

Utility of Buddhist Teachings and Buddhist Social Work

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Abstract

This study explores the profound interconnection between Buddhist teachings and the practice of Buddhist social work, with a focused examination of primary sources from the Sutta Pitaka. Recognizing the rising interest in integrating spiritual and ethical dimensions into social work, the paper investigates how canonical Buddhist texts can serve as both philosophical and practical frameworks for compassionate, mindful service to society. The Sutta Pitaka, a foundational scripture in the Pāli Canon, contains numerous discourses that emphasize ethical behaviour, compassion, social harmony, and the alleviation of suffering. Central to this analysis are selected suttas that illuminate key doctrinal elements such as the Four Bases of Sympathy, the Six Unsurpassed Practices, the Four Right Efforts, and the foundational teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. These texts also address themes relevant to social well-being, including crime prevention, environmental stewardship, diligence, self-reliance, moral virtues, and practical skills and all of which carry significant implications for the theory and practice of Buddhist social work. By interpreting these texts through a contemporary lens, this paper argues that Buddhist social work is not a modern invention but a natural extension of early Buddhist ethical and social principles. The suttas serve not only as spiritual guidance but also as practical blueprints for creating compassionate, equitable, and sustainable communities. This synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern application supports the development of a distinctly Buddhist model of social work that is both culturally relevant and universally humane. It helps build a model of Buddhist social work that is spiritually informed, culturally sensitive, and socially transformative. The results of this study would benefit scholars, practitioners, and students by showing how Buddhist philosophy is not only spiritual but also socially transformative and providing tools and frameworks for more humane, ethical, and culturally attuned Buddhist social work.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist social work, ethical conduct, socially transformative, Sutta Pitaka

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for spiritual and ethical dimensions within the field of social work. As the global community grapples with escalating social inequalities, psychological distress, and cultural disconnection, the search for holistic approaches to healing and social justice has intensified. One such promising approach lies within the deep philosophical and ethical traditions of Buddhism. Rooted in over two millennia of reflection on human suffering and the means to alleviate it, Buddhist teachings offer not only a spiritual path but also a profound social vision. This paper seeks to explore the dynamic intersection between these teachings and the evolving discipline of Buddhist social work, drawing particularly from the rich textual reservoir of the Sutta Pitaka, which is one of the earliest and most authoritative collections of the Buddha's discourses. Thus, Lee & Choi said, "Buddhist teachings provide a holistic framework for understanding and alleviating suffering that parallels social work's mission of social justice and human welfare. The Sutta Pitaka's ethical principles of compassion, mindfulness, and right livelihood offer valuable guidance for practitioners seeking spiritually grounded and socially responsive care" (Lee & Choi, 2018, p. 20).

The Sutta Pitaka, part of the Pāli Canon, is not only a repository of metaphysical insights but also a practical guide for living ethically and compassionately in society. Within its pages, we find a consistent emphasis on virtues such as *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *paññā* (wisdom), as well as directives for right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*) and the moral responsibilities of both laypeople and leaders. "Integrating Buddhist ethics into social work practice not only deepens personal insight and compassion but also provides an ethical foundation for addressing systemic and social forms of suffering" (Payne, 2020, p. 335). These teachings do not merely concern the inner cultivation of virtue but extend outward, offering guidance on how to build harmonious and equitable communities. The Buddha's concern for social welfare is evident in his discourses addressing poverty, governance, social conflict, and interpersonal conduct, issues that are strikingly relevant to contemporary social work practice.

By engaging directly with selected suttas, this study argues that Buddhist social work is not a novel adaptation or a modern reinterpretation, but rather a continuation of the early Buddhist commitment to alleviating suffering in all its forms, such as physical, psychological, and social. Queen (2000) discusses how Buddhist social engagement, rooted in canonical teachings, provides frameworks for addressing

structural suffering and promoting collective well-being. This paper proposes that a Buddhist model of social work, grounded in the ethical and philosophical principles of the Sutta Pitaka, can offer a culturally rooted and universally relevant framework for compassionate service. Such a model integrates mindfulness, ethical clarity, and social responsibility, creating space for a transformative practice that addresses both individual well-being and collective harmony. “The contemplative and ethical dimensions of Buddhism translate naturally into helping professions, where mindfulness and compassion become instruments of both personal healing and collective responsibility” (Zajonc, 2013, p. 42). In doing so, this study contributes to the broader conversation about the integration of spirituality and social justice, offering tools and insights that can guide practitioners, scholars, and students alike toward a more humane and spiritually informed model of care. Buddhist social work is deeply rooted in canonical teachings that remain timeless in their relevance. The fusion of inner cultivation and outward service creates a powerful model for compassionate social engagement. As the world grapples with mounting social challenges, these ancient teachings offer not only solace but actionable frameworks for building more humane and harmonious communities.

1.1 Buddhist Social Work

Buddhist Social Work is a values-driven approach to social service that integrates the ethical and philosophical foundations of Buddhism with the practical aims of modern social work. It emphasizes alleviating human suffering through compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), non-harm (*ahiṃsā*), and wisdom (*paññā*), aiming to support individuals and communities toward well-being, dignity, and holistic development. Grounded in the teachings of the Buddha, Buddhist social work goes beyond material assistance to include mental and spiritual support, recognizing the interconnectedness of all life and the root causes of suffering.

Unlike conventional models, Buddhist social work places significant focus on inner transformation alongside external intervention. Practitioners are encouraged to cultivate mindfulness (*sati*), ethical conduct (*sīla*), and right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), making their service not just a professional duty but a path of spiritual practice. The goal is not only to solve social problems but to foster environments where peace, empathy, and justice can flourish through right action and right intention. Historically, Buddhist social work has deep roots in the community-oriented teachings found in the Sutta Pitaka. Texts like the Sigalovada Sutta promote social harmony and duties between family, friends, teachers, and rulers. The Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta

discusses righteous leadership that supports the welfare of the poor. Such teachings reveal that Buddhist concern for social justice, care for the vulnerable, and ethical leadership is not a modern invention but a continuation of early Buddhist principles.

In practice, Buddhist social work might involve caring for the elderly, supporting orphans, promoting mental health through meditation and mindfulness, advocating for non-violence, or working toward environmental sustainability. It is adaptable across cultures and societies, offering a spiritually informed, compassionate response to suffering in all its forms. Ultimately, Buddhist social work is a harmonious blend of timeless spiritual wisdom and modern humanitarian action, which is a path of service where inner compassion meets outer engagement.

1.2 Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhist philosophy is a comprehensive system of thought rooted in the teachings of Buddha, who lived in the 5th - 6th century BCE in ancient India. It addresses fundamental questions about existence, suffering, consciousness, and the path to human liberation. Unlike speculative metaphysical systems, Buddhist philosophy is deeply pragmatic and experiential, emphasizing personal transformation through ethical living, meditative insight, and wisdom (*paññā*). Its central aim is not merely intellectual understanding, but the complete cessation of suffering (*dukkha*) and the attainment of inner peace and liberation (*nibbāna*). At its core lie the Four Noble Truths, which outline the nature of suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the path leading to its end (the Noble Eightfold Path). This path, encompassing right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, serves as a guide for ethical conduct, mental cultivation, and the development of profound insight. Buddhist philosophy teaches that all phenomena are impermanent (*anicca*), without a fixed self (*anattā*), and marked by suffering if clung to. Understanding these truths through direct experience is key to spiritual liberation.

Another hallmark of Buddhist thought is the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), which explains the interdependent nature of all things. It reveals that nothing arises or exists independently, but comes into being through a web of causes and conditions. This principle has profound ethical implications, fostering a worldview of interconnection, responsibility, and compassion (*karuṇā*) for all beings. Such insights are not abstract theories but tools for transforming the mind and living with wisdom and empathy.

1.3 Socially Transformative

Socially transformative refers to actions, ideas, or processes that bring about meaningful, positive, and lasting changes in society. It goes beyond surface-level improvements or temporary fixes, aiming to address the root causes of social issues such as inequality, injustice, poverty, and discrimination.

Buddhist teachings offer a deeply transformative vision for society, which one grounded in compassion, ethical responsibility, and the alleviation of suffering. When integrated into social work, these teachings inspire a model of practice that not only addresses individual needs but also challenges systemic injustice and promotes holistic well-being. Central to this transformation is the Buddhist understanding of *dukkha* (suffering) as a universal condition rooted in ignorance, craving, and attachment.

One of the most socially transformative aspects of Buddhism is the emphasis on *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion) as active social principles. These are not passive emotions but ethical commitments to alleviate the pain of others, especially the marginalized and vulnerable. A Buddhist social worker guided by these principles treats every individual with dignity, empathy, and nonjudgment, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). This understanding naturally leads to inclusive and non-discriminatory practices that honour diversity and human rights.

1.4 Sutta Pitaka

The Sutta Pitaka is one of the three primary divisions of the Tipiṭaka (Pāli Canon), the foundational scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism. The word “Sutta” means “discourse” or “thread,” and “Pitaka” means “basket.” Thus, the Sutta Pitaka is known as the “Basket of Discourses” and refers to a vast collection of the Buddha’s teachings and dialogues delivered to disciples, monks, lay followers, kings, and people from all walks of life during his 45 years of teaching.

Composed in the Pāli language, the Sutta Pitaka captures the core of the Buddha’s doctrine (*Dhamma*) in the form of sermons, stories, parables, and ethical instructions. It is regarded as a primary source for understanding the original teachings of the Buddha and serves as a practical guide for both monastic and lay life. The teachings within are intended not only for intellectual study but for transformation through practice and addressing the causes of suffering and providing a path to liberation (*nibbāna*).

The Sutta Pitaka is divided into five Nikāyas or collections:

- Dīgha Nikāya – “Long Discourses”: Contains lengthy and detailed suttas that cover a wide range of topics, including cosmology, ethics, and philosophical debates.
- Majjhima Nikāya - “Middle-Length Discourses”: Comprises medium-length teachings that often explore meditation, morality, and insight in greater depth.
- Saṃyutta Nikāya - “Connected Discourses”: A thematically grouped collection focusing on specific doctrinal topics such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.
- Aṅguttara Nikāya - “Numerical Discourses”: Organized by number-based lists (e.g., one-fold, two-fold, up to eleven-fold), making complex teachings easy to remember and apply.
- Khuddaka Nikāya – “Minor Collection”: A diverse anthology including well-known texts like the Dhammapada, Sutta Nipāta, Jataka Tales, and Theragāthā.

The Sutta Pitaka is invaluable for both academic study and personal practice. It remains a cornerstone of Buddhist ethical, philosophical, and social thought, offering timeless guidance on how to live a compassionate, mindful, and meaningful life.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse key teachings from the Sutta Pitaka that emphasize ethical conduct, compassion, and social responsibility, and assess their relevance to contemporary social work practice.
2. To develop a framework for Buddhist social work that integrates core principles.
3. To establish Buddhist social work as a spiritually informed and culturally grounded model by interpreting canonical texts through a modern lens, offering guidance for scholars, practitioners, and students in creating socially transformative practices.

2. Literature Review

The growing body of scholarship on Buddhism and social work reflects an increasing recognition of the need to integrate spiritual and ethical dimensions into contemporary helping professions. Scholars have noted that while social work has traditionally emphasized human rights, social justice, and empowerment, the inclusion of spiritual frameworks, especially those rooted in non-Western traditions, adds depth and cultural sensitivity to practice (Lee & Choi, 2018; Payne, 2020). Buddhism, with its rich ethical and philosophical traditions, offers a unique lens through which to view human suffering, moral responsibility, and social well-being. Central to this perspective are teachings from the Sutta Pitaka, a core section of the Pāli Canon, which outlines the Buddha's discourses on ethical living, compassion, and the alleviation of suffering.

Recent literature has begun to systematically explore how canonical Buddhist teachings can inform modern social work theory and practice. Payne (2020) argues that Buddhist ethics, especially the principles of *karuṇā* (compassion) and *mettā* (loving-kindness), align closely with social work's professional values of empathy, respect, and the pursuit of social justice. By situating the practitioner within a framework of mindfulness and ethical awareness, these teachings support what Payne describes as a "transpersonal model of practice," where inner transformation becomes the basis for outward social engagement. Similarly, Zajonc (2013) emphasizes the transformative potential of Buddhist contemplative practices in fostering compassion-based social engagement. He highlights that mindfulness, when rooted in ethical consciousness, becomes a tool not only for self-regulation but for cultivating an empathetic responsiveness to collective suffering.

Building on this foundation, several scholars have examined the practical implications of Buddhist principles for social welfare and community development. Queen (2000) introduced the concept of "Engaged Buddhism," which advocates for applying Buddhist moral teachings to address social, political, and environmental injustices. This approach resonates strongly with the social work mission to challenge systemic inequality and promote human dignity. Engaged Buddhist leaders, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Sulak Sivaraksa, have demonstrated how traditional doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, can guide socially transformative action. These doctrines emphasize the recognition of suffering (*dukkha*), its causes, and the path to its cessation through right understanding, ethical conduct, and mental discipline, principles that mirror the holistic ethos of social work intervention (Queen, 2000; Loy, 2019).

The Sutta Pitaka itself contains numerous teachings relevant to social ethics and communal harmony. Texts such as the Sigalovada Sutta and the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta address moral duties, governance, social responsibility, and economic justice. Harvey (2000) notes that these discourses provide an ethical template for right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), social welfare, and moral accountability, which offer early examples of socially engaged ethics. When interpreted through the lens of social work, these suttas reveal an integrated vision of personal virtue and collective well-being, emphasizing that inner spiritual cultivation must translate into compassionate social action.

Furthermore, recent studies underscore the relevance of Buddhist teachings for addressing modern social challenges such as poverty, mental health, and environmental sustainability. Lee and Choi (2018) argue that Buddhist ethics can provide a culturally rooted yet universally applicable framework for practice, especially in multicultural contexts where Western models may lack resonance. Their research emphasizes that Buddhist social work promotes not only individual healing but also systemic transformation through mindfulness-based awareness, moral clarity, and compassion-driven service. This perspective positions Buddhist social work as both a continuation of ancient ethical traditions and an innovative response to contemporary social crises.

In synthesis, the literature consistently supports the view that Buddhist social work is not a recent construct but an evolution of established ethical and social principles found within the Pāli Canon. By grounding social work practice in canonical sources like the Sutta Pitaka, practitioners can draw upon a time-tested moral framework that integrates mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom. This integration fosters a holistic, spiritually informed, and culturally sensitive model of practice capable of addressing both individual suffering and structural inequities. As the world faces escalating social and ecological challenges, the intersection of Buddhist ethics and social work offers a profoundly humane vision for transformative social engagement, one that unites inner awakening with outer compassion (Payne, 2020; Zajonc, 2013; Queen, 2000).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutical approach rooted in textual analysis of primary sources from the Sutta Pitaka, intending to explore the applicability of Buddhist teachings to contemporary social work. The methodology is based on a close reading and thematic analysis of selected discourses (teachings) that address ethical conduct, social responsibilities, and compassionate action. These texts are

interpreted both in their historical context and through a contemporary social work lens to assess their relevance to modern challenges in community welfare and ethical leadership.

The initial phase of this research focused on identifying relevant suttas from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, and *Khuddaka Nikāya* that explicitly address themes of social ethics, interpersonal responsibility, and collective well-being. The selected texts included the *Sangīti Sutta*, *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, *Mahāli Sutta*, *Adhammika Sutta*, *Wanaropa Sutta*, *Padhāna Sutta*, *Wassakāra Sutta*, *Pañhavyākaraṇa Sutta*, *Akusalasamāpatti Sutta*, *Sārandada Sutta*, *Puñṇakiriyavatthu Sutta*, *Sappurisa Sutta*, *Vyaggapajja Sutta*, *Bhūmija Sutta*, *Attadīpa Sutta*, *Pathama Lōka Vijaya Sutta*, *Bōgādiya Sutta*, *Metta Sutta*, *Sundarika Sutta*, *Udaya Sutta*, and *Hatta Kālawaka Saṅgahavatthu Sutta*. Each of these discourses was systematically analyzed using content analysis methods to identify and interpret key ethical principles and social values embedded within the texts. These themes were then categorized into key domains relevant to social work: interpersonal ethics, community relationships, social justice, critical thinking, and compassionate leadership. The study also involved a comparative analysis that aligned Buddhist ethical frameworks with foundational principles in modern social work, such as dignity, non-harm, equity, and holistic care.

4. Discussion

Many Buddhist teachings hold strong relevance to the field of Buddhist social work, yet particular emphasis is placed on those that directly align with social work principles. The Buddha is often regarded as the world's first social worker, as his vision “*Bahujanahitāya Bahujanasukhāya*” (for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many (Vinaya Pitaka, Vol. 1, p. 21) represents one of the earliest recorded expressions of a universal commitment to collective welfare. This ideal serves as a foundational concept for Buddhist social work, deeply rooted in the actions and philosophy of the Buddha himself. Throughout his life, the Buddha lived in urban monasteries closely connected to the lay community and remained actively engaged with society. His teachings in the Sutta Pitaka clearly reflect his dedication to social welfare, demonstrating that compassionate engagement with the world was integral to his spiritual mission.

The concept of “four bases of sympathy” in Buddhism can be introduced as a basic concept of Buddhist social work. Western-rooted social work was born with a religious concept that includes the teaching of charity work. The *Sangīti Sutta*

has shown four bases of sympathy. They are (1) Generosity - (dāna), (2) Pleasing speech - (piyavacana), (3) Beneficial conduct - (arthacaryā), and (4) Impartiality - (samānattatā) (1) (Sangīti Sutta -DN-3, p.394). How are these concepts relevant to Western social work?

Table 1. Four bases of sympathy

Four Bases of Sympathy	Social work point of view
Generosity - (dāna),	Charity work, provide money, material or assistant to the needy
Pleasing speech - (piyavacana),	Use of pleasant words in communication with others. Successful communication is the only tool a social worker has to build relationships with people (kind speech)
Beneficial conduct - (arthacaryā)	(arthacaryā - Social work) Doing a good turn. Resorting to beneficent actions. Emphasizes the importance of commitment to the well-being of the people.
Impartiality - (samānattatā),	Treating all alike or equally. The importance of treating everyone equally, regardless of race or caste. The fundamentals of human rights.

(Source: Created by the author based on the Sangītu Sutta (DN-3, p.394)

An analysis of these four bases of sympathy will show to what extent Buddhists maintain social relations to bring about harmony and concord among the members of a society. Besides, Buddhism, in advocating these modes of behavior, has recognized the reciprocity of rendering services. In the Anuttariya Sutta (AN-4), there are six unsurpassed things. Although they have a deep Dhamma meaning, the researcher has not discussed it from that aspect. The focus here is on discussing how these six unsurpassed facts can be used to solve human problems. (Social work point of view)

Table 2. Six unsurpassed things

Six unsurpassed things	Problems solving process
The unsurpassed sight - (dassanānuttariyam)	Reporting the case (intake stage)

The unsurpassed hearing - (savanānuttariyam)	Study the case and collecting more details about it.
The unsurpassed gain - (Lābhanuttariyam)	Diagnosis the case based on details (evidence)
The unsurpassed training - (Sikkhānuttariyam)	Preparing proposal (planning stage)
The unsurpassed service - (parichariyānuttariyam)	Implementing the activities
The unsurpassed recollection - (Anussatanuttariyam)	Follow-up

(Source: Created by the author based on the Anuttariya Sutta (AN-4, P.72)

This framework can be understood as a problem-solving approach drawn from the Sutta Pitaka. The core of this process is found in the Four Noble Truths, a foundational teaching of Buddhism outlined in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. These truths are:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering (dukkha sacca),
2. The Origin of Suffering (samudaya sacca),
3. The Cessation of Suffering (nirodha sacca), and
4. The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (magga sacca) (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, DN 2, p. 142).

The four truths can be applied meaningfully within the context of social work as a structured method for addressing and alleviating social suffering. For example: Step 1. Recognizing social suffering:

Table 3. Four Noble Truths & social sufferings

Four Noble Truths	Social work implications
(1) Noble truth of suffering (dukkha sattya)	(1) Social suffering
(2) Origin of suffering (samudaya sattya)	(2) Origin of social suffering

(3) Cessation of suffering (niroda sattya)	(3) Cessation of social suffering
(4) Path leading to the cessation of suffering (mārgha sattya)	(4) Path leading to the cessation of social suffering

(Source: Created by the author based on the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN-2, p. 142)

Just as Buddhism begins with acknowledging personal suffering, social work begins by identifying and understanding various forms of “social suffering” experienced by individuals and communities.

Step 2- These four steps are relevant to social work. Example, “Poverty circle”

Table 4. Four Noble Truths & poverty circle

Four Noble Truths	Social work implications
(1) Noble truth of suffering (dukkha sattya)	(1) Problem (dukkha)
(2) Origin of suffering (samudaya sattya)	(2) Origin of poverty (Samudaya)
(3) Cessation of suffering (niroda sattya)	(3) Cessation of poverty (niroda)
(4) Path leading to the cessation of suffering (mārgha sattya)	(4) Path leading to the cessation of poverty (mārgha)

(Source: Created by the author based on the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN-2)

Step 3- These four steps are relevant to social work. Example, “Problem-solving process”

Table 5. Four Noble Truths & problem-solving process

Four Noble Truths	Social work implications
(1) Noble truth of suffering (dukkha sattya)	(1) Problem (dukkha)

(2) Origin of suffering (samudaya sattya)	(2) Study the problem (Samudaya)
(3) Cessation of suffering (niroda sattya)	(3) Solution/ plan (niroda)
(4) Path leading to the cessation of suffering (mārga sattya)	(4) Implementation (mārga)

(Source: Created by the author based on the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN-2)

The Mahāli Sutta presents a comprehensive discussion of the Noble Eightfold Path, which serves as the Buddha’s practical guide for overcoming suffering. This path is embedded within the Fourth Noble Truth and outlines a systematic approach to liberation. It consists of eight interrelated principles, which are traditionally grouped into three core aspects of Buddhist practice: ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Buddha emphasized the importance of this path throughout his teachings, offering clear, accessible guidance that remains deeply relevant and applicable even today.

Table No. 6 illustrates the components of the Noble Eightfold Path and their implications for social work, highlighting how each element can inform compassionate, ethical, and mindful engagement in the field.

Table 6. Noble Eightfold Paths & social work implications

Noble Eightfold Paths	Social work implications
1. Right View 2. Right Thought 3. Right Speech 4. Right Action 5. Right Livelihood 6. Right Effort 7. Right Mindfulness 8. Right Concentration	Among the eight components of the Noble Eightfold Path, at least the first six carry indirect implications for social work. Notably, sammā ājīva (Right Livelihood) stands out as particularly significant in this context. This principle encourages ethical and responsible ways of living, serving as a key motivator for promoting integrity, compassion, and good practice within the field of social work.

(Source: Created by the author based on the Mahāli Sutta (DN-1, p.334)

Social problems arise from a variety of interconnected causes. In the Sangīti Sutta, the Buddha identifies ten specific factors that contribute to the emergence of

such issues: 1. Lack of moral shame 2. Lack of moral dread 3. Ignorance and craving for existence 4. Harsh behaviour and association with unwholesome companions 5. Absence of mindfulness and clear awareness 6. Unguarded sense faculties (eye, ear, tongue, nose, body) 7. Lack of restraint in eating 8. Decline in morality and wrong views 9. Discontent with wholesome actions and 10. Aversion to effort or exertion. These causes show that social problems are not isolated incidents but rather the result of a complex web of moral, psychological, and social conditions. The Buddha's analysis in the Sangīti Sutta emphasizes the cumulative and interdependent nature of these factors.

Similarly, the Adhammika Sutta underscores the systemic impact of unethical leadership. It states that when a ruler behaves unrighteously, this behaviour influences the broader society, leading to moral decline among the people and even disturbances in the natural environment. The Adhammika Sutta outlines this pattern as a chain reaction, as an unrighteous cycle like beginning at the top and filtering throughout the social and ecological fabric.

1. Kings are unrighteous
2. Then royal vassals become unrighteous
3. Then Brahmins and householders
4. Then people of the towns and countryside
5. Then sun and moon proceed off course
6. Then after the constellations and the stars proceed off course
7. Then day and night proceed off course
8. Then months and fortnights proceed off course
9. Then seasons and years proceed off course
10. Then, after the winds blow off course and at random
11. Then, after the deities become upset
12. Then, after sufficient rain does not fall
13. Then, after the crops ripen irregularly
14. Then, when people eat crops that ripen irregularly
15. Then they become short-lived, ugly, weak, and sickly (Adhammika Sutta AN-2, p.140).

The Wanaropa Sutta stands out as one of the most significant discourses in Buddhism concerning social welfare and environmental conservation. Framed as a dialogue between a deity and the Buddha, the sutta explores the theme of meaningful worship. The deity inquires about the highest form of devotion and one that continuously accumulates merit both day and night. Further, Buddha said that,

- 1. Those who set up a forest (park) or a grove
- 2. The people who construct a bridge
- 3. Build a place to drink and a public well
- 4. Those who give a residence (Wanarōpama Sutta (SN-1, p.60)

This sutta conveys key philanthropic teachings and touches on ideas central to green social work. It emphasizes the importance of meeting basic human needs through acts like protecting forests, planting trees, building bridges and wells, providing clean water, and constructing homes for others.

The Padhāna Sutta outlines the concept of the Four Right Efforts (sammāppadhāna), which are essential practices for cultivating a wholesome and liberated mind. These efforts, also known as right endeavors or right strivings, offer practical guidance on how to direct mental energy effectively in the path toward spiritual development. The Four Right Efforts are:

- 1. To prevent unwholesome states from arising
- 2. To abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen
- 3. To develop wholesome states that have not yet arisen
- 4. To maintain and perfect wholesome states that have already arisen

For each of these efforts, the practitioner is encouraged to generate motivation by arousing energy, focusing the mind, and striving with determination. These mental exertions are not passive but require active engagement and sustained attention. When practiced diligently, these efforts strengthen wholesome mental states such as kindness, mindfulness, and wisdom, making them more stable and enduring. At the same time, they help diminish and eliminate unwholesome states like anger, greed, or delusion. However, when one’s intention or effort is weak, positive mental states may not arise at all or quickly fade, while negative states can grow stronger and dominate the mind.

Table 7. Four right efforts, primary function

The Four Right Efforts	Primary Function	Explanation
1. Restraint (saṁvara)	Generating the desire for the non-arising of unwholesome states.	Avoiding and preventing the arising of unwholesome states and unskillful thoughts which have not yet arisen.

2. Abandoning (pahāna)	Generating the desire for abandoning the arisen unwholesome states.	Abandoning unwholesome states and unskillful thoughts which have already arisen.
3. Developing (bhāvanā)	Generating the desire for abandoning the arisen unwholesome states.	Cultivating, developing, and bringing forth wholesome states and skillful thoughts which have not yet arisen.
4. Protecting (anurakkhanā)	Generating the desire for continuing arisen wholesome states.	Maintaining and sustaining wholesome states and skillful thoughts that have already arisen.

(Source: Created by the author based on the Padhāna Sutta (AN-2, p.30)

Teachings 3 and 4 hold particular relevance to social work, especially in relation to skill development and empowerment. These two principles are:

- 1. Helping individuals develop strengths and abilities they do not yet possess
- 2. Encouraging and supporting them to sustain and apply these acquired skills

These align closely with core practices in social work, which focus on capacity-building and long-term empowerment. The Wassakāra Sutta (AN 2, p.72) also highlights four key qualities of a person with great wisdom:

- 1. They work for the welfare and happiness of many
- 2. They have control over their thoughts (thinking only what they choose to think)
- 3. They achieve their goals effortlessly and skillfully
- 4. They possess direct, experiential knowledge

In the same sutta, the Buddha states, “I am practicing for the welfare and happiness of many people,” reflecting his deep sense of altruism. This attitude of selfless service is central to the Buddha’s character and serves as a powerful model for social workers. It encourages a compassionate and purposeful approach to serving others, an essential aspect of Buddhist-informed social work.

The Buddha identified four distinct methods for responding to questions, offering valuable guidance for addressing complex human issues, especially in the context of problem-solving and social work. These approaches emphasize the importance of discerning the true needs behind what people express and responding wisely. According to the Pañhavyākaraṇa Sutta (AN 2, p.90), the four methods are:

- 1. Some questions should be answered directly (categorically)
- 2. Some require a response that makes distinctions or clarifies nuance
- 3. Some are best answered with a counter-question to prompt deeper reflection
- 4. Some questions should be set aside as unproductive or irrelevant

These approaches help practitioners navigate sensitive conversations with insight and precision, ensuring that responses align with actual needs rather than surface-level concerns. In the Akusalasamāpatti Sutta (AN 3, p.9), the Buddha warns against the dangers of laziness, noting that it drains a person's energy and hinders progress. He states, “When energy disappears and laziness becomes addictive, negative consequences follow. Therefore, one must act without delay.” This teaching emphasizes the urgency of timely and energetic action, a key quality in effective social work.

For those engaging in discussions aimed at solving problems, the Buddha encourages the development of certain essential qualities. These include mindfulness, discernment, energy, patience, and a compassionate commitment to truth and welfare.

Table 9. Qualities that make one a negotiator

Qualities that make one a negotiator
(1) He is himself accomplished in virtuous behavior.
(2) He is himself accomplished in concentration.
(3) He is himself accomplished in wisdom.
(4) He is himself accomplished in liberation.
(5) He is himself accomplished in the knowledge and vision of liberation.

(Source: Created by the author based on the Akusalasamāpatti Sutta (AN-3, p.9)

In the field of social work, certain core qualities are essential for a social worker, as highlighted in the Alansākacca Sutta (AN 3, p.128). A social worker should embody the following virtues:

- 1. Virtuous behaviours
- 2. Concentration (mindfulness and mental discipline)
- 3. Wisdom

4. Liberation (spiritual freedom)
5. Knowledge and vision of liberation

These qualities not only strengthen personal integrity but also enhance one's capacity to serve communities effectively. One of the key methods in social work is community organization. This approach, which emphasizes collective effort and shared responsibility, finds resonance in the teachings of the Sutta Pitaka. A significant reference in this context is the Sārandada Sutta (AN 4, p.304), which outlines seven principles of non-decline that can guide effective community organization:

1. Holding frequent assemblies
2. Conducting assemblies in harmony and dispersing peacefully
3. Upholding ancient laws and customs without imposing unnecessary new laws
4. Respecting and following the guidance of elders and their descendants
5. Protecting women, girls, and princesses
6. Honoring and safeguarding traditional places of worship
7. Seeking counsel from arahants, monks, and Brahmins, and offering them righteous protection

These principles are vital for nurturing community relationships and ensuring social stability. Additionally, the Puñṇakiriyavatthu Sutta presents a framework of Ten Meritorious Acts (dasapuñṇakiriyāni), which also carry strong social relevance:

1. Giving (dāna)
2. Moral conduct (sīla)
3. Mental development or meditation (bhāvanā)
4. Paying respect to holy persons and elders (apacāyana)
5. Rendering service (veyyāvacca)
6. Sharing merit (pattidāna)
7. Rejoicing in others' merit (pattanumodanā)
8. Listening to the Dhamma (dhammasavana)
9. Teaching the Dhamma (dhammadesanā)
10. Straightening one's views (diṭṭhujukamma)

While all ten acts are significant, the Puññakiriyavatthu Sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya (AN 5, p.158) emphasizes three foundational acts of merit: 1. Giving (dāna), 2. Moral conduct (sīla), 3. Mental development (bhāvanā). These form the basis of ethical and spiritual development, contributing directly to personal transformation and social wellbeing. The three-bases and ten-bases are defined in Sutta Pitaka, as follows:

Table 10: Ten & meritorious actions

Three Bases of Meritorious Action	Ten Bases of Meritorious Action
(1) Generosity (Dāna)	(1) Generosity, giving, sharing material things. (2) Sharing with others in merit or good deeds. (3) Rejoicing in others’ merit.
(2) Morality (Sīla)	(4) Observing the precepts or moral conduct. (5) Rendering services and assistance (6) Respecting the elders, the holy ones, and honoring others
(3) Mental Development (Bhāvanā)	(7) Mental development (meditation) (8) Listening to the Teachings (9) Instructing others in the Teaching (10) Straitening one’s own views in accord with the teachings.

(Source: Created by the author based on the Puññakiriyawatthu Sutta (AN-3. p.158)

According to the Sappurisa Sutta (AN 5, p.164), when a virtuous person is born into a family, it brings benefit, welfare, and happiness to many. But who exactly receives these benefits? The Sutta outlines eight groups who are positively affected:

1. His mother and father
2. His wife and children
3. His slaves, workers, and servants
4. His friends and companions
5. His departed ancestors
6. The king (ruler of the land)
7. The deities (devas)
8. Ascetics and Brahmins

This illustrates the ripple effect of individual goodness on broader society and the spiritual realm. In the Pathama Lōka Vijaya Sutta (AN 5, p.212), the Buddha praises a woman who is diligent and responsible, one who manages her household well, supports her husband faithfully, and protects the family's earnings. Such a woman, he says, has “conquered the world.” However, this traditional view, while culturally significant, may not fully align with the values and gender perspectives upheld in modern social work philosophy, which emphasizes equality, empowerment, and shared responsibilities.

As for how one can live a happy and fulfilling life in the present, the Vyagghapajja Sutta provides practical guidance. It identifies four factors that contribute to the welfare and happiness of a layperson in this life:

- 1. Diligent effort (utthāna sampadā) - being hardworking and industrious
- 2. Protective vigilance (ārakkha sampadā) - safeguarding wealth and resources
- 3. Good companionship (kalyāna mittatā) - associating with wise and virtuous friends
- 4. Balanced living (sama jīvikatā) - living within one's means

These principles promote a balanced, ethical, and socially responsible way of life which values that deeply resonates with the goals of the social work profession. They are,

Table 11: Four things that lead to the welfare and happiness

Four things	Implications of social work
Accomplishment in initiative (Utthānasampadā)	Poverty is a significant social problem that requires both structural change and individual empowerment. To effectively address and overcome poverty, clients must be empowered with the skills, opportunities, and confidence needed to transform their circumstances. Central to this process is the value of effort.
Accomplishment in protection (Ārakkhasampadā)	Resource management is another crucial factor in achieving success. The disciplined use, careful spending, and protection of one’s earned wealth play a significant role in ensuring long-term stability and prosperity.

Good friendship (kallyānamittatā)	The Buddha emphasized that friendships can greatly influence a person's life, both positively and negatively. The success of an individual is often shaped by the company they keep. Those who associate with wise and virtuous friends are more likely to thrive. Therefore, when choosing companions, it is essential to carefully consider their qualities and character. This is not optional; it is a necessity.
Balanced living (Samajīvikatā)	The Buddha taught that one should exercise great care in how they use the wealth they have earned. Thoughtful and responsible consumption is essential. For this reason, the Buddha placed high value on effective domestic management, recognizing it as a vital aspect of a balanced and meaningful life.

(Source: Created by the author based on the Vyaggpajja Sutta (AN-5, p.234)

In the Bhūmija Sutta (MN 3, p.322), the Buddha emphasizes the importance of right understanding and correct method in achieving any goal. He advises: “*Be encouraged, but know that progress is not possible unless one first recognizes what is wrong.*” To illustrate this, he gives a powerful analogy: A man in search of oil fills a tub with gravel, sprinkles it with water, and presses it, hoping to extract oil. Whether he prays, makes an aspiration, or not, his efforts will be in vain. Why? Pressing gravel is not the correct method to obtain oil. The message is clear: no amount of aspiration or effort will yield results if the approach is fundamentally flawed. Success requires right effort, based on right understanding.

In the Bōgādiya Sutta (AN 2, p.70), the Buddha highlights the value of wealth earned through honest labor. A person who acquires wealth righteously, through effort and integrity, not only benefits personally but also supports their family, children, and workers. This form of wealth is a source of nourishment and well-being for many and is respected in the Dhamma.

The Jatā Sutta (SN 1, p.26) presents a spiritual metaphor. A deva approaches the Buddha, saying: “A tangle inside, a tangle outside, this generation is entangled in a tangle.” When asked how to overcome these entanglements of life, the Buddha responds: “One who is established in virtue, who is wise, and who develops the mind and insight, he can free himself from the tangle.” This teaching encourages moral discipline and mental cultivation as the path to liberation from life's complexities.

In the Udaya Sutta (SN 1, p.310), the Buddha teaches about the importance of generosity through repetition and consistency. Udaya, a wealthy householder, noticed the Buddha visiting his home three days in a row for alms. On the fourth day, he questioned the Buddha's repeated visits, suspecting greed. The Buddha responded with a powerful analogy: just as farmers plant seeds repeatedly, and the rains fall again and again to bring crops, so too do those who give continue to give. "Philanthropists give again and again, and through that merit, they attain heaven again and again." This Sutta emphasizes that generosity is not a one-time act; it is a sustained virtue that bears lasting fruit.

In the Sakka Sutta (SN 1, p.368), Sakka (a celestial being) asked the Buddha, "Do you have the right to admonish others?" The Buddha replied that one who has a calm and purified mind can indeed guide others, not out of personal desire or attachment, but from genuine compassion and sympathy. Such a person serves others selflessly, with no expectation of reward. This teaching strongly reflects the principles of social work, where service is rooted in empathy and altruism. Just as the monk offers his guidance with no personal gain, social workers are expected to serve communities with integrity, compassion, and non-attachment.

In the Dēvā Sutta, also known for the Seven Vows (Satta Vata Padāni), the Buddha outlines seven ethical commitments that lead a person to attain the noble status of Sakka, here symbolizing a morally upright and virtuous individual. These vows reflect the conduct of a good person and can be viewed as foundational principles for ethical living and community leadership. What were the seven vows?

- (1) As long as I live, may I support my parents.
- (2) As long as I live, may I respect the family elders.
- (3) As long as I live, may I speak gently.
- (4) As long as I live, may I not speak divisively.
- (5) As long as I live, may I dwell at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, and delighting in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.
- (6) As long as I live, may I speak the truth.
- (7) As long as I live, may I be free from anger, and if anger should arise in me, may I dispel it quickly.

In short form (satta vata padāni), (1) Supports parents, (2) Respects family elders, (3) Speech is gentle and courteous, (4) Refrains from divisive words, (5) Strives to remove meanness, (6) Truthful, and (7) Vanquishes anger (Dēvā Sutta -

SN-1, p.406). These vows reflect the qualities of a virtuous person and are deeply aligned with ethical behavior in both personal life and social work practice.

In the Attadīpa Sutta, the Buddha encouraged individuals to rely on themselves. He taught: “Attadīpā bhikkhave viharatha, attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā; dhammadīpā dhammasaraṇā anaññasaraṇā.” “At Sāvatti, Bhikkhus, live with yourselves as your light (or island), with yourselves as your refuge, having no other refuge. Live with the Dhamma as your light, with the Dhamma as your refuge, having no other refuge.”

This message closely aligns with the core goal of social work: empowering individuals to become self-reliant. In practical terms, this means helping clients gain the skills and confidence to overcome their challenges independently. For example, a social worker guiding someone out of poverty serves to illuminate the path while encouraging the client to walk it themselves. (Attadīpa Sutta – SN 3, p.76)

Similarly, the Metta Sutta outlines twelve qualities essential for a social worker, which also reflect the qualities of an ideal leader. These are:

1. Capable (Sakko)
 2. Upright (Ujūca)
 3. Extremely upright (Sūjūca)
 4. Receptive to advice (Suvaco)
 5. Gentle (Mudu)
 6. Free of arrogance (Anatimānī)
 7. Content and easily supported, with few responsibilities (Santussako ca, Subharo ca)
 8. Living simply (Appakicco ca, Sallahukavutti)
 9. Peaceful in senses (Santindriyo ca)
 10. Wise or discerning (Nipako ca)
 11. Respectful (Appagabbho)
 12. Free from greed, especially among households (Kulesu ananugiddho)
- (Metta Sutta – Suttanipāta, p.44)

These virtues are not only important for social workers but also serve as guiding traits for leaders in every sphere, such as from parents to politicians. In the Utthāna Sutta, the Buddha also emphasizes personal responsibility and action. When asked about the results of sleep and idleness, he responds: “Rise up, do not be lazy. Be determined and strong. Sit up—what do you gain by sleeping?” (Utthāna Sutta – Suttanipāta, p.98)

In the Sundarika Sutta, the Buddha advises not to focus on a person's ethnicity or birth, but rather to consider their conduct and actions (Sundarika Sutta – SN 1, p.300). Similarly, in the Hattā Kālawaka Saṅgahavatthu Sutta, the Buddha engages Hattaka in a dialogue about how to care for and support others based on the four principles of social harmony (saṅgahavatthu). The Buddha asks, “How do you sustain this large following?” Hattaka replies:

1. “When I know someone should be supported by giving, I support them with gifts.”
2. “When I know someone should be supported through kind and endearing speech, I speak to them with such words.”
3. “When I know someone should be supported by helpful conduct, I assist them through my actions.”
4. “When I know someone should be supported by impartiality, I treat them with fairness and equality.” (Hattā Kālawaka Saṅgahavatthu Sutta – AN 5, p.118)

These teachings provide timeless guidance on ethical leadership and compassionate support, especially in managing teams or communities.

5. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the profound and lasting connection between Buddhist teachings and their application to the field of Buddhist social work. Through a focused examination of primary texts from the Sutta Pitaka, it becomes clear that the foundations of Buddhist social work are not products of modern reinterpretation but are firmly rooted in the original teachings of the Buddha. The selected suttas emphasize essential values such as wise effort, ethical livelihood, mental clarity, generosity, and compassion, such as principles that are crucial not only for individual growth but also for fostering social harmony and well-being. At the heart of these teachings lies a powerful call to action: transformation arises through conscious effort, not passivity. Whether in the realm of social work or leadership, the message is unequivocal: awaken, take responsibility, and be a light unto yourself.

Importantly, the alleviation of suffering is not treated as a peripheral concern but as a core ethical mandate in the Buddha's vision. The suttas do more than propose high ideals; they offer practical guidance for building just, compassionate, and inclusive communities. Viewed through this lens, Buddhist social work emerges as a practice that is spiritually grounded and socially responsive—a dynamic interplay of inner cultivation and outer service that speaks directly to the challenges of our time.

This research contributes meaningfully to the development of a Buddhist model of social work that is both culturally authentic and globally relevant. By aligning ancient wisdom with contemporary social realities, it presents a framework that is spiritually resonant and practically effective. The findings underscore the potential of Buddhist philosophy to enrich the field of social work with ethical clarity, cultural depth, and transformative power. Ultimately, this study affirms that Buddhist social work is not only a reflection of timeless values but also a vital tool for creating a more compassionate and equitable world.

Abbreviations

- D. - Dīgha Nikāya
- M. - Majjhima Nikāya
- S. - Samyutta Nikāya
- A. - Aṅguttara Nikāya
- K. - Khuddaka Nikāya
- P. – page

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