

Application of *Mettā* (Loving-Kindness) in Stress Management within the Buddhist Tradition

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Introduction

Life today is full of frustrations, deadlines, and demands. Stress is part of our life. Stress¹ is simply a negative reaction to a stimulus that disturbs our physical or mental equilibrium. What are the strategies used to manage stress to reduce physical and mental suffering? How to acquire happiness in our daily life. And what is the criteria for the effective way of stress management? Social engagement is the key for managing stress. However, the fact is it is not always possible to respond to stress using social engagement. It is important to know how to manage stress and maintain healthy social engagement. This paper will attempt to answer the questions above.

Stress Symptoms and Responses to Stress

The latest research into the brain shows that we, as mammals, have three ways of regulating our nervous systems and responding to stress²:

1) Through social engagement

Good social interaction with people means making eye contact, listening attentively and feeling understood. The body functions such as blood pressure, heartbeat, digestion, and the immune system continue to work uninterrupted. One can think and feel clearly.

When stress is well managed, good relationship with people sustains the harmony and the happy way of life.

¹ *Definition of Stress*. Web. 10 March, 2016. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/stress>>

² *Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes*. Web. 10 March, 2016.
<<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-causes-and-effects.htm>>

2) Mobilization or the fight-or-flight response.

When the social engagement arouses stress, the body releases chemicals to provide the energy either to defend oneself or to run away from the danger.

Once the danger has passed, the nervous system calms the body, slowing heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and winding back down to its normal balance.

3. Immobilization.

This is the dysfunctional state response to stress when social engagement and mobilization have failed. One may find oneself traumatized or “stuck” in anger.

In extreme, life-threatening situations, one may even lose consciousness, enabling one to survive high levels of physical pain. However, until one is able to arouse one’s body to a mobilization response, one’s nervous system may be unable to return to its pre-stress state of balance.

According to Lily de Silva in her paper of “*Understanding & Managing Stress*”³, she mentioned that Philip Zimbardo in his *Psychology and Life*, points out four interrelated levels reaction to stress:

- 1) Emotional⁴: sadness, depression, anger, irritation, and frustration.
- 2) Behavioural: poor concentration, forgetfulness, poor interpersonal relations, and lowered productivity, isolating oneself from others, using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax.
- 3) Physiological: bodily tensions, which may lead to headaches, backaches, stomach ulcers, high blood pressure, and even killer diseases.

³ Lily de Silva. *Understanding & Managing Stress*. Beyondthenet. Web. 10 March, 2016. <<http://www.beyondthenet.net/thedway/stress.htm>>.

⁴ Emotional: How We Think and Feel. Behavioral: How We Behave. Physiological: How Our Body Reacts

4) Cognitive: constant worrying, seeing only the negative, one may lose self-esteem and self-confidence, which leads to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. At worst such a person may even end up committing suicide.

Buddhist Psychopathology

In the Buddhist analysis of suffering (dukkha) in the First Noble Truth, there are three stages, i.e. physical, mental and bondage suffering⁵. The definition of dukkha includes unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, distress, discomfort, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, anguish, unease, etc. The primary suffering is psychological suffering or mental stress.

Buddhist psychopathology reveals mental stress as due to the psychological influences of the noxious trio, namely, desire (raga), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha). The second noble truth (the cause of suffering) discovers mental stress as driven by three types of cravings, namely, craving for sense desire, craving for existence and craving for annihilation. These cravings are underlying the egotistic self.

The root cause of the egotistic self is desire, hatred and delusion. Hatred feeling leads to poor relationship with people. *Mettā* is known as the remedy for hatred. *Mettā* cultivation over a period of time can melt the hatred or soften the egoistic self. Thus, this implies that the concept of *mettā* is appropriate in the context of social engagement for managing stress.

Summary of Table 1 shows investigation of stress management, combining recent scientific research, western psychology and Buddhist psychopathology. There are some similarities in addressing stress. Thus, the implication behind it should not be ignored.

Table 1: Applying the Four Noble Truth in stress management investigation.

The Four Noble	Buddhist	Analogy of Science
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⁵ Bondage suffering is cosmic suffering. It means suffering from the bare fact of being existent as a human being. It includes both, physical (rūpa) and psychological (nāma) suffering.

Truth	Psychotherapy	and Western Psychology
1. Suffering	unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, distress, discomfort, sorrow, affliction, anxiety, anguish, unease, etc.	Symptoms of chronic stress: Sadness, poor concentration, bodily tensions, constant worrying
2. Cause of suffering	Egotistic self (noxious trio and cravings)	The causes of stress - Major life changes - Relationship difficulties - Negative self-talk
3. Cessation of suffering	The spiritual fruition of stream entry, once return, non-return and Arhat.	Social engagement, mobilization, immobilization.
4. The path leading to cessation of suffering	<i>Mettā</i> cultivation	- Engage socially ⁶ - Set aside relaxation time ⁷ : Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing.

⁶ *Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes*. Web. 10 March, 2016.
<<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-causes-and-effects.htm#dealing>>

⁷ Ibid. It seems the Buddhist meditation is successfully westernized to fit into the lifestyles.

		- Eat a healthy diet.
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The Implication of Stress Management in the Patta Kamma Sutta⁸

In the beginning of the discourse, the Buddha stated the four benchmarks of well-being, namely, wealth, fame, longevity, and rebirth in a heaven-world, which are wished for, desired, agreeable but hard to get. Consequently, stress is induced. In the second part of the discourse, the Buddha prescribed four things that will lead to the obtaining of the four things that are wished for, desirable, agreeable, but difficult to get in the world, namely the accomplishment of faith⁹, moral virtue¹⁰, charity¹¹ and wisdom.¹² In other words, prescriptions are given in the discourse to cope and manage stress in order to obtain the four benchmarks of well-being.

The review of Patta Kamma Sutta indicates that the Buddha is an expert in managing stress. The strategies prescribed by the Buddha can overcome stress and result in happiness here and now and in the future. The strategies should be embraced with the concept of *mettā* as the basis. For example, taking precepts with the thought of not hurting others as a basis to protect oneself.

⁸ A 4.61. *Patta Kamma Sutta: The Discourse on Worthwhile Work*.

⁹ Faith: He has faith in the Buddha's awakening thus: "So too, is he the Blessed One: for, he is an arhat, the fully self-awakened one, accomplished in wisdom and conduct, well-farer, knower of worlds, peerless guide of tamable persons, teacher of gods and humans, awakened, blessed".

¹⁰ Moral virtue: refrains from harming life, refrains from taking the not-given, refrains from sexual misconduct, refrains from false speech and refrains from strong drinks.

¹¹ Charity: with a heart free from the stain of stinginess, devoted to charity, open-handed, delighting in giving, devoted to alms-giving, delighting to have a share in giving.

¹² According to the comment in *Patta Kamma Sutta*. Trans. Piya Tan. 2011. Web. 10 March 2016.

<file:///C:/Users/Asus/Downloads/37.12-Patta-Kamma-S-a4.61-piya.pdf> : Here, the lay follower's attainment of wisdom (*paññā sampadā*) is defined as the overcoming of these five "domestic hindrances." (rampant greed, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse and doubt). We might call the five hindrances mentioned in the Patta Kamma Sutta as the layman's hindrances to wisdom.

Benefits of Meditation on Loving-kindness

The (*Aṭṭha*) *Mettānisamsa Sutta* or *Mettā Cetovimutti Sutta*¹³ lists eight benefits of meditation on loving-kindness (from 1 to 8)¹⁴ whereas the (*Ekādasa*) *Mettānisamsa Sutta* (A 11.16) lists an additional three benefits (from 9 to 11):

- (1) One sleeps happily.
- (2) One wakes happily.
- (3) One sees no bad dreams.
- (4) One is dear to humans.
- (5) One is dear to non-humans.
- (6) One is protected by devas.
- (7) Fire, poison and weapons cannot harm one.
- (8) One's mind easily concentrates.
- (9) One's countenance is serene.
- (10) One dies unconfused, and
- (11) If he penetrates no higher, he goes to the Brahma world.

The list clearly shows that stress can be overcome through *mettā*. One can sleep and wakes happily means one has no mental stress of sadness, depression, anger, and frustration. *Mettā* cultivation improves one's concentration. One is effective in his job and not forgetful. One

¹³ A 8.1. *The Discourse on the (Eight) Benefits of Lovingkindness or The Discourse on Liberation of Mind by Lovingkindness.*

¹⁴ A 8.1. When the liberation of mind through loving-kindness is practiced, cultivated, increased, made as a vehicle, used as a basis, and established, consolidated, and well engaged in, there are 8 benefits of the practitioner of loving-kindness are to be expected.

is free from all the troubles of mental stress. The benefit is extended to a happy rebirth in the future.

Metta the most Effective Way for Coping with Stress

According to a research performed by Dr. Russ Phillips, a Buddhist and professor of psychology at the Missouri Western State University in 2008 entitled “*Buddhist Strategies For Coping With Stress*,”¹⁵ seven coping strategies were further studied, namely meditation,¹⁶ mindfulness,¹⁷ loving-kindness,¹⁸ morality,¹⁹ impermanence,²⁰ comprehensive karma²¹ and fatalistic karma.²² The results showed that meditation and mindfulness are not ranked at the top, but that the most effective strategy is the cultivation of loving-kindness, or being non-judgmental, compassionate and kind to oneself and others.

Buddhist strategies become popular nowadays to address stress especially meditation. But *mettā* is the most effective way of coping and managing stress among all the Buddhist strategies. Thus, it is important to find out what are the concept and implications of *mettā*.

Approach and Concept of *Mettā* from Western and Buddhist Psychotherapy

There was a dialog between a group of experts in psychology and His Holiness the Dalai Lama on Compassionate Action.²³ The psychologists agreed that modern psychotherapy is not

¹⁵ Bodhipaksa. *Buddhist Strategies For Coping With Stress*. Wildmind Buddhist Meditation. June 4, 2008. Web, 10 March 2016. <<http://www.wildmind.org/blogs/on-practice/buddhist-strategies-for-coping-with-stress>>.

¹⁶ Ibid. Meditation: Focusing in a relaxed, nonjudgmental way on one structured aspect of a situation (e.g., breath, mantra).

¹⁷ Ibid. Mindfulness: Nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance of the present moment.

¹⁸ Ibid. Loving-kindness: Being nonjudgmental, compassionate, kind to oneself and others.

¹⁹ Ibid. Morality: Practicing Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, and doing these things with good intention.

²⁰ Ibid. Impermanence: Realizing nothing lasts forever.

²¹ Ibid. Comprehensive Karma: Acknowledgement that one's past, present, and future actions will have consequences, and that one has the ability to control his/her current actions.

²² Ibid. Fatalistic Karma: Feeling a sense of helplessness, that one's past actions have led to one's current state, and there is nothing one can do to avoid those consequences.

²³ The Dalai Lama XIV, *Worlds in Harmony: Dialogues on Compassionate Action* (Parallax Press, 1992). 第十四世达赖喇嘛著，叶可文译《慈悲》达赖喇嘛与八位精神治疗、心理辅导界尖顶人士的对谈，第78页，新世纪丛书。

as good as Buddhist psychotherapy. Even though the patient can recover from negative emotions, he does not possess goodwill towards people. They agree that along with the treatment, good qualities have to be developed in the patient, where positive states of mind should be emphasized. The Dalai Lama pointed out that modern psychotherapy seems to focus only on suffering and the cause of suffering, but it does not focus on the cessation of suffering and the path of liberation.

Western psychotherapy's emphasis is more on the technique and the knowledge of symptoms. Its objective is limited to just bringing the patient back to the normal situation. On recovery the patient does not possess goodwill towards people.

The Buddhist emphasis is on training the positive states of mind, i.e. mettā and compassion. What are these positive states of mind? And how are they developed?

Buddhist Approach - Managing Stress through *Mettā* in Five Steps

According to the *Visuddhimagga*,²⁴ there are five stages of step by step approach.

- a) Loving oneself
- b) Loving a person you like
- c) Loving a neutral person
- d) Loving a hostile person
- e) Breaking through all barriers of the above four types of persons.

The first step in loving oneself begins with the concept of self while the last step ends with the establishment of the perception of non-self.

This is a mind training to be done repeatedly. The method is cognitive conditioning. “May I be happy and free from suffering” or “May I keep myself free from enmity, affliction,

²⁴ *Visuddhimagga* Translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Nanamoli. Access to Insight. Web, 10 March 2016. <<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>>

anxiety and live happily.”²⁵ Beginning with realization of how much I love myself or in other words, accepting myself unconditionally. Then this loving feeling and acceptance is transposed towards a loving person, a neutral person and finally a hostile person. The final accomplishment is the establishment of the perception of non-self, breaking through all the barriers of the four types of person.²⁶ that is non-duality of mind of self and other, the emptiness of mind.²⁷ The positive state of mind is the healthy mind that loves oneself as much as others.

Methods for Developing Metta

There are numbers of ways to develop this loving feeling.

1) With the thought of mother’s love

To envelop oneself in mother’s love, forgiving oneself for whatever mistakes done. The *Mettā Sutta* says, mother sacrifices her own life to shield her only child from hurt and danger. Mother’s love represents unconditional love towards her only child. A channel is established to relieve negative emotions like depression, anger, guilt, etc. The negative emotions is healed by mother’s love. Through this contemplation, one learns how to face negative emotions and receives mother’s unconditional love. The acceptance of mother’s love means forgiving oneself and letting go the ego that induces stress.

Tara Springett²⁸, a Buddhist therapist suggests to address chronic stress through the thought of mother’s love. It is recommended that at least 20 minutes is allotted for stillness and silence daily and all that is needed is to envelope oneself with a feeling of love and goodwill just like a mother sending love to a child who has trouble settling down.²⁹

²⁵ *Visuddhimagga Translated from the Pali* by Bhikkhu Nanamoli. Access to Insight. Web, 10 March 2016. <<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>>. p. 292.

²⁶ Four types of persons: oneself, dear person, neutral person and hostile person.

²⁷ *Visuddhimagga*. p. 301.

²⁸ Tara Springett’s spiritual teacher is His Eminence Garchen Rinpoche, the Tibetan-born Buddhist Master. In 2002 he encouraged Tara to become a Buddhist therapist, teacher and self-help author. Web, 20 March. 2016 <<http://www.taraspringett.com/>>.

²⁹ *De-stress the Buddhist Way*. Beliefnet. Web, 13 March 2016.

This is a simple stress coping strategy that can be performed easily by anyone.

To heal the chronic stress is to love oneself. One has to build up the inner strength of a healthy mind before one is capable of helping others in the context of social engagement.

2) With the thought of Buddha's compassion

This method is specially dedicated to Buddhist devotees. Faith in the Buddha is the basis. Devotees rely on the Buddha's *mettā* and compassion for stress relief instead of mother's love.

3) Through the reflection and realization of loving oneself, extending love to others

One has to reflect on how much one loves oneself or in other words, accepting oneself unconditionally. One accepts and forgives oneself for whatever mistakes done. In the same way, others are extremely dear to themselves. So one should not hurt others if one loves oneself truly. This rational is based on the Buddha's saying of, "Searching all directions with your awareness, you find no one dearer than yourself."³⁰ One learns how to feel for others. This is compassion.

Another way is to realize how one treats oneself out of self-respect, self-worth, self-forgiveness, self-acceptance, etc.

4) Through "exchanging self with others"

The concept of loving oneself was adopted by the Indian scholar, Shantideva,, which expounds the cultivation and enhancement of Bodhicitta. By exchanging self with others, one is able to reduce one's envy towards a person of higher position; one is able to constrain one's antagonism to a person of equal position; one is able to be aware of one's pride towards a person of lower position. One is able to forgive and handle the stress induced by jealousy, rivalry and

<<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Buddhism/Articles/Destress-the-Buddhist-Way.aspx>>

³⁰ Ud 5.1. *Rāja Sutta: The King*, Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight. Web, 20 March. 2016. <<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.5.01.than.html>>.

pride and reduce one's ego.³¹ These conditions in turn induce loving-kindness and compassion towards them as they are but the victims of defilements and ignorance.

In such a way, the mind is always prepared and know how to react in the context of social engagement. As a result, social relationship is full of harmony, compromise, love, and tolerance. One learns how to control one's speech, body and mind through *mettā*.

When one realizes or knows how to treat oneself well, that is to know how much one loves oneself then one will have a healthy mentality and positive emotions, that is full of confidence, with no fear and doubts; only then one is conditionally fit to put oneself in the shoes of others to inspire the same compassion and love for others. One listens tentatively and has a good understanding of others' suffering. One will be able to help skillfully according to one's needs. This is how to extend the love from within to those outside of oneself. Thus a good interpersonal relationship with others is initiated. One is able to be of service to others with good intention and able to express gratitude towards others.

Just loving oneself is not a Buddhist teaching because it enhances the ego. In fact, it is against the Buddhist teaching of non-self. Loving-kindness that extended from oneself towards others does not mean less love for oneself because the final aim is to break through all barriers towards the four³² types of persons. This is immeasurable thought of *mettā* that is described in the *Mettā Sutta*, "Just as with her own life, a mother shields from hurt, her own son, her only child, let all-embracing thoughts, for all beings be yours."³³

Thus loving oneself is forgiving oneself and forgiving others. Forgiving others is to love others. The positive stage of mind is the healthy mind that prepares oneself to serve others.

³¹ Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva: A translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Translated from the Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, Revised Edition, 2006), p. 129. Take others - lower, higher, equal - as yourself, identify yourself as "other." Then, without another thought, immerse yourself in envy, pride, and rivalry.

³² Four types of persons: 1) oneself 2) a person you like 3) a neutral person and 4) a hostile person

³³ Buddhārakkhita, *Mettā: The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love*.

Criteria for Effective Ways of Stress Management

1) Through the thought of “May I be happy and free from suffering”, “May you be happy and free from suffering”. The mind is conditioned repeatedly with positive state of mind, loving oneself and others. The mind is strengthened as it is exposed to positive emotions most of the time. There is no space for negative emotions such as hatred, anger, anxiety.

2) Over time, the mind is slowly transformed from a narrow, constricted mind to a wide expanded mind. The expanded mind is full of caring, sympathy and *mettā* for others, there is no space or time to exaggerate one’s own minor problems. When the focus on self interest is shifted, the stress that underlies the egostic self is no longer there. Thus, this is how the practice of helping others is actually helping oneself.

3) The change of attitude begins with the conditioning mind of *mettā*. It is *mettā* cultivation that transforms a person, through all bodily, verbal and mental activities. In serving and helping others, one experiences happiness. It is essential to keep on the *mettā* activities in one’s social engagement. This inner happiness is not through praying and could not be stolen or disappear. One becomes more free of stress as the mind has less afflictions.

4) Liberation of mind is supramundane because of the “immeasurable” mind. One has to understand the impact of “immeasurable” starting from loving oneself and extending it towards uncountable sentient beings in all directions.

5) In the *Mettā Sutta*³⁴ the training is threefold, namely, training in virtue (*Sīla*), training in concentration (*Samādhi*) and training in wisdom (*Paññā*). The progressive training of *mettā* cultivation is applicable to all people with different capabilities of learning. Yet each stage of development is equally important as they condition each other for further improvement. Table 2 shows the co-relation between the threefold training and the three stages of stress management. This is a well-structured progressive training for the elimination of stress.

³⁴ Buddhārakkhita, *Mettā: The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love*.

Table 2: Stress management with the concept of *mettā*

A) Threefold Training	Sīla	Samādhi	Paññā
Mettā Sutta devided into 3 parts	<p><i>“Should be able, honest and upright, gentle in speech, meek and not proud.”</i></p> <p>“</p>	<p>1) <i>“May all be well and secure, May all beings be happy!”</i></p> <p><i>“Also, he must refrain from any unwholesome action.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Holding no more to wrong beliefs, with virtue and vision of the ultimate, and having overcome all sensual desires, never in a womb is one born again.”</i></p>
Comments	<p>Good seeds of positive mental states planted in the beginning.</p>	<p>Mettā is radiated during meditation. It deepens cultivation & meditation joy.</p>	<p>Slowly leading to transcendental realization.</p>
		<p>2) <i>“Let none deceive or decry, his fellowmen anywhere;</i></p>	

		<i>Let none wish others harm, in resentment or in hate.”</i>	
Comments		Total commitment to mettā, involving body, speech and mind.	
B) 3 levels of concentration	rudimentary	access	placement
C) Predicted 3 stages of stress management and results	coping with stress - social engagement - happiness	managing stress - social engagement - happiness.	transcendence of stress - ultimate happiness.

D) Signs and symptoms of stress	Probably fixing or partially eliminating emotional, behavioral, physiological & cognitive stresses.	Eliminating emotional, behavioural, physiological and cognitive stresses.
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In summary, effective ways of stress management should have the following criteria:

1. The mind is conditioned repeatedly with positive states of mind over a period of time.
2. One has to experience happiness in social engagement through bodily, speech and mind cultivation.
3. One has to understand the impact of the “immeasurable”.
4. Stress Management should be structured on the threefold training of virtue, concentration, and wisdom with due flexibility for personal cultivation and development, ranging from this life’s happiness to the ultimate happiness.

Conclusion

The application of *mettā* in relation to stress management is the cultivation of positive states of mind, that of loving oneself and loving others. This leads to the realisation that helping others is actually helping oneself. This is being developed during *mettā* cultivation, the healthy mind strengthens the social engagement in the management of stress, establishing good interpersonal relationships, reducing the egostic self, that is the source of the afflicted mind.

The cultivation starts with the concept of loving oneself and ends with the realization of non-self. The conditioning of positive states of mind over a period of time is aimed at transforming one’s egostic self to non-self. The transformation is through all bodily, verbal and mental activities of *mettā* and happiness obtained. The threefold training (*Sīla*, *Samādhi* and

Paññā) structure allows people to enjoy the happiness here and now and in the future, depending on one's capability of self-development. The impact of "immeasurable" of *mettā* has an implication of the commitment for others' well-being through one's own life . These are the criteria for the effectiveness of stress management through the concept of *mettā*.

As such, it is concluded that the concept of *mettā* is an effective way for managing stress. The concept of *mettā* of loving oneself and loving others is universal and applicable to today's society for both Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

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