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A Qualitative Study on *Mettā* Practice in Conflict Management among Myanmar Buddhists

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ABSTRACT

As there are many conflicts in daily life, Myanmar Buddhists are also facing some conflicts in their daily lives. When Myanmar Buddhists encounter conflicts in their daily lives, it is uncertain whether they can manage these issues using *mettā* (loving-kindness), despite frequently reciting the *Metta Sutta* and practicing *mettā* as they interpret it. This article examines the ways in which Myanmar Buddhists apply *mettā* (loving-kindness) to manage conflicts as part of their daily lives. The research examines the fundamental values of *saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (effort), *sati* (mindfulness), *pañña* (wisdom), and *sīla* (morality) to understand how to develop and utilize *mettā* in effectively handling conflicts. The study aims to explore the *mettā* practice among Myanmar Buddhist people by raising awareness of the challenges and opportunities in applying *mettā*. A thorough study of the *mettā* practice is therefore essential if one is to completely investigate the effective *mettā* application (EMA).

INTRODUCTION

Mettā is benevolence, loving-kindness, the love of all, friendliness, and sincere concern for the welfare of living beings, human or non-human, under all circumstances. *Mettā*'s dominant feature is the characteristic of benevolence: a profound desire to improve the welfare of others. *Mettā* lessens the harm of hatred in all its many forms: rage, ill will, aversion, and resentment.

Mettā, being a pervasive concept, has been mentioned as one of the immeasurable truths and a sublime quality that a human being must desire. *Brahmavivāra* mentions four sublime qualities—*mettā*, *karuṇā*, *mudītā*, and *uppekṣhā*. *Mettā*, the foundation of the other three qualities in the *Brahmavivāra*, can solve conflicts (Mahāsi Sayadaw, 2013). The author Megan Tschannen-Moran defined the conflict as “Conflict is a form of friction, disagreement, or clash that takes place between individuals or within a group when the ideas or behaviors of one or more members of one group are resisted or not desired by one or more members of another group. Conflict is the opposing ideas and actions of one or more persons against another, which results in an antagonistic nature” (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Conflict management involves the identification, handling, and resolution of disputes through the use of *Mettā* practice. This conflict management facilitates the identification of a compromise, an alternate solution to any issue, and the effective execution of the concept. (Niklas & Weissmann, 2005).

As the majority of people in Myanmar are *Theravāda* Buddhists, they possess a thorough understanding of *mettā* as elucidated by the Buddha and His disciples.

Most of them, however, cannot implement it effectively when they face disagreements. Hence, this study makes an effort to find out why they could not apply the *mettā* approach to face the daily conflicts in their lives and during crisis periods and tries to explore the role of the five *mettā* principles for effective *mettā* application. These five *mettā* principles are *sīla* (morality), *saddhā* (Faith), *virīya* (effort), *sati* (mindfulness), and *pañña* (wisdom).

Visuddhimagga Commentary by *Bodagosa Thera* states *sīla* as the consciousness produced by a person who refrains from killing and who maintains the mode of moral duty (Nānamoli, 2010). *Saddhā* is the strong confidence in the Three Jewels (ti-ratana), the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha (Mon, 2002). *Virīya* actually refers to effort, vigor, exertion, virility, and heroism. *Virīya* is the state of being vigorous (*vīra*). It is the element of arranging (marshalling while driving). Remembering (*saranti*), self-remembrance, or remembrance (*saraṇa*) is mindfulness or awareness (*sati*). It can be understood either as a perceiver or as a means of achieving a goal (Nānamoli, 2010). *Pañña* literally means right understanding. Its definition encompasses both knowledge of reality as it is and intuitive knowledge, which refers to precise insight. By understanding the reality and by transpiring ignorance, *pañña* is termed to be a ruling faculty (Indriya) (Nārada, 1987). However, the analysis of this literature provides many precious contributions to the research.

In addition to the *mettā* practice of Myanmar Buddhist people and the role of the five *mettā* principles, this study examines the barriers to effective *mettā* application and the better ways for effective *mettā* application in daily life conflicts. Therefore, this study provides valuable

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information to help effective *mettā* practice or solve daily life conflicts to live peacefully.

Statement of the Problem

Mettā has been considered as a meditational tool, and its importance as a solving tool for daily life conflicts has not been researched properly. Although there are many Buddhist people in Myanmar, many types of conflict, such as workplace, social, economic, religious, ethnic, and political conflicts, have been seen there for a long time. Most of the Buddhist people follow the Buddha's teachings, taught to them by the monks and the dhamma teachers. In the Pāli canon, the teachings for *mettā* practice are described in detail. Some commentaries, such as the *Visuddhimagga* written by Buddhaghosa Thera, describe the *Mettā* practice with wide and detailed explanations. Myanmar people can easily read this literature in their native language. The monks and the dhamma teachers preach about *mettā* frequently. The Myanmar Buddhist people chant the *Mettā Sutta* daily or frequently. However, they cannot apply this *mettā* practice effectively when they face conflicts. Therefore, the researcher aims to investigate the status of the *mettā* practice among Myanmar Buddhist people during conflicts and to explore the role of the five *mettā* principles in EMA.

In summary, although the *mettā* application is widely used among Myanmar Buddhists, there is an absence of efficient and accessible strategies for managing daily life issues. Conflict management by *mettā* application still needs empirical evidence. Moreover, most existing research does not address daily life conflict management among Myanmar Buddhists or the role of *mettā* principles. Therefore, the main objectives of this study are

1. To explore the role of five *mettā* principles: *śīla* (morality), *saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (effort), *sati* (mindfulness) and *paññā* (knowledge) in daily life conflict management based on effective *mettā* application (EMA).
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of the effective *mettā* application in daily life conflict management.
3. To investigate the challenges of the effective *mettā* application.

Research Questions

1. How do the five *mettā* principles contribute to daily life conflict management?
2. How effective is *mettā* Application in daily life conflict management?
3. What are the challenges of effective *mettā* application?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study applies the qualitative approach to provide an in-depth analysis of *mettā* practice among Myanmar Buddhists. We selected the participants in this study using the following criteria.

- The five Buddhist participants have passed successfully the Abhidhamma exam, the Vissudhimagga exam, and other religious exams.
- All are over 40 years old and have many experiences

in their daily lives.

- Moreover, they meditate frequently and have quite a bit of experience with *mettā* bhāvanā.

This study employs the purposive sampling method. All participants have extensive experience in *mettā* practice theoretically as well as practically, and so the sample size was five since it is appropriate for in-depth qualitative research (Osborne & Smith, 2021; Guest *et al.*, 2006).

Before the interview, we obtained the participants' consent and identified them as Participant P1, Participant P2, and so on.

The interview questions are prepared according to the research objectives and semi-structured question types. We conducted private interviews with each participant using a Zoom meeting room, each lasting one hour. Before the in-depth interview of these five participants, the researcher examined two Buddhist people who have well-experienced *mettā* practice theoretically as well as practically as a pilot test for reliability analysis.

The thematic analysis was conducted by coding responses into open and focused codes, followed by theme identification aligned with the research questions and objectives. The researcher investigated manually as well as by using Delve software (Delve).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to systematic data analysis, the researcher finds the following themes and subthemes.

Theme 1: Role of the Five *Mettā* Principles

Subtheme 1.1: Five *Mettā* Principles

Participants recognized the five *mettā* principles—*saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (effort), *sati* (mindfulness), *paññā* (wisdom), and *śīla* (morality)—as fundamental principles for effective *mettā* practice to manage conflicts. Participants highlighted their interconnection and the importance of applying them all together.

A participant (P1) explained:

“Morality (*śīla*): one cannot develop self-confidence and inner peace. Without faith (*saddhā*), it is impossible to practice *mettā* or engage in wholesome actions. No endeavor will succeed without effort (*virīya*). *Sati*, or mindfulness, is as necessary as salt in cooking. Wisdom (*paññā*) is indispensable for understanding and applying deeper truths.”

One participant (P5) reflected:

“Practicing the five principles (*śīla*, *saddhā*, *virīya*, *sati*, *paññā*) while cultivating *mettā* will lead to maximum effectiveness. The lack of these five principles results in numerous weaknesses.”

Another participant (P4) pointed out:

“When the five foundational principles are consistently cultivated, *mettā* becomes more powerful.”

The participant (P1) elucidated:

“Without faith (*Saddhā*), it is impossible to practice *mettā* or engage in wholesome actions. Without effort (*virīya*), no endeavor will succeed.”

Subtheme 1.2: The Most Essential Principle

Out of five participants, three participants mentioned that *sila* is the most essential principle to develop the effective *metta*, and one participant said that *pañña* is the most essential principle. Another one described *saddhā* as the most essential principle.

The participant (P1) revealed:

“Among the five principles, *sila* is the most important. The stability and progress cannot be achieved without it.”

The participant (P4) stated:

“Among these, *sila* (morality) is the most important.”

The participant (P5) explained:

“Progress is unattainable in the absence of morality. Nevertheless, morality (*sila*) alone is insufficient. To maintain morality and succeed in meditative practices, faith (*saddhā*) is necessary. Nothing can be accomplished without effort (*viriyā*). *Sati* (mindfulness) guarantees that one does not overlook or disregard what is significant. Lastly, to prevent errors, it is essential to possess wisdom (*pañña*). *Mettā* is founded on these five principles. When fully developed, they enhance the capacity of loving-kindness.”

Theme 2: Practical Application and Impact of EMA

Subtheme 2.1: Effective *Mettā* Practice

The application of three types of *metta* (loving-kindness), proper knowledge, systematic practice, systematic learning, systematic teaching, and practical *metta* training courses was discussed as essential to resolving conflicts. A participant (P2) shared:

“I practice *metta* daily through physical, verbal, and mental actions: helping others to the best of my ability, such as clearing obstacles like thorns from pathways.”

The participant (P1) said:

“Practicing *metta* requires proper knowledge, systematic cultivation, and consistent application to produce effective results.”

The participant (P3) mentioned systematic practice as

“According to the teachings, I extend *metta* to loved ones, neutral individuals, and even those I dislike.”

The participant (P4) made the following statement about systematic practice:

“However, after learning the Buddha’s *Metta Sutta*, I now practice according to the *Sutta*’s teachings.”

The participant (P5) indicated the systematic practice:

“I begin with *metta* towards my body, my family, visible beings, and invisible beings like devas. Gradually, I expand it to my neighborhood, city, country, and the world.”

For systematic teaching, the participant (P1) provided the following description:

“Ultimately, systematic education in the Dhamma is essential.”

The participant (P2) pointed out:

“Buddhist teachings should be systematically taught.”

The participant (P4) suggested:

“Cultivating *metta* after learning it is more effective than doing so without proper study.”

The participant (P5) said:

“We rely solely on superficial knowledge without

systematic learning.”

“Practical *metta* training courses should be conducted, relating theory with real-life applications.” said by the participant (P1).

Additionally, the participant (P2) stated that

“We should conduct comprehensive teaching programs on *metta* development, which include workshops and practical training courses.”

An additional participant (P3) underscored the significance of instructing children on *Mettā*:

“Nearby individuals, such as parents and educators, should instruct children on *Mettā* through narratives, thereby promoting a compassionate outlook.”

Subtheme 2.2: Other Principles

We identified understanding and tolerance as complementary principles that improve the efficacy of *metta* practice. One participant (P3) noted:

“I resolved these conflicts with *metta* (loving-kindness), exercising patience and understanding.”

Subtheme 2.3: Current State of *Mettā* Practice

While many participants acknowledged the benefits of *metta*, they also noted its ineffectiveness due to a lack of profound understanding, mechanical recitation of the *Metta Sutta*, missing basic principles, a lack of knowledge, and an absence of inner strength in noble qualities.

The participant (P1) shared:

“Although I extend *metta* to those involved, the outcomes are not always successful. Although I recite the *Metta Sutta* once in the morning, afternoon, and evening, the effectiveness is limited because it is not yet deeply ingrained. Proper training is necessary to cultivate *metta* in a truly impactful way. A lack of knowledge is a major issue.”

Another participant (P5) mentioned:

“People lack the inner strength of noble qualities.”

Theme 3: Challenges to Effective *Mettā* Application

Participants identified greed, anger, delusion, and lack of understanding as major barriers to effectively applying *metta* in daily life.

The participant (P2) shared:

“Most conflicts in the world comes from loba, dosa, and moha.”

Another participant (P1) stated:

“The basic understanding of *metta*’s profound essence is frequently absent. The effects of *metta* will be restricted if one lacks the necessary qualities for its extension. It is imperative to receive proper training. Many people are unaware of the systematic methods used to develop *metta* due to a lack of education or guidance. Therefore, learning and practice are critical.”

The participant (P3) denounced:

“Challenges arise when obstacles like attachment or lust (*raga*) interfere with the practice of *metta*.”

The participant (P4) clarified:

“Additionally, greed has evolved beyond simple desires

into more extreme forms such as unlawful greed (*adhamma lobha*) and insatiable greed (*visama lobha*).

The participant (P5) elaborated:

“The primary obstacle to *mettā* is anger. Most of the lack or reduction of *mettā* practice comes from anger, which many people fail to recognize.”

Theme 4: Nature and Context of Daily Conflicts

Subtheme 4.1: Common Daily Life Conflicts

Participants recognized various conflicts in their daily lives, including family, workplace, economic, social, and intrapersonal conflicts. People often attributed workplace conflicts to misunderstandings between coworkers, competition for promotions, and differences in work principles. One participant (P1) shared:

“The most frequent conflict I have encountered relates to work, especially as a doctor. In resolving conflicts, I rely on the teachings and advice of the Buddha to navigate these challenges effectively.”

People frequently mentioned family conflicts, especially those involving financial struggles, generational gaps, and differing opinions. A participant (P2) noted:

“The most common conflicts I face are family-related. Family and social conflicts often arise from differences in opinions or attitudes.”

Social conflicts included issues within communities, disputes, and societal expectations. One participant (P1) said:

“Neighborhood disputes arise, such as complaints about noise from generators or improper garbage disposal. Resolving these conflicts often involves formal mediation or practical solutions to maintain peace.”

Greed and competition often link economic struggles, leading to ethical dilemmas. The participant (1) mentioned: “The economic struggles often lead to greed and anger as accompanying issues. Practically, addressing these struggles effectively is a daunting task.”

Intrapersonal conflicts, such as self-doubt and internal struggles, were also highlighted. One participant (P2) confessed:

“Often, the conflicts originate within myself.”

Subtheme 4.2: Roots of Conflicts

Atta (ego), *ayoniso manasikāra* (wrong attention), lack of positive thinking, and misunderstanding emerged as key factors in the identification of the fundamental causes of conflicts among participants. One participant (P5) considered ego the predominant factor:

“Atta (ego), frequently intensifies disputes, as individuals prioritize their perspectives over others.”

The participant (P5) discussed how conflict frequently results from the incorrect attention (*ayoniso manasikāra*): “We are unable to see solutions when we exclusively concentrate on the negative aspects of a situation. I don’t respond to it but reframe my outlook instead.”

Theme 5: Recommendations on Improvement of *Mettā* Practices

The participants’ new ideas for advanced *mettā* practice

were many, including understanding each other, the importance of having the right knowledge of *mettā* practice, the relevance of regular practice, understanding the importance and purpose of the five *mettā* principles, ways of optimistic thinking, a course on *mettā*, the practice of loving-kindness, and teaching to children.

The following were openly exclaimed by the participant (P1) to achieve a beneficial outcome:

“Practicing *mettā* necessitates systematic cultivation, regular application, and proper knowledge.”

The participant (P3) clarified:

“I extend *mettā* to loved ones, neutral individuals, and even those I dislike, following the teachings.”

The participant (P1) elaborated:

“As a result of inadequate education or guidance, a significant number of individuals are unaware of the systematic methods for cultivating *mettā*.” Consequently, it is imperative to engage in both learning and practice.”

The participant (P2) expressed their dissatisfaction with “However, in today’s world, lack of *mettā* cultivation, dominance of negative emotions, and lack of positive thinking hinder its effectiveness.”

The participant (P4) suggested:

“Cultivating *mettā* after learning it is more effective than doing so without proper study.”

The participant (P5) clarified:

“Practicing *mettā* without understanding and practicing it after education has vastly different impacts. Organizing meditation retreats focused on *mettā* would be beneficial. The participant (P1) said the importance of patience and understanding:

“Thus, I resolved these conflicts with *mettā* (loving-kindness), exercising patience and understanding.”

The participant (P4) explained:

“Starting from childhood and extending to adults, structured *mettā* training programs can help people deepen their practice and achieve better results. Adding *mettā* meditation to these sessions would enhance their benefits.”

The participant (P1) expressed opinion:

“In the modern context, the necessary basic principles may be missing, making it difficult to resolve conflicts through *mettā* alone.”

Findings

The Importance of the Five *Mettā* Principles in *Mettā* Practice

From this study, the five *mettā* principles—*saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (effort), *sati* (mindfulness), *paññā* (wisdom), and *sīla* (morality)—are indeed essential for developing *mettā* effectively. The findings show that without these basic principles, *mettā* practice is not effective. Below are key explanations why these principles are essential for developing and sustaining *mettā*.

Sīla (Morality)—The Ethical Foundation of *Mettā*

Morality provides self-discipline and ethical conduct, ensuring that *mettā* is practiced with sincerity rather than

as a superficial act.

“For instance, in the book *Rahantha Puggo Htoo* (About Arahats), it is mentioned that those with strong morality (*sila*) and *mettā* can live peacefully even in the forest.” (Participant P1)

Saddhā (Faith)—The Motivation to Cultivate *Mettā*

Faith in the Dhamma and in the transformative power of *mettā* motivates individuals to practice consistently. Faith also helps overcome doubts about whether *mettā* is effective in conflict resolution.

“Without faith (*saddhā*), it is impossible to practice *mettā* or engage in wholesome actions.” (Participant P1)

Vīriya (Effort)—The Consistency in Practicing *Mettā*

Developing *mettā* requires consistent effort and dedication. Without effort, one may only practice *mettā* occasionally or in easy situations. Effort helps overcome internal resistance, such as anger or resentment, which hinders loving-kindness.

“Without effort (*vīriya*), no endeavor will succeed.” (Participant P1)

Sati (Mindfulness) - The Awareness that Enhances *Mettā*

Mindfulness guarantees *mettā* is used in real-time scenarios, hence avoiding reactionary actions including anger or impatience. *Mettā* could stay theoretical without awareness instead of a lived practice.

“Like salt in cooking, mindfulness (*Sati*) is essential in *mettā* practice.” (Participant P1)

Paññā (Wisdom) – The Guiding Insight in *Mettā* Practice

Wisdom ensures that *mettā* is applied appropriately in different contexts. Without wisdom, one may misunderstand *mettā* as mere passivity. It helps distinguish between genuine kindness and enabling harmful behavior. “Wisdom (*paññā*) is indispensable for understanding and applying deeper truths. Without such knowledge, the practice will not yield results. Wisdom prevents mistakes and enables proper actions and decisions.” (Participant P1)

The Five *Mettā* Principles as an Interconnected Framework

The study strongly supports the idea that these five principles are not only important but essential for developing genuine and effective *Mettā*. Each principle supports the others, creating a complete approach to *Mettā* practice. Without one, the entire practice may

become weak or incomplete.

“These five principles support each other and enhance *mettā*. The five principles are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.” (Participant P2)

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the practical value of *mettā* in resolving daily conflicts. Key findings include:

- Family, workplace, and community conflicts are common among Myanmar Buddhists.
- Effective *mettā* practice relies on the five principles, with morality as the foundation.
- Barriers such as anger, ego, and lack of training hinder application of *mettā*.
- EMA, supported by systematic education and community engagement, offers significant potential for fostering harmony.

This thematic analysis highlights the nature and context of conflicts, the role of *mettā* in conflict resolution, and the challenges faced in its application. The findings emphasize the need for more profound understanding, structured training, and integration of *mettā* principles into daily life. By addressing the challenges and improving *mettā* education, individuals and communities can foster a more harmonious and compassionate society.

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