

QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION ON EXPERIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN THE CONTEXT OF BUDDHA AMONG THAI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS*

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Abstract: The study aimed to examine the experience of psychological distress in the context of Buddhism or “Dukkha” through qualitative method. Key informants were 21 undergraduate students from universities in Thailand. They were purposively selected using a set of criteria. Instruments included the Thai version of the College Student Adjustment Questionnaires, the Dukkha Characteristic Evaluation Checklist, and interview guidelines. The researcher interviewed key informants individually and analyzed data by grouping the data with the same or similar issues using the ATLAS.ti program. Data creditability was secured using a data triangulation method and an expert panel. The findings yielded four main themes. First, key informants defined their perceived psychological distress as frustration that manifests itself in the form of hatred as well as symptoms of distress, such as sorrow, lamentation, and feelings of physical pain, grief, and despair. Second, they mentioned psychological distress experiences with common characteristics, such as anger, distraction and remorse, and disconsolation and despair. Third, the informants reported psychological distress caused by their strong attachment, greed, irritation, and anxiety. Finally, they identified how they relieve psychological distress by using inner strengths, such as reflective thinking, equanimity, and acceptance of the truth as well as a supportive environment to buffer their psychological distress.

Keywords: Psychological Distress, Dukkha in Buddhist Context, University Students, Qualitative Study

Introduction

Psychological distress in the Buddhist context, or Dukkha, is defined as a state of mind that becomes evident as oppression, pressure, malaise, and suffering. The main

* Dissertation, Doctor of Philosophy, Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University. This dissertation was funded by THE 90th ANNIVERSARY OF CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY FUND (Ratchadaphiseksomphot Endowment Fund).

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characteristics of Dukkha are discomfort, resentment, nervousness, sadness, irritation, and agitation. These characteristics all are rooted in Avijja, or ignorance. Avijja's general meaning is ignorance about truth, no desire to investigate the truth about things, a lack of knowledge in four noble truths, and the doctrine of three characteristics of existence—namely, impermanence, suffering or state of changing, and non-self (Phra Prayudh Payutto & Olsen, 1995). Dukkha has its foundation on the Dharma principle of things being impermanent. Lacking in wisdom, individuals struggle to keep things permanent and cannot accept that things are changing. Such distress disturbs people's peace of mind and causes concern or anxiety about events in life, both past and future. These include conflict, doubt, and difficulty in making decisions.

According to the Buddhist doctrine, Dukkha is a major concern of individuals as it can be experienced by everyone. Dukkha as human suffering can be classified into three characteristics: (1) suffering due to being oppressed such as the suffering of both the body and mind, caused by unpleasant objects; (2) suffering due to impermanence, which is a fear of changing; and (3) suffering due to conflict, which occurs from clinging to the five groups of existence, which goes against the law of nature. The suffering is expressed in the form of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. The arising and ceasing process of Dukkha as human suffering has been explained under the cycle of dependent origination or *Pratītyasamutpāda* in Balinese (Suwat Chanchamnong, 2003). Moreover, Buddha also taught the four noble truths, which contained (1) the truth of suffering (Dukkha), (2) the truth of the origin of suffering (Samudaya), (3) the truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha), and (4) the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga) (Phra Thepsophon (Prayoon Mererk), 2005), which is also called the noble eight-fold path by means of the middle way practice as a path to the end of suffering and a gradual path of self-improvement. However, the experiences of Dukkha or psychological suffering in a Buddhist context among Thai undergraduate students are not clearly apparent, as defined by its boundaries and conceptual framework.

Although 94.6% of Thais are Buddhist (National Statistical Office, 2012), there is no evidence of empirical research carried out on this topic. Thus, this qualitative investigation aimed to study the experiences of Thai undergraduate students' psychological suffering in the Buddhist context. The main research questions were as follows: What are the experiences of Dukkha in undergraduate students? What factors help students overcome Dukkha or psychological distress?

Method

A phenomenology qualitative study design was employed. The study procedures are discussed in the following subsections.

Participants

Participants consisted of 21 undergraduate students from government universities and private universities in northern Thailand. They were purposely selected as study participants using the following criteria: must be an undergraduate student between 18 and 21 years old, must have a score below 168 on the Thai version of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, must have answered "yes" to 4 or more items

out of a total of 7 on the Dukkha Characteristic Evaluation Checklist, and finally must have been willing to join this study by signing a consent form.

Instruments

Several instruments were used in this study: (1) the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, Thai version, developed by Premporn Maunsameau (2002) and adopted from the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) (Baker & Siryk, 1989). Its reliability is demonstrated by a Cronbach's alpha of .90, which shows a high level of reliability among Thai undergraduate students; (2) the Dukkha Characteristics Evaluation Checklist; and (3) interview guideline questions about Dukkha or psychological suffering in the Buddhist context. The Dukkha Characteristics Evaluation Checklist and interview guideline questions were developed by the first author and reviewed by two experts on Buddhist Dharma for content validity.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the Ethics Review Committee for research involving human research subjects in the health science group at Chulalongkorn University, the first author contacted the gatekeepers to recruit qualified key informants. Appointments with the key informants were then made to provide information about this study and their rights to participate in the study. Those willing to participate in the study were asked to sign a consent form and complete the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire and the Dukkha Characteristics Evaluation Checklist. Students who met all criteria were invited and interviewed once for approximately one hour each.

Data Analysis

After transcribing (verbatim) the interview tapes, the scripts were analyzed using the ATLAS.ti program by coding messages with similar meanings together. Next, those messages with the same themes were grouped into subcategories and categories. Trustworthiness of the validity of the analysis of the findings, interpretation, and summary from supportive data were achieved through external auditing conducted by two experts on Buddhist Dharma and one expert on qualitative research.

Results

Four main themes were revealed from the data, as discussed in detail in this section.

1. The Characteristics of Dukkha.

All undergraduate students indicated that Dukkha, or psychological distress in the context of Buddhism, which they encounter in their experience are the things or situations that make them feel distressed, uncomfortable, sad, depressed, hatred, exhausted, worried, and anxious. They also experience grumbling, feelings of deficiency, perceptions of not achieving their expectations, and inevitable events that might happen to themselves or their loved ones, such as getting sick or passing away. Yet Dukkha is not all bad. Dukkha itself has the property to resolve itself into strength. The examples of these are:

Be suffocating and suppression. When I was suffering, I felt suppressed, and uncomfortable. When I faced a person whom I didn't like or when I felt very upset, I had this feeling. It can't be expressed in words, but I knew it involved strong suffering and quandary. (ID2:246-248)

The suffering has the ability to make a new life. Because of psychological distress that I faced, it taught me through experience. I could bring it forward to adjust and make my life better. When I was suffering, I knew it was not easy and not comfortable. But the next time I will try to avoid that for a better life. (ID20:246-250)

2. The State of Mind When Suffering.

The three common characteristics reported were the state of mind when suffering during anger, distraction and remorse, and disconsolation and despair. These are detailed below.

2.1 Anger

Anger refers to the feelings of being displeased, being bad tempered, and experiencing hatred. These are shown through outward behavior such as avoidance, ignorance, or challenges to the law; some are argumentative whereas some respond with ridicule or sarcasm. Unfortunately, it sometimes evolves into fighting or attacking others.

Although I faced a little unwanted thing, I lost my temper...such as I had an argument with my friend. I was not afraid to make my friend angry with me, but I was scared of my temper. I was afraid of losing my control. I used to hit the window of my boyfriend's house. Normally, when I lose my control, I vandalize things and might bleed someone. (ID8:117-121)

My heart was shaking, but I didn't do anything wrong. By the way, I was in the situation of a guilty person. I didn't do anything, but I felt like I was being slandered, as a suspected person. It made me angry and moody. (ID20:31-33)

2.2 Distraction and remorse

The students reported that their minds get muddled. By this, they mean they experience a state of mind that is opposite from peaceful tranquility. They tend to tense up or get agitated. They also find that, when they face a bad or trying situation, they tend to blather or moan—in other words, they repeatedly ask themselves why this is happening to me. When they are in this state of mind, they are unable to focus on the present or real situations they are experiencing. They not only lose their concentration, but they also get annoyed and suffer from confusion and concern about events that might or might not happen in the future.

I was worried because I hadn't any savings. I was afraid of having no money for my expenses. Of course, I will have the cost of living to pay, but

my income isn't stable. It made me worried and stressed. Sometimes, it made me cry. I tried to figure it out, repeatedly thinking again and again. (ID13:13-17)

2.3 Depression, sorrow, and burnout

These states of mind happen with people who do not want to face anyone or do anything. They spend their life day by day, doing things sluggishly. They have no motivation, are lonely and sad, and feel sorry for themselves as they have no one they can talk to who understands how they feel. These are indications of psychological distress and psychosomatic syndromes

I was sad for a couple months. At that time, I felt loneliness; I lived with my cousins, but felt no one. When my father passed away, for about 2 months, I stayed with my cousins. After that my mother told me to live in the dorm, not with my father's cousins. (ID2:86-88)

When I was stressing, I got a headache on one side (pointed to left temple). It normally occurred in the evening. I felt this for two to three years, but I never saw the doctor. By the way, it was not a lot of pain, I was able to tolerate it. When I was feeling pain, I didn't do anything. I wanted to sleep, watch T.V., I didn't want to think about my studies. I wanted to relax. (ID6:96-101)

3. The Causes of Psychological Distress in the Buddhist Context (Dukkha).

An important cause of Dukkha is Avijja (ignorance), which leads to attachments, desires, irritation and conflict. The details follow.

3.1 Attachments

Participants mentioned attachments to the past in terms of self-opinion, self-perception, lack of shame, pessimism, and self-perceptions including insult and blame

When I expressed my opinion, they didn't listen to me. It made me annoyed. Oh, if I let them take responsibility, I was sure they couldn't. I was very annoyed and also thought that I worked with a selfish person. I had to follow them, it made me annoyed. (ID15:92-94)

Everything had to change. I had to adjust myself in everything. New friends weren't the same as high school friends. I thought they were already mature. It was okay for me to have conversations with them, but I felt like I was not one of them. I felt like I was not close to friends anymore. I felt terrible, I was far from them. It seemed like they were friends only in name. (ID17:10-12, 21-25)

3.2 Desires

Students reported they had feelings of inadequacy and were unable to obtain something that they expected; this in turn led to anxiety and agitation. They had to

struggle for acceptance, which could cause psychological distress when they compared themselves to others. If they felt inferior, they might envy others and not share in others' joy, happiness, or success. Psychological distress also resulted when people wanted something, but they could not get it.

At first, I wanted not to study here. I was very distressed to learn here. Deep down inside me, I felt that I didn't like this field that I was studying. I loved another one, fine arts, but I had to study something else. My parents wanted me to study other field, and I couldn't argue with them. (ID5:32-37)

Almost crying about expenses—this made me not want to go out anywhere. Because going out meant expenses. I decided to stay alone in the dorm. I wanted to stay alone, depressed alone in room. If I went outside, I might desire something. Especially close to the end of month, I had some money, it was about 100 THB. So, I decided to keep it for food, trying not to go outside for extravagant things. (ID6:224-227)

I did not feel good when others got better scores. I felt discouraged; it seemed like I was not suited for learning here, it wasn't me. When I compared myself to them, it was so different. Maybe I chose the wrong path in life, my feelings told me. (ID19:43-45)

3.3 Irritation and conflict

Irritation as a state of mind is a kind of low-level resentment; in Pali language, this is called *pañigha* (annoyance or irritation within the mind) (Buddhathat Bhikkhu, 2002). It can lead to displeasure and worry and will surely destroy peaceful moments in one's mind (Buddhathat Bhikkhu, 1995). The sources of these irritants can stem from expectations and suffering of significant people close to us. Their words or actions in the past can cause conflict, as detailed below:

It wasn't gone, it was still here. It was bothering my mind; I felt like my life sucked. I had to stay in that room (abortion room). My life wasn't perfect, as I wished; I had been touched by the imperfection in my life through abortion. My life was at an end due to an illegal abortion; it should have been my life, but it wasn't. My mother used to say "Get married, then have a baby at a suitable age." When my mother said something like this, it annoyed me. (She kept this secret so her mother didn't know what she had done.) (ID8:163-166)

I was so confused at that time. What should I do to continue my life? I thought a lot about the possibility of the ways out, such as shall I not graduate in time? Shall I study the field of art, which I love? If not, what should I do? That made me stressed. I worried about my studies. (ID5:39-42)

4. *Things that Relieve Suffering.*

Theme four consists of two factors: undergraduate students' inner characteristics and the support they receive from those close to them. These are detailed here.

4.1 Inner characteristics

The undergraduate students indicated that they are able to relieve their suffering through reflective thinking, a review of past experiences, equanimity, acceptance of the truth, and religion.

I accepted the truth of my family's economic status. I was not as rich as my friend. Thus, I had a limitation in myself. I used reflective thinking to understand the economics of my family and also the teachings of my mother, grandfather, and grandmother. They said not to be extravagant and have high ambition like others. (ID4:43-46)

It seemed that I was able to accept it and be myself again. Time healed me, I was relieved from my suffering. Love is impermanent, changing all the time. At first, it is fulfilled, then it fades away. It was the same as pain: Time can relieve it. However, if I thought about it, it would be painful again, but finally I could gently forget it again. (ID2:83-86)

4.2 Support from persons close to them

Undergraduate students receive consolation, help, support, and encouragement including advice or guidance from those close to them. The persons who support them when they face psychological distress are usually parents, cousins, friends, and teachers. An example of such support is shown below:

When I saw the notice board, I had not passed the university entrance exam. Then I ran to my teacher and cried. The teacher, who was my tutor for the entrance exam, told me that it was okay. Try it once. Your mother will fine for this. She will understand because she has faced this period before. She comforted me. (ID3:46-49)

Discussion

Experiences of Dukkha among undergraduate students can be considered as a state of unsatisfactory existence. The data from this study revealed the students experience negative emotions such as discomfort, irritation, nervousness, and unhappiness. These are the effects of misunderstanding the truth of nature and unhealthy lifestyles caused by delusions from mental defilements, which can lead to them becoming troubled and distressed. Regarding the roots of psychological distress of the Buddhist context, the students reported three main causes.

First, attachments can lead to self-opinion, past events and the feelings of sorrow, self-benefits without shame, pessimism, and self-perception related to insult and blame.

Second, desires can cause suffering in our quest to fulfill our ambitions that we cannot reach. These can lead to psychological distress, such as destitution and

craving, comparisons, and inferiority. If students feel they are inferior, they envy those whom they feel are better than them. When they find others who are more successful or happier than themselves, they cannot feel joy for the other person. Suffering can also occur when desires are not met, such as when people do not get what they want. A stronger desire for something they cannot obtain creates more psychological distress in their mind.

Finally, irritation and conflict can be caused by worrying about the expectations and suffering of significant persons close to them or being ashamed of their past actions. In addition, hesitation when making decisions might lead to anxiety about the future. When undergraduate students are not sure about how they should respond in certain situations, this can lead to anxiety as well. They are not sure if the decisions they make today are the correct decisions and if they will be good or not for their future.

The concept of the origin of psychological distress of these undergraduate students is similar to the concept of three Kleshas (defilements), which are the basic root of Avijja or ignorance (Phra Chanya Sutthiyano, 2009). It is described as the root of destructive states of the mind in psychology. From a Buddhist psychology perspective, Avijja (ignorance) leads to delusion, which is the initiation of mental defilement that prevents the human mind from seeing reality as it is. It is the cause of attachment, desire, and resentment (Nyanaponika Thera, 2008).

These defilements are the emotional states that impair one's judgment or ability to make a correct assessment of the nature of things (Goleman, 2003). This supports the finding of the cause of psychological distress among Thai undergraduate students—namely, Avijja (ignorance), which is the origin of attachment, desire, and resentment or irritation and conflict. These three components are the main causes in this study.

Regarding the factors that relieve psychological distress among undergraduate students include their inner characteristics, such as reflective thinking, past experiences, equanimity, acceptance of the truth, and the use of religion to support their feelings, as well as social support from people around them (e.g., parents, cousins, friends, and teachers) who give them advice, encouragement, and help when needed. The way out of psychological distress in Buddhist teaching is called “the developing process of the right view,” which consists of the external factor Paratoghosa (inducement by others) and the inner factor Yonisomanasikāra (analytical reflection) (Proetphan Daensilp, 2007). When the right view process is continually developed, the psychological distress gently vanishes (Phra Prayudh Payutto (P.A. Payutto), 2009).

Summary

The findings from this study illustrate both the state inside oneself and its roots of Dukkha experiences or psychological distress in the Buddhist context among Thai undergraduate students. A valid and reliable scale of Dukkha or psychological distress in the Buddhist context among graduate students should be developed in the future for use in assessing and providing feedback during the counseling process for graduate students on the path of personal growth and development.

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