

Buddhist-Informed Gratitude Meditation and Emotional Well-Being: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role of gratitude as an ethical and contemplative practice informed by Buddhist teachings and its relevance to emotional well-being from a psychological perspective. Employing a qualitative exploratory approach, the study involved a structured gratitude meditation practice conducted with ten Vietnamese participants over a period of four weeks, with daily practice lasting 12–15 minutes. The meditation process followed four sequential steps: breathing, feeling, mindfulness, and awareness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Based on Buddhist philosophical teachings, particularly from the Maṅgala Sutta and Āsāduppajaha Vagga, and supported by relevant neuroscientific findings, the study examines gratitude in relation to emotional regulation, psychological resilience, and interpersonal connectedness. The findings revealed the emergence of key themes, including emotional healing, improved interpersonal relationships, enhanced self-awareness, and spiritual growth.

Keywords: *Gratitude, Buddhism, Mindfulness, Emotional Well-Being, Self-Healing*

In real life, there have been many experiences of gratitude passed down through generations. In Vietnamese culture, the expression of gratitude and the return of gratitude has become a tradition, a truth of life, and a human value. People who respect their teachers and moral values are cherished and respected. However, limited qualitative research has explored lived experiential practice integrating Buddhist teachings and psychological well-being through gratitude, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiential effects of a structured gratitude meditation practice grounded in Buddhist teachings on emotional well-being.

The Psychological and Spiritual Power of Gratitude

The practice of gratitude, as advocated by the Buddhist philosophical tradition, has increasingly gained support from modern scientific studies. There are many studies that have demonstrated the beneficial effects of the practice of gratitude on one's mental and physical well-being. Gratitude practice has been proven to be beneficial in increasing one's well-being, lessening depression, and increasing life satisfaction. Scientific studies underpin the

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Buddhist notion that the practice of gratitude increases well-being. Dr. Robert Emmons' research on the topic of gratitude shows that individuals who practice gratitude daily experience greater amounts of happiness and well-being, smaller amounts of stress, and better physical health (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude practice also improves one's social relationships because it promotes empathy and compassion. In Positive psychology, the practice of gratitude was postulated by one of its founders, Dr. Martin Seligman, as one of the top virtues that contribute to the happiness and well-being of individuals (Seligman, 2002). According to Dr. Seligman, the practice of gratitude helps individuals see the good side of life and increases one's level of happiness and life satisfaction.

There are many studies that demonstrate the practice of gratitude helps one's emotional regulation by reducing one's negative emotional states and intensifying one's positive emotional states. Gratitude practice has also demonstrated to be very important in the regulation of one's emotional states and in producing emotional balance. Several studies, the practice of gratitude helps build one's resilience as a factor that contributes to one's happiness and well-being. In some researchers and studies, the practice of gratitude was postulated as one of the most important virtues that would build one's resilience and happiness. Research has found that people who exercise gratitude tend to have a positive attitude and mindset despite adverse circumstances (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Neuroscientific studies have proven that the brain too can change structure and function due to the exercise of gratitude to develop a more positive and resilient attitude (Kini et al., 2016). Studies have revealed that exercising gratitude activates the reward centers of the brain, specifically the Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex, associated with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction (Kini et al., 2016).

These ideas are consistent and supported by the Buddhist teachings on the practice of gratitude as it produces happiness and joy. As demonstrated by the Maṅgala Sutta (Snp.2.4) of the Pali Canon, the practice of gratitude results in happiness and joy. Gratitude is also an element of Buddhism for managing resilience. The Buddha said that the world is prone to suffering (*dukkha*), but cultivating gratitude for what we have and what we can glean from adverse situations strengthens our resilience to deal with life situations calmly (*upekkha*). The Metta Sutta, the practice of gratitude and loving-kindness together produce one's emotional balance and peacefulness. The Sattipathana Sutta describes how cultivating mindfulness of gratitude would lead to 'growing from suffering to growth and development' (MN 10). The Maṅgala Sutta proclaims gratitude to be a source of blessings and happiness, entrenching the notion that gratitude translates to mental tranquility and contentment (Snp 2.4). Gratitude is a potent means to develop amicable relationships and create compassion and empathy. There have been psychological studies to establish that gratitude builds relationships, a notion echoed by Buddhist teachings on Sangha (community) and interpersonal conduct. Studies have discovered that exercising gratitude strengthens relationships and makes people feel appreciated and valued (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). There have been Buddhist teachings on exercising gratitude for the Sangha (community) and mutual respect and kindness to others. The Buddha said that exercising gratitude and helping others would create a good society for everyone to experience bliss (Sigalovada Sutta, DN 31). Consequently, gratitude is not merely a pivotal Buddhist teaching but also a powerful psychological tool to boost emotional health by developing stronger relationships and resilience. Through the integration of Buddhist teachings and psychological discoveries, it becomes apparent that gratitude is a medium between spirituality and psychological well-

being. Whether it is about mindfulness, emotion regulation, or relationships, the potent aftereffects of gratitude have been observable in both spirituality and psychological research.

Buddhist perspective

The Sanskrit term for gratefulness is *kṛtajña* (kataññu), which means “recognition of benefits received.” According to *Dutiyasiṅgāla Sutta*, gratefulness is something that should never be overlooked but ever remembered and practiced (SN 20.12, SA 1246). Humans are prone to forgetfulness regarding kindness, as ignorance and greed cause forgetfulness of kindness. Therefore, it is said in *Āsāduppajaha Vagga*, AN 2.119, “A person with gratefulness is hard to find in the world.” Gratitude is described as “the psychological state of appreciating, cherishing, and appreciating goodness received in life. Hence, in *Maṅgala Sutta*, gratitude is identified as “the highest bliss (Snp 2.4).” Gratitude leads to positive acts towards other people and thus makes the enhances communal harmony. They will act with kindness if people have gratitude towards them. Gratitude is also identified as the “remedy of selfishness, crude-mindedness, and arrogance. Hence, people with gratitude and those who do not forget kindness are identified as “virtuous people in life (AN 2.32).” Gratitude generates love and trust in life, inspires hope for the future, and encourages other virtues. Besides, ingratitude leads to darkness in life, to the loss of trust and love for oneself and others. It makes us weak in the face of life experiences. In the *Akataññutā Sutta*, the role played by the factor of gratitude in determining his future life cannot be underestimated (AN 4.213).

A person who fails to be grateful for the assistance he or she gets will be heading for a fall, and the ungratefulness will make people avoid him or her (MA 89). The Buddha himself is an excellent role model on the practice of gratitude. After achieving enlightenment, he gave his second week under the Bodhi tree, or *Ficus religiosa*, because it had protected him during 49 days of heavy meditation. The Bodhi tree is considered the representation of the presence of the Buddha within Buddhism itself. According to the text *A Dục Nhân Duyên Kinh* (SA 604), “to see the Bodhi tree is the same as seeing the Buddha.” The respect that the Buddha showed to the tree and the respect that Buddhists showed down through the ages to the Bodhi tree indicate the great importance of gratitude within Buddhism itself. Gratitude is the intangible string that links people and builds traditions. It is written in “*Ký Sứ về Trưởng Lão Yaññasāmika*”, gratitude is exalted in this world (Tha Ap 326). Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiential effects of a structured gratitude meditation practice grounded in Buddhist teachings.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the study aimed to explore participants’ lived experiences, subjective meanings, and personal interpretations of gratitude meditation. Although the study does not aim to measure emotional well-being quantitatively, it seeks to explore participants’ subjective experiences and perceived emotional changes associated with gratitude meditation. This approach aligns with the intention to capture nuanced psychological and experiential changes associated with gratitude practice, which may not be standardised quantitative instruments. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit a total of ten subjects from diverse age groups. The subjects are aged between mid-twenties to early fifties, and they come from diverse backgrounds, and all are Vietnamese. The subjects include working professionals, students, caregivers, and retirees. The subjects were either practising Buddhists or practised Buddhism out of curiosity to see how the teachings could help them cultivate gratitude.

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The subjects agreed to undertake a systematic gratitude meditation process comprising four steps: breathing with a gratitude component, feeling of gratitude, mindfulness of gratitude, and mindful awareness of gratitude. The subjects practiced this process of gratitude meditation for around 12-15 minutes a day for a total of four weeks, from May to June, 2025. Data was collected using one-time semi-structured online interviews conducted a week after completion of the experiment, specifically on 5th July, 2025. The online interviews lasted a total of 20-30 minutes. The subjects for individual semi-structured online interviews included a total of ten Vietnamese individuals. The guiding questions for individual online semi-structured interviews focused on how subjects felt a difference in their overall emotional wellness, and how subjects understood their overall experiences of gratitude practised. The study aimed to explore how subjects experienced overall changes within their emotional wellness and spiritual interpretations. The researcher analyzed topics of interest within individual subjects' experiences to reveal patterns of sentiments. The ethical considerations of this study entail privacy protection of subjects.

Findings: Lived Experiences of Gratitude Practice

- 1. Healing and Emotional Resilience:** Through practices of gratitude, participants were able to look at adversity from a positive perspective, and the process of healing and building resilience took place. A 35-year-old mother, struggling with postpartum depression, explained: "Reflecting on the strength of my body through meditation allowed me to reconnect with myself. I then learned to look at my struggles, stepping stones of resilience." A 40-year-old man, struggling at work, said: "When I meditated on gratitudes of achieving small things and supportive coworkers, my anxiety gradually reduced."
- 2. Rebuilding & Strengthening Relationships:** The emphasis on gratitude enabled participants to rebuild distant relations and even enhance emotional intimacy with family members "I realized, through gratitude meditation, that I had been taken my parents' sacrifices for granted. Writing a gratitude letter helped bridge the gap," said one 27-year-old university student. "I used the meditation to reflect on friends who helped me during my divorce," said a 50-year-old retired schoolteacher. "I began making more effort, and it revitalized my relations."
- 3. Boost in Self-Awareness and Contentment:** Gratitude meditation helped in moving from external sources of happiness, which in turn helped increase contentment in participants. A 32-year-old entrepreneur said, "I always felt discontented while pursuing my objectives." Gratitude meditation helped the individual realize how much he already possessed, which helped in experiencing peace. A 24-year-old university graduate said, "When I began reflecting upon my accomplishments rather than comparing myself with others, I no longer felt that I was not good enough."
- 4. Spiritual Development and mindfulness:** Participants felt that this act had spiritual significance and encouraged mindfulness and alignment with values expressed through everyday behavior. A participant, aged 45 and a Buddhist, said, "The gratitude meditation practice brought me closer to my religion. It brought back memories of the teachings of Buddhism and the kindness that I have experienced throughout my life." The participant mentioned, "The mindfulness part of the gratitude process matched the teachings that I impart to students during yoga classes. It brought clarity and focus into my life."

Analysis of the qualitative responses showed that the four-step gratitude exercise influenced emotional wellness, relationships, and a feeling of purpose in a positive manner among the respondents. Although each of their personal encounters was different, the general themes of

healing and spirituality were common among the responses. Taken together, these findings suggest that gratitude practice was experienced as a process-oriented practice that influenced participants across emotional, relational, and reflective dimensions. The narratives indicate that gratitude meditation facilitated a reorientation of attention from external stressors and comparisons toward internal resources. While participants' backgrounds and life circumstances differed, their accounts consistently reflected an increased a renewed sense of connection with others.

Importantly, the findings highlight that gratitude was experienced as embedded in daily life. Participants described applying insights from the practice to interpersonal interactions, coping with adversity, and value-based decision-making. This suggests that gratitude meditation functioned as an integrative practice and reflective meaning-making. Such experiential patterns underscore the relevance of gratitude aligning with qualitative understandings of well-being as dynamic and context-dependent rather than static or solely outcome-based.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the experiential effects of a structured gratitude meditation practice grounded in Buddhist teachings on spiritual well-being. The findings revealed four central themes: emotional healing and resilience, improved interpersonal relationships, enhanced self-awareness and contentment, and spiritual development. Collectively, these themes suggest that gratitude meditation may function as a holistic practice. Previous studies have demonstrated that gratitude practices are associated with reduced depressive symptoms, enhanced emotional regulation, and increased life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010). Participants in the present study similarly reported reduced anxiety, greater felt experience balance, and improved coping with adversity.

The emergence of emotional resilience as a key theme further aligns with neuroscientific findings indicating that gratitude practices activate neural regions (Kini et al., 2016). Participants' descriptions of increased adaptive responses to stress may reflect these underlying neural mechanisms. This supports the notion that gratitude also involves physiological processes conducive to stability. Improvements in interpersonal relationships reported with psychological research emphasising gratitude's role in strengthening social bonds (Algoe et al., 2008). Expressions of appreciation appeared to foster empathy, forgiveness. It suggests that gratitude meditation may enhance relational well-being by shifting attention from perceived deficits to relational resources. While the conceptual roots of the gratitude practice in this study are grounded in Buddhist teachings, the findings suggest that its psychological effects are not limited to religious belief systems. From a psychological perspective, Buddhist-informed gratitude meditation may function to cultivate mindfulness, emotional awareness, and ethical sensitivity. This integration provides a framework for understanding gratitude as an experiential process.

The present study contributes to the literature by offering qualitative insights into gratitude as a lived experiential practice, complementing existing quantitative findings. By situating gratitude, the study highlights dimensions of meaning, embodiment, and spiritual interpretation underrepresented in standardised psychological measures. Besides, the study has several limitations. The small sample size and purposive sampling limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, participants' familiarity with Buddhist concepts may have influenced their interpretations of gratitude practice. Future research

could be more diverse samples, employing longitudinal designs, or integrating mixed-method approaches.

CONCLUSION

The research has investigated gratitude as one of the essential ethical and meditative practices in Buddhism and its relevance to modern psychological well-being. Based on Buddhist scriptures and findings from modern psychological and neurological studies, the results indicate that gratitude functions as a practical process with the potential to foster emotional healing, resilience, relational harmony, and spiritual development. The results from the qualitative analysis of the gratitude meditation process, which involved four structured steps practiced by participants, demonstrate how gratitude may be experienced as an ongoing process rather than merely an ethical habit.

Through this integration, the article offers a conceptual link between spirituality and psychological well-being through the practice of gratitude. The article highlights the significance of the gratitude meditation technique in cultivating lived experiences of gratitude. Although the findings are derived from qualitative research involving a limited number of participants, they provide meaningful insights into experiential aspects of gratitude that are often not captured by quantitative studies. Future research may build upon this study by employing larger and more diverse samples, as well as by applying gratitude practices in clinical, educational, or cross-cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the study affirms the importance of gratitude practices within the Buddhist tradition and their continuing relevance as a cross-culturally meaningful human value.

From a methodological perspective, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on well-being by demonstrating the value of exploring gratitude through participants' lived experiences. By foregrounding subjective narratives, the findings provide nuanced insights into how gratitude is embodied, interpreted, and integrated into everyday life within a Buddhist-informed context. This qualitative emphasis complements existing quantitative research in understanding complex psychological phenomena as value-oriented practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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