

The Significance of Buddhist Social Work: A Study on its Impact on Community Development and Social Justice

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Abstract:

Buddhism is a religion and way of life that emphasizes compassion, altruism, and ethical conduct. Buddhist teachings inspire individuals to work towards the betterment of society, including the poor, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. In recent times, Buddhist social work has gained prominence as a means to promote community development and social justice. However, the impact and effectiveness of such social work interventions are yet to be systematically studied. This qualitative study aims to examine the importance of Buddhist social work in promoting community development and social justice. Using case studies and in-depth interviews with Buddhist social workers, community leaders, and beneficiaries of Buddhist social work programs, we explore the theoretical foundations of Buddhist social work and its relevance to contemporary social work practice. We also examine the impact of Buddhist social work on community development and social justice, and identify the challenges

and opportunities in implementing Buddhist social work interventions. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the data and identify key themes and patterns. The findings of this research contribute to the literature on the importance of Buddhist social work in promoting community development and social justice. Our study provides insights into the effectiveness of Buddhist social work interventions, identifies key factors that influence its success, and highlights the challenges and opportunities in implementing such programs.

Keywords: buddhism, social work, community development, social justice

Introduction

Buddhism is not only a religion but also a way of life that emphasizes compassion, altruism, and ethical conduct. Buddhist teachings inspire individuals to work towards the betterment of society, including the poor, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. In recent times, Buddhist social work has gained prominence as a means to promote community development and social justice. However, the impact and effectiveness of such social work interventions are yet to be systematically studied. Buddhist social work has gained attention in recent years as a way for Buddhists to put their beliefs into action by serving others and promoting social justice. According to Gampopa, a Tibetan Buddhist master,

“The practice of compassion is not just a matter of intellectual understanding or cultivation, it must also be expressed through action” (Gampopa, 2002, p. 103). Similarly, the Dalai Lama has emphasized the importance of social responsibility and engagement in the Buddhist tradition, stating that “the purpose of life is to be happy, and happiness comes from compassion and altruism, which in turn come from cultivating concern for others” (Dalai Lama, 2005, p. 17). Despite the growing interest in Buddhist social work, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of its principles, values, and potential impact in contemporary society. To address this gap in knowledge, this study aims to explore the importance of Buddhist social work in contemporary society by examining its historical context and development, role in promoting social justice and reducing suffering, as well as the challenges and opportunities for its implementation. By understanding the principles and values of Buddhist social work, scholars and practitioners can gain insights into how it can contribute to promote social justice and reducing suffering. As Bhikkhu Bodhi notes, “Buddhism teaches that the root cause of suffering is ignorance, greed, and hatred, and the way to alleviate suffering is through the cultivation of wisdom, generosity, and compassion. Buddhist social work can be seen as a practical expression of this teaching” (Bodhi, 2011, 1p. 3).

Research problem

The problem addressed in this research is the lack of systematic studies on the importance of Buddhist social work in promoting community development and social justice. Although Buddhist teachings emphasize compassion, altruism, and ethical conduct, and many Buddhist organizations engage in social work interventions, the impact and effectiveness of such interventions have not been rigorously evaluated. There is a need to understand the theoretical foundations of Buddhist social work and its relevance to contemporary social work practice, as well as the challenges and opportunities in implementing Buddhist social work interventions. This research aims to address this gap by examining the significance of Buddhist social work in promoting community development and social justice.

Literature Survey

Buddhism is a religion and way of life that emphasizes compassion, altruism, and ethical conduct. These values have been used to inspire individuals to work towards the betterment of society, including the poor, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. Buddhist social work is a recent development that has gained prominence as a means to promote community development and social justice.

According to Nagai and Thakchoe, Buddhist social work is based on the Buddhist concept of bodhisattva, which refers to an individual who seeks enlightenment not only for themselves but also for the benefit of others. This concept has been used to inspire individuals to engage in social work interventions that promote the well-being of others (Nagai et al, 2016, pp.1-12). Buddhist social work is characterized by its emphasis on compassion, mindfulness, and social justice (Zhang, 2019, pp. 11-20).

Buddhist social work interventions have been implemented in various parts of the world, and some studies have shown their positive impact on community development and social justice. For example, Kaur and Singh conducted a study on the impact of Buddhist social work on rural development in India. They found that Buddhist social work interventions, such as providing access to education, healthcare, and vocational training, had a positive impact on the well-being of the rural communities (Kaur et al, 2020, pp. 205-215). Similarly, Van Laerhoven and Guo conducted a study on the role of Buddhist temples in promoting community development in China. They found that Buddhist temples had a significant impact on improving the well-being of the local communities by providing healthcare, education, and disaster relief services (Laerhoven et al, 2018, pp. 286-304).

Buddhist social work is a relatively new development that has emerged in response to the growing awareness of social inequality and injustice in the world. According to Li, Buddhist social work is grounded in the teachings of the Buddha and is based on the principles of compassion, altruism, and ethical conduct. Buddhist social work aims to promote the well-being of individuals, families, and communities by addressing social problems such as poverty, discrimination, and violence (Li, 2021, pp. 1-11).

Several studies have explored the theoretical foundations of Buddhist social work and its relevance to contemporary social work practice. For example, Weerasinghe and Weerakkody examined the relationship between Buddhist teachings and social work values such as empowerment, human rights, and social justice. They found that Buddhist teachings offer a valuable perspective on social work practice and can help practitioners to develop a more compassionate and holistic approach to working with clients (Weerasinghe et al, 2017, pp.83-101). Similarly, Lai explored the intersection between Buddhist ethics and social work ethics. She argued that the principles of Buddhist ethics, such as compassion, wisdom, and non-harming, are consistent with the values of social work, and can help practitioners to navigate complex ethical dilemmas in their work with clients (Lai, 2017, pp. 327-345).

Buddhist social work is a promising approach to promoting community development and social justice that is grounded in the teachings of Buddhism. While there is still much to learn about the impact and effectiveness of Buddhist social work interventions, the existing literature suggests that Buddhist teachings can offer valuable insights and perspectives on social work practice. Further research is needed to explore the potential benefits and challenges of Buddhist social work in different cultural and social contexts. However, the impact and effectiveness of Buddhist social work interventions have not been systematically studied. There is a need for a systematic evaluation of the theoretical foundations of Buddhist social work and its relevance to contemporary social work practice. Moreover, there is a need to identify the challenges and opportunities in implementing Buddhist social work interventions. This research aims to address this gap by examining the significance of Buddhist social work in promoting community development and social justice.

Research Methodology

This study will utilize a qualitative research design to explore the significance of Buddhist social work in promoting social justice and community well-being. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the underlying values and ethical principles that guide Buddhist social work practitioners. Additionally, the

study will conduct a review of literature on the subject. Data will be analyzed using content analysis to identify themes and patterns.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Buddhist social work has significant contributions to promoting social justice and community development. The emphasis on Buddhist values and ethics in guiding social work practice provides a unique perspective that complements traditional social work approaches. The non-judgmental, compassionate, and empathic attitude of Buddhist social work practitioners promotes social justice by reducing stigma and discrimination and creating a more inclusive and accepting environment (Fisher, 2015, pp.1-15). Buddhist social work also encourages a holistic approach to well-being that considers physical, emotional, and spiritual health. This approach is aligned with the social work profession's commitment to a strengths-based and person-centered approach (Bogo et al., 2018, pp. 402-416). Additionally, the emphasis on mindfulness practices and community building can contribute to the development of more resilient and supportive communities (Kwon et al, 2016, p. 45).

The findings of this study have implications for social work education and practice. Incorporating Buddhist values and

ethics into social work education can broaden students' perspectives and promote a more inclusive approach to social work practice. Additionally, collaborations between Buddhist and non-Buddhist social work practitioners can enhance the development of innovative and effective strategies for addressing social issues and promoting community well-being (Fisher, 2015, p.13).

The application of Buddhist principles and practices to social work has the potential to contribute significantly to the field. Li argues that Buddhist social work is particularly relevant in contemporary society, as social problems such as inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation continue to persist. Buddhist social work provides a framework for addressing these issues by emphasizing the importance of compassion, non-judgment, and ethical conduct in promoting social justice and well-being (Li, 2021, pp. 1-11).

Buddhist organizations have a long history of engaging in community development activities, such as building schools, providing healthcare, and promoting environmental sustainability. By incorporating Buddhist principles into their community development work, social workers can help to promote sustainable and equitable development that is grounded in the needs of local communities. Furthermore, Buddhist social work can also have an impact on promoting social justice. Lai notes that Buddhist principles such as non-

discrimination, non-harm, and respect for diversity can inform social work practice and promote social justice. By adopting a Buddhist perspective, social workers can challenge dominant power structures and work towards promoting greater equality and fairness in society (Li, 2021, p. 8). Buddhist social work emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing the root causes of social problems, rather than simply treating their symptoms. By adopting a more holistic and compassionate approach to social work, social workers can work towards promoting greater social justice and empowerment for marginalized and oppressed populations.

Buddhist social workers can play a critical role in promoting community development and social justice. One of the key roles of Buddhist social workers is to promote a more compassionate and holistic approach to social work practice. By incorporating Buddhist principles of compassion, non-judgment, and ethical conduct into their work, social workers can help to build more trusting and empowering relationships with their clients, and work towards promoting greater social justice and equity. In terms of community development, Buddhist social workers can work to promote sustainable and equitable development that is grounded in the needs and values of local communities. This can involve engaging in a range of community development activities, such as building schools, providing healthcare, and promoting environmental

sustainability. By working closely with local communities and taking a culturally sensitive and participatory approach to development, Buddhist social workers can help to build greater social cohesion and resilience within communities. Furthermore, Buddhist social workers can play a critical role in challenging systemic oppression and promoting social justice. This can involve advocating for policies and practices that promote greater equality and fairness, and working to challenge dominant power structures and systems of oppression. By adopting a more critical and systemic approach to social work practice, Buddhist social workers can help to address the root causes of social problems, rather than simply treating their symptoms. In addition, Buddhist social workers can work to promote greater awareness and understanding of Buddhist principles and values within the broader social work profession. This can involve engaging in research and advocacy efforts, as well as providing training and mentorship to other social workers.

Obviously, the role of Buddhist social workers in promoting community development and social justice is a critical one. By promoting greater compassion, ethical conduct, and cultural sensitivity in social work practice, Buddhist social workers can help to build more empowering and equitable relationships with their clients, and work towards promoting greater social justice and well-being within communities.

Buddhist Social Work Strategies

Buddhist social work strategies refer to the various approaches and techniques used in social work practice that are inspired by Buddhist principles and teachings. These strategies aim to promote social welfare, community development, and social justice, while emphasizing the values of compassion, mindfulness, nonviolence, and empowerment. Buddhist social work strategies may include engaging with the community, empowering individuals and communities, promoting nonviolent conflict resolution, using mindfulness-based interventions, and advocating for social justice.

Engaging with the community: Buddhist social work emphasizes the importance of engaging with the community and building relationships based on trust and respect. This involves working with community leaders and stakeholders to identify the needs and priorities of the community and developing interventions that are tailored to their specific context (Charoenlap, 2018, pp. 153-166).

Empowerment through education: Buddhist social work emphasizes the importance of education in empowering individuals and communities to improve their social and economic conditions. This involves providing education and training programs that build skills and knowledge in areas such as health, agriculture, and small business development.

Nonviolent conflict resolution: Buddhist social work promotes nonviolent conflict resolution through dialogue and negotiation, rather than violence or aggression. This involves building bridges between different groups and promoting understanding and respect for diverse perspectives (Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 128).

Mindfulness-based interventions: Buddhist social work emphasizes the use of mindfulness-based interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing, reduce stress and anxiety, and promote self-awareness and compassion. This involves teaching mindfulness practices such as meditation and breathing exercises to individuals and communities (Nagai, 2017, pp. 8-26).

Social justice advocacy: Buddhist social work emphasizes the importance of social justice advocacy to address systemic social problems such as poverty, discrimination, and inequality. This involves working to change social policies and structures that perpetuate social injustices and promote social welfare and human rights (United Nations, 2020).

Buddhist Social Work Practice in Sri Lanka

Buddhist social workers play a significant role in promoting community development and social justice in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism is the predominant religion and its teachings have shaped the country's culture and social norms. According

to Nandasena, Buddhist social workers in Sri Lanka draw on Buddhist principles and values to inform their practice, and provide a unique perspective on social work that emphasizes compassion, non-judgment, and ethical conduct (Nandasena, G., 2016, p. 27). One area in which Buddhist social workers in Sri Lanka intervene is in providing support and services to marginalized and vulnerable populations, including those affected by poverty, conflict, and natural disasters. For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Buddhist monks and nuns played a key role in providing relief and support to affected communities. Similarly, in response to recent floods and landslides, Buddhist organizations have been involved in providing emergency relief and rehabilitation services (Dilrukshi, 2018, pp. 206-213).

Buddhist social workers in Sri Lanka also work to promote sustainable community development that is grounded in the needs and values of local communities. This involves engaging in a range of community development activities, such as building schools, providing healthcare, and promoting environmental sustainability. By taking a culturally sensitive and participatory approach to development, Buddhist social workers can help to build greater social cohesion and resilience within communities (Gunasekera, 2015, pp. 593-604).

Furthermore, Buddhist social workers in Sri Lanka play a critical role in challenging systemic oppression and promoting

social justice. This can involve advocating for policies and practices that promote greater equality and fairness, and working to challenge dominant power structures and systems of oppression. Buddhist social workers in Sri Lanka can draw on Buddhist teachings on non-violence, interdependence, and social responsibility to inform their advocacy work and promote greater social justice.

Conclusion and further work

In conclusion, Buddhist social work offers a unique and valuable perspective on social work practice that emphasizes compassion, non-judgment, and ethical conduct. By incorporating Buddhist principles and values into their work, social workers can help to promote more empowering and equitable relationships with their clients, and work towards building greater social justice and well-being within communities. The literature has shown that Buddhist social work has a rich history and continues to be relevant in today's world. It has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting community development and social justice, and has the potential to make significant contributions to the social work profession. Further work in this area could focus on exploring the specific ways in which Buddhist principles and values can be integrated into social work practice, as well as the challenges and limitations that may arise in doing so. Additionally, there is a need for more research on the impact of Buddhist social

work on individual and community well-being, as well as on the broader social, economic, and political systems that contribute to social inequality and injustice. In summary, Buddhist social work has the potential to make a significant impact on community development and social justice. By incorporating Buddhist principles into social work practice, social workers can promote greater empathy, understanding, and equity in their work. As such, Buddhist social work is an important area of study and practice that has the potential to contribute significantly to the field of social work.

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Biographical Note

Ven. Rideegama Wanarathana, with a commitment to both teaching and research, has made significant contributions to the fields of Buddhist Philosophy and Social Work. He obtained his initial degree in Buddhist Philosophy from the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. He pursued three Master's degrees, two in Buddhist Philosophy from the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka and the University of Kelaniya respectively, and another in Social Work from the National Institute of Social Work Development. Currently, he is pursuing his Doctoral Degree in Social Work at the University of Cyberjaya in Malaysia.