuing happiness is Buddhism's main goal, and achieving mental equanimity through knowledge is a great way to detach yourself from materialistic, bodily needs in order to let your mind open the door for transcendence and the well-being of your soul.

Developed, and still-developing countries, have a dire need of implementation of mental issue awareness procedures. Governing the mechanisms and establishing a coordination unit may be a great improvement concerning mental health problems. And developed countries should focus on revival of moral values, than think only about material prosperity. As well as developing countries should focus to fulfill basic needs have people to uplift their lifestyle.

As with any religious system, the interpretation of textual and other material in the modern context, and particularly in the field of mental health, gives much space for variations of view, and as with other religious positions, there is no Buddhist consensus on particular controversies or a single approach that can be advocated as the sole Buddhist view.

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