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Original Article

Problem Solving Experiences of Thai Undergraduate Students within the Context of Buddhist Teachings

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Abstract

Problem solving has been widely studied, but the knowledge which plays a key role in both problematic situations and psychological suffering remains understudied. The present study aimed to explore the experience of Thai undergraduate students in employing problem solving within the context of Buddhist teachings. This study used purposive sampling to examine the problem-solving experience of 15 Thai undergraduate students. All respondents were aged between 21-23 years (M = 21.60, SD = 0.63) and were recruited from all four regions of Thailand; 53.33% were females, and 46.67% were males. A qualitative approach was employed. The data were collected by in-depth interviews and analyzed using descriptive thematic analysis. The emerging themes included: 1) recognize problems and psychological suffering; 2) identify the causes of problems and psychological suffering; 3) deal with problems and psychological suffering; and 4) witness the alleviation of suffering. Findings highlight the benefits of problem solving that address both psychological suffering and problematic situations. An examination of problem-solving, particularly within the framework of Buddhist teachings, could be beneficial in the Thai context as an alternative and complementary framework for problem-solving.

Problem-solving entails cognitive abilities that lead to actions aimed at overcoming problematic situations (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971; Heppner et al., 2004; Nezu, 2004; Shure, 2001; Shure & Spivack, 1972). It has played an important role in psychological well-being and mental health (Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021; Alvarez et al., 2022; Bond et al., 2002; De la Fuente et al., 2022; Elliott et al., 1991; Hanson & Mintz, 1997; Nezu, 2004; Witty et al., 2001). Problem-solving ability could provide benefits by promoting psychological well-being and reducing undesirable psychological symptoms such as stress, depression and anxiety (Bell & D'Zurilla, 2009; Heppner et al., 2004; Michelson et al., 2020; Nezu, 2004; Rojas et al., 2022).

This research is in the context of Thailand and the researchers propose that the Buddhist teachings could complement problem-solving perspective and efficacy, especially to most Thai people who practice Buddhism as their religion (Tuicomepee et al., 2012). As Uthayaratana et al. (2019) suggested, Buddhist teachings of the *four noble truths* could be applied to problem-solving processes to directly resolve problematic situations and psychological disturbances of the mind.

While problem-solving in the Western context is rooted in situational emphasis (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971), problem solving in *Buddha dhamma*, or a Buddhist teaching context, focuses on

addressing both the suffering mind and problematic situations (Payutto, 2012). Solving problematic situation together with psychological suffering is the aim of problem-solving in the context of Buddhist literature, which could be mentioned in summary as dealing with *suffering*. Suffering, as a translated word for *dukkhā*, does not share the exact meaning of *dukkhā* in and of itself (Pokaeo, personal communication, May 31, 2022). Suffering means the state of undergoing pain, distress or hardship, while *dukkhā* covers any state of mind that is unstable (both in negative, and positive light) due to the influence of ignorance. On the other hand, 'suffering' has been used widely as an interchangeable term with the Pali word: *dukkhā* (Daya, 2000; Sumedho, 1992; Van Gordon et al., 2015). The authors choose to use the word 'suffering' in this article as an equivalence to the general usage of the word *dukkhā*, with respect to the inherent limitation of the languages. By applying the knowledge on problem-solving found in Buddhist literature, one could also benefit as a complementary framework for problem-solving as offered in Western literature, thereby applying *Buddha dhamma* to the field of psychology, not for a religious purpose, but to enhance and understand the human mind (Choudhuri & Kraus, 2014; Daya, 2000; Dryden & Still, 2006; Kim & Ha, 2021; Mikulas, 2007; Pokeao, 2010; Venty, 2021; Wilber, 2001).

A study of problem-solving could be of benefit, particularly to Thai undergraduate students, whose mental health have recently been affected through lots of changes and adjustments during the pandemic and worsened during the COVID-19 outbreak (Choompunuch et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021). According to a Thai mental health survey by the National Statistical Office (2021), Thai youth had the lowest score in mental health compared to the Thai general population. The survey results also suggested that problem-solving skills should be developed among Thais. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies on how problem-solving, especially in the field of mental health, can be adopted by Thai university students, who have a relatively higher tendency to inherit *Buddha dhamma* from Thai culture (Tuicomepee et al., 2012). This also aligns with Heppner et al.'s (2004) recommendation to conduct more studies of problem-solving within subgroups of population and culture. An examination of problem-solving, particularly within the framework of Buddhist teachings, could be beneficial in the Thai context as an alternative and complementary framework for problem-solving that is offered in Western literature. Thus, this study aims to explore the experiences of Thai university students in employing problem-solving within the context of Buddhist teachings.

Literature Review

Problem-solving from both the western and Buddhist contexts have been reviewed in this section.

Problem Solving and Mental Health

Many research studies (Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021; Bond et al., 2002; De la Fuente et al., 2022; D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971; Elliott et al., 1991; Heppner et al., 2004; Nezu, 2004; Shure, 2001; Shure & Spivack, 1972) show that problem-solving is closely associated with mental health. A meta-analysis on problem-solving concludes that the construct helps predict psychological adjustment and has a strong negative relationship with anxiety, while perceived ineffective problem-solving is associated with increased depression, hopelessness and suicidal ideation, and other mental health-related behavior (Heppner et al., 2004). There are problem-solving interventions that could help with depressive symptomatology (Bell & D'Zurilla, 2009; Becker-Weidman et al., 2010), and also aim to help with many forms of psychological concerns (Nezu et al., 2013). These research studies and interventions can be broadly divided into three main approaches: 1) interpersonal cognitive problem solving; 2) problem-solving therapy; and 3) problem-solving appraisal.

Interpersonal cognitive problem-solving (Shure, 2001; Shure & Spivack, 1972) pays attention to psychological factors that are related to problem-solving, such as problem sensitivity, alternative solution thinking, causal thinking, and means-end thinking. Shure (2001) has developed an intervention called 'I

Can Problem Solve' to enhance the development of problem-solving skills from early childhood as a mental health prevention program.

Problem-solving therapy (Nezu et al., 2013) has its therapeutic process based on social problem-solving (SPS) (Nezu, 2004; Nezu et al., 2013) as developed from D'Zurilla and Goldfried's (1971) study of problem-solving. This approach views problem-solving in 2 dimensions: 1) problem orientation, cognitive-affective schemas that could affect an individual's motivation and tendency to solve a problem based on their perception of it, in either positive or negative light, and 2) problem-solving style, cognitive-behavioral activities that can be grouped into an effective problem-solving style called rational/planful problem-solving, and another two ineffective styles called impulsive-careless problem-solving, and avoidant problem-solving. Rational/planful problem-solving consists of a problem definition, generation of alternatives, decision making, and solution implementation and verification. Problem-solving therapy also employs other techniques, such as self-restraint to pause and think carefully before taking any action or solution, or cognitive restructuring to help an individual deal with their view of problems.

Heppner et al. (2004) have suggested an appraisal of problem-solving. Heppner (1978) proposed a way of applying D'Zurilla and Goldfried's (1971) model of counseling psychology to encourage a client's acceptance of their problem by using empathy and active listening skills to help the client formulate their problem, adopting brainstorming techniques to create a safe space for the client to generate choices, helping the client explore their choices and predictable consequences in order to help them make a decision, and then embolden the client with skills such as self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self-management to help them evaluate, verify and maintain their problem-solving abilities. Heppner and Petersen's (1982) further studies introduced a problem-solving appraisal, which consists of monitoring for: 1) problem-solving confidence, a self-assurance in the ability to cope effectively with problems; 2) an approach-avoidant style, a tendency to approach or avoid problem-solving activities; and 3) personal control, a belief in one's control of emotions and behaviors while solving problems. Problem-solving appraisal studies have shown connections between problem-solving and mental health, which could briefly be concluded as a more positive appraisal of one's problem-solving related to better mental health (Heppner et al., 2004).

In sum, a problem-solving conceptualization within Western theoretical psychological frameworks has been advanced in psychological research and practice (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971; Heppner et al., 2004; Nezu, 2004; Shure, 2001), where situational factors remain the focus of problem resolution. Furthermore, these frameworks have been proven effective and beneficial to those engaging in problem-solving. Its effectiveness, however, could be enhanced by expanding the focus on one's internal factors, thereby addressing both the situational and personal factors relevant to the problem, as proposed in problem-solving in the Buddhist context.

Problem Solving in the Buddhist Context

In the Buddhist context, especially Theravada Buddhism, which is the school of Buddhism that has been inherited by Thai culture (Tuicomepee et al., 2012), a concept called 'the four noble truths' is known as a fundamental key practice for solving one's problems and allowing one to maintain an equanimous state of mind. The four noble truths and their application to problem-solving have been explained in detail by Payutto (2012). The process of this problem-solving technique consists of acknowledging *dukkhā* (recognizing psychological suffering), *samudāya* (identifying the cause of the suffering), *nirodha* (setting a goal to evince the suffering's cessation), and *magga* (practicing what has been found to be effective until the individual ceases suffering), together with new understanding and insight about what causes and what ceases psychological suffering.

Payutto (2012) also explained "the four noble truths" by incorporating problem-solving thinking that includes four steps: identify and understand the problem; examine the causes of the problem; set and weigh

the possibility of realizing the goal of ending the problem; and plan a practicable way to deal with the problem.

Sammādiṭṭhi (right understanding), together with a four noble truths-based technique of problem–solving, result in an understanding of the causes of suffering and the laws of nature (things exhibit: inter-relatedness, impermanence, change, and non-self) (Payutto, 2012). The causes of psychological, or mental, suffering can be described in brief as being due to craving, clinging, and ignorance (Buddhadãsa Bhikku, 2014). Craving is a desire for something, which is usually inconsistent with what really happens. Craving can be inflated further into clinging, which is an attachment to the desired object. Craving and clinging occur through ignorance, which is a misperception and misconception of the laws of nature. And that is where Right understanding does its duty on ceasing ignorance, craving, clinging, and suffering. For problem-solving, Payutto (2012) has suggested to start dealing with problems by ceasing the psychological suffering first, in this way, the mind is in a clear state and ready to deal solely with problematic situations when they arise.

Hence, problem-solving in the Buddhist context extends the problem-solving process by not only addressing the problematic situation, but also focusing on the suffering in the mind that relate to the situation (Payutto, 2012). These characteristics appear to be beneficial and complement the process that is emphasized in Western culture. The current study, therefore, is mainly aimed at exploring the initial understanding of problem-solving within the Buddhist context as seen through Thai undergraduate students' experiences. It was anticipated that the findings would help address the gap of problem-solving in Western literature and provide an alternative or complementary method to enhance the process. Doing so would address the concern raised by Uthayaratana et al. (2019), that Western problem–solving, as applied to counseling and psychotherapy, remains restricted in its main focus on circumstantial management (i.e., resolving problematic situations). The Theravada Buddhist perspective, which focuses on solving the problem of the mind or the mental suffering itself, would be beneficial in fulfilling this gap.

Research Question

What is the experience of Thai undergraduate students when employing problem-solving within the Buddhist context?

Method

This study took a qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed by descriptive thematic analysis. Triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking methods were utilized to ensure trustworthiness in this study.

Participants

Respondents were purposively selected from all four regions of Thailand (i.e., the central, northern, northeastern, and southern parts) for in-depth interviews via gatekeepers The gatekeepers would act as mediators to gain access to the participants, using inclusion criteria in which the scores were rated by both the gatekeepers and the participants themselves, as engaging in *Buddha dhamma* problem-solving. These are reflected in the scores on: 1) the problem-solving in *Buddha dhamma* behavior checklists (i.e., being scored as "true" for all 24 items by both gatekeepers and themselves), and 2) the *paññā* (understanding) scale (Daensilp, 2007), which measures understanding in a *Buddha dhamma* context as the understanding of inter-dependence and change (i.e., obtaining an average self-rated score of 4.00 or above). The researcher contacted 21 gatekeepers who were university professors and who had direct experience with students. The researcher provided them with information regarding problem-solving in *Buddha dhamma*. The gatekeepers identified prospective research participants who scored "true" for all 24 items in problem-solving on the *Buddha dhamma* behavior checklists. Then, the researcher contacted 38 prospective research participants and asked them to do self-evaluations on the behavior checklist and *paññā* scale, 15 students

met the inclusion criteria and voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Demographics of the respondents include age, gender, and university region. Respondents (see Table 1) were aged between 21-23 years old (M = 21.60, SD = 0.63); 53.33% were female (n = 8), 46.67% were male (n = 7). Their universities were located in the four regions of Thailand: 40.00% were in the southern region (n = 6), 26.67% were in the central region (n = 4), 20.00% were in the northeastern region (n = 3), and 13.33% were in the northern region (n = 2). The interviews took place in various settings upon the agreement and convenience of the respondents, such as the university library, a lecture room, or café (private and safe). Prior to the interviews, participants were requested to sign an informed consent. All participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time and confidentiality was assured. The interview duration ranged from 30 to 90 minutes with voice recording, covering semi-structured interview questions.

Instruments

All interviews were conducted using 6-item semi-structured questions in order to answer each research question (e.g. “What was the issue that troubled and bothered you?”, “How did that problem affect you?”, “What were the causes of the problem?”, “How did you deal with the problem?”, “What have you learned from the problem?”, “How did the process and result of problem-solving affect you and the people surrounding you?”). The content validity and ability to answer the research questions of this instrument were determined by three subject matter experts, who were professionals and worked in the field of qualitative and counseling psychology research. Then, a trial interview with a university student was performed to check and finalize the interview questions.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Respondents

Alias	Age in years at the time of interview	Gender	University Region
P1	22	Male	Central
P2	23	Male	Central
P3	21	Female	North-east
P4	21	Female	North east
P5	21	Male	North east
P6	22	Male	Central
P7	22	Male	Central
P8	22	Female	North
P9	22	Female	North
P10	21	Male	South
P11	22	Female	South
P12	22	Female	South
P13	21	Female	South
P14	21	Female	South
P15	21	Male	South

Problem-solving in *Buddha dhamma* behavior checklists. The researchers developed a 24-item behavior checklist using dichotomous responses (true or false) that covered 3 concrete problem-solving ways of thinking from *Buddha dhamma* (Payutto, 2012), including four noble truths thinking, three kinds of *ñāṇa* (three insights in four noble truths), and *yonisomanasikāra* (proper ways of consideration) (e.g. "when there is a problem or suffering, I could acknowledge what the problem or suffering is”, “I recognize how the causes of the problem are related and formed into a problem”, “when I acknowledge a problem, suffering, and its causes, I know what the righteous goal is to overcome the problem”, “I know what to do before or after in order to solve this problem”). Content validity as item objective congruence was conducted among three subject matter experts in the research and work of counseling psychology and *Buddha dhamma*. The experts evaluated each question on the ordinal scale (+1, 0, or -1) as having high to

low correlation, in order to evaluate the index of each item, the objective congruence (IOC) should be higher than .50 (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1976). This behavior checklists of the IOCs were .66 – 1.00. The problem-solving in *Buddha dhamma* behavior checklist was then used as an instrument for inclusion criteria. The respondents were scored as "true" when all 24 items in the behavior checklists were scored as "true" from the gatekeeper, and then themselves.

The *paññā* scale (Daensilp, 2007) is a 74-item scale, responses were measured on a 5 points Likert scale, consisting of two factors: understanding of inter-dependence, and understanding of change. This *paññā* scale had a Cronbach's reliability coefficient of .98. The *paññā* scale was used as an instrument for inclusion criteria in which respondents rated themselves at an average score of 4.00 or above.

Procedure

Descriptive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Clarke et al., 2015; Creswell, 2007). Firstly, the first researcher transcribed the voice recordings verbatim. Then, the researcher read the transcripts to understand the participants' experiences and identify the primary common and emerging themes. The researcher finally coded and categorized them into themes and subthemes.

Trustworthiness analysis of this study was conducted to ensure validity, reliability and transferability, as communicated in qualitative research fashion as creditability, dependability, and transferability (Creswell, 2007) Creditability was established by three methods. 1) Triangulation was conducted by collecting data from various locations in Thailand, and also triangulated with problem solving, counseling, and *Buddha dhamma* frameworks and specialists. 2) Peer debriefing was employed by rechecking and consulting with qualitative research specialists along with a data analysis method. 3) Member checking was done by rechecking the data results with 6 key informants to ensure that results covered and aligned with their experiences. Dependability refers to reliability or the ability to reestablish the process of this study, which was held by two methods. 1) An Audit Trail, where the researcher described what the plan on strategic planning was, including well-preserved traces and evidence of this study such as behavior checklists and verbatim transcriptions so that this study is replicable. 2) An Inquiry Audit was employed where the researcher rechecked the research process and results with research experts. Transferability ensures that this study has the respective results of a representative sample that can be transferred to similar contexts and samples: 1) Purposive sampling was conducted to make sure that the results of this study referred to the objective of this study. 2) Thick description was employed so that the researcher would be able to describe in fruitful detail and enhance the results so that they could be of benefit to others' contexts and studies. Lastly, Confirmability was determined by ensuring that the findings were based on the results of the phenomenological experiences and views of the respondents, while recognizing that this study has its own limitations (Shenton, 2004).

Ethical Consideration

The data collection process began after ethics clearance by the research ethics review committee for research involving human research participants, health science group, Chulalongkorn University (COA No. 145/2016), issued and dated 11 August 2016. The data collection process was consecutively conducted for approximately 3 months from September to November 2016.

Results

By employing descriptive thematic analysis, the results are presented in four themes to answer the research question of 'what is the experience of Thai undergraduate students in employing problem-solving within the Buddhist context?'. Four emerging themes illustrated the processes relevant to problem-solving

within the Buddhist context (see Figure 1). These included, 1) *recognize problems and psychological suffering*, 2) *identify the causes of problems and psychological suffering*, 3) *deal with problems and psychological suffering*, and 4) *witness the alleviation of suffering*.

Recognize Problems and Psychological Suffering

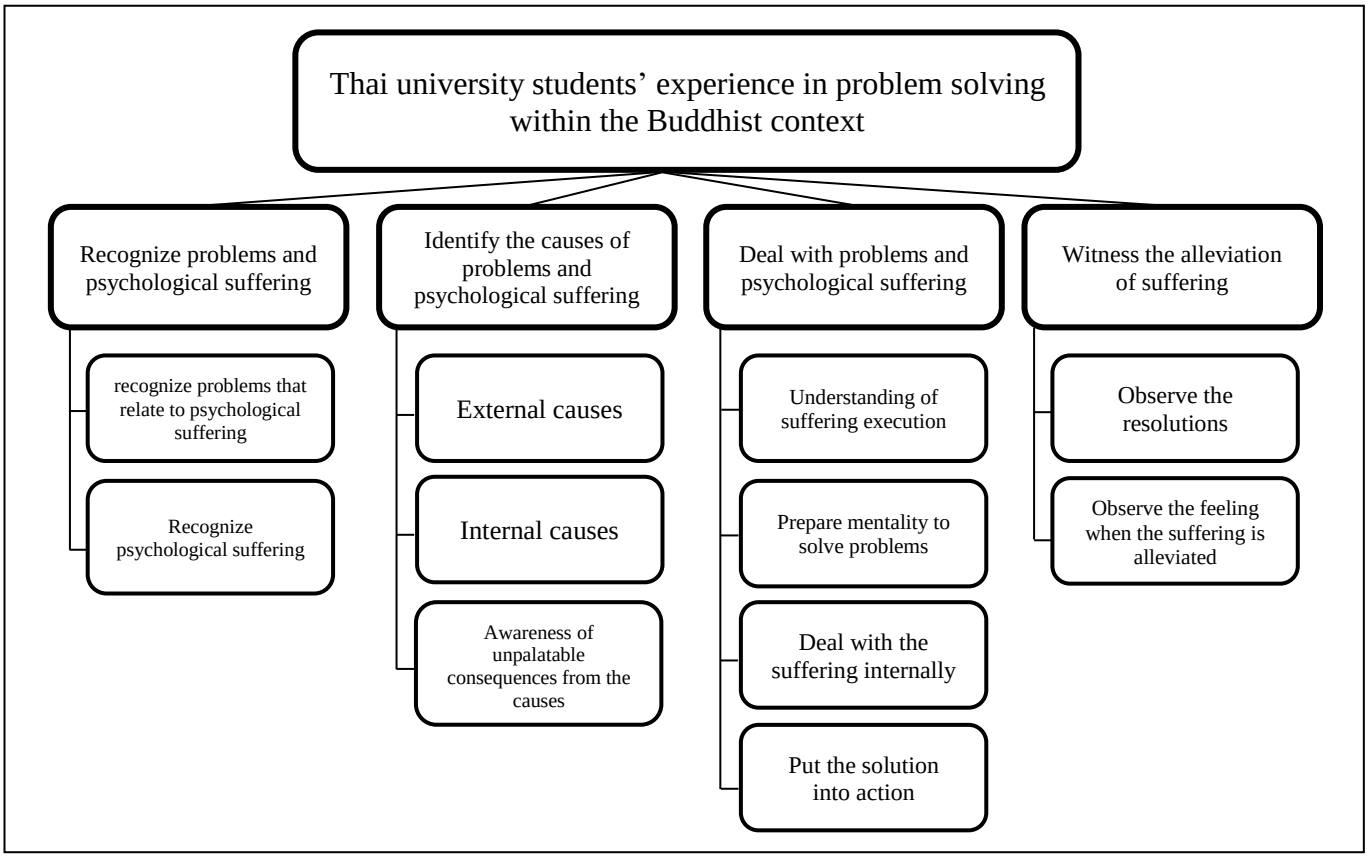
To *recognize problems and psychological or mental suffering* refers to how respondents observed and recognized their problems and the resulting psychological suffering experience. The respondents became fully aware of their concerns and perceived psychophysiological suffering to conceive their problem and suffering. This theme consisted of 2 categories: 1) recognize problems that relate to psychological suffering, and 2) recognize psychological suffering.

Category 1: recognize problems that relate to psychological suffering. All respondents (n = 15) mentioned their observation of problems which created issues and situations that were related to their psychological suffering. Respondent P6 shared his issue of suffering:

> The issue that has disturbed me a lot was during university admission time, four years ago... by that time all of my friends were accepted to their chosen faculty, except me. That made me feel lost and worried about my future. I was so afraid that I would have no place to study. (P6)

Figure 1

Four Emerging Themes of Thai University Students' Experience in Problem Solving within the Buddhist Context



Category 2: recognize psychological suffering. All respondents (n = 15) mentioned their perceived psychophysiological experience in terms of mind, body and behavior, as related to their issues and problematic situations during their mental suffering. The results also revealed a specific psychological experience in the context of thoughts and feelings, bodily reactions, and past unaware behavior(s). For

example, P12 said that she perceived psychological suffering through her thoughts and feelings that were related to the issues and problematic situations:

> I was so sad that dad did 'that'. I didn't understand why. Why did he hurt mom? Why didn't he have any responsibility? Why, why, why, why. There were so many questions. And that leads to sadness. I was sad that things weren't the same. (P12)

Meanwhile, P6 mentioned that he perceived bodily reactions that related to his psychological suffering, concerns and problematic situations:

> I woke up during the night. It felt like I couldn't breathe. I tried to put myself to sleep but I could only breathe a little. The air didn't go into my lung. It happened not just once. It took two to three nights so I could aware of this stress. (P6)

P15 mentioned his previous behaviors, which lacked contemplation before responding to his problematic issues and concerns, this usually brought back negative consequences and kept him engrossed in his problems:

> I posted a status on Facebook. I knew that by that time I wasn't regulating my emotion. So, I posted about freshmen welcoming activities that I felt dissatisfied. So, the seniors didn't like me and posted a status about me that reflected badly on Facebook. (P15)

Identify Causes of Problems and Psychological Suffering

The data analysis revealed that to *identify causes of problems and psychological suffering* came as a second theme. It required one to observe and reflect on the cause of the problem or psychological suffering, or both, which led them to a clear conceptualization of their issues. Respondents tended to categorize causes into external causes, which were more likely to relate to their problem, and internal causes, which more likely related to their psychological suffering. But these two categories oftentimes weren't considered as two different issues. Respondents considered both external and internal causes as relative factors that they could both identify in order to deal with their perceived suffering. An awareness of the unpalatable consequences from both external and internal causes could result as their undesirable state of mind. This was divided into 3 categories: 1) external causes, 2) internal causes, and 3) awareness of unpalatable consequences from the causes.

Category 1: External causes. Most respondents (n = 10) pointed out the causes of their problems as being related to external factors such as people, places, systems, and situational factors, as shared by P13:

> The external factor was someone, some of my friends made fun of me. I am Muslim, and I couldn't make a proper pronunciation of some words. That made me less confident. (P13)

Category 2: Internal causes. All respondents (n = 15) described their observation of the causes in their own minds, which were psychological factors such as thoughts, feelings or beliefs, and views about themselves and expectation that led to their psychological suffering, as P8 mentioned:

> Home wasn't just a brick and stone, there were memories. Even though it was a memory of losing my loved one, my family member, and anything we had done. Loss made me really sad. My whole life, I suffered from grief. The grief that came from my mind that chooses to keep what I had lost. (P8)

Category 3: Awareness of unpalatable consequences from the causes. Most respondents (n = 9) stated their observations regarding the unpalatable consequences of the causes of their problem and the suffering which motivated them to ease the suffering, as P14 mentioned:

> We had to work together. If I kept sweating the small stuff, it would just add up the difficulties. (P14)

Deal with Problems and Psychological Suffering

The results showed that, after recognizing problems and psychological suffering, and identifying the causes of problems and psychological suffering, then the respondents would *deal with problems and psychological suffering*. Respondents portrayed that their ways of dealing with problems and psychological suffering were rooted in understandings about suffering's execution and their life. These understandings led to seeing how they dealt with psychological suffering and problems. There were many ways chosen to deal with their problematic situations and psychological suffering, such as changing psychological perspective and performing actions, which related to what respondents had realized once completing the first two stages: to recognize problems and psychological suffering and identify its causes. Although there could be various ways of dealing with problems and psychological suffering, all the respondents had put their effort on dealing with their psychological suffering so that they could deal completely with the problems and psychological suffering that resulted from those suffering phenomena. This theme was divided into 4 categories 1) understanding of suffering execution, 2) prepare mentally to solve problems, 3) deal with the suffering internally, and 4) put the solution into action.

Category 1: Understanding of suffering execution, which could be defined as the respondents' views of problem-solving, a perspective that a problem and the related suffering can be solved starting at one's self, and their value of virtue, together with their understanding of life and way of life. All respondents (n = 15) described what and how this understanding affected their resiliency, mental flexibility, and how they decided to solve problems. The results also showed 3 specific understandings among the respondents; 1) understanding in the context of the problem's nature, 2) understanding of life and the ways of life, and 3) the view of executing one own suffering.

Most respondents (n = 10) mentioned their understanding of the problem's nature in the perspective of problem and problem-solving in a way that helps them reclaim their resilience and understand them. For example, to be aware that there will be a solution, so the problem will only stay for a while, or to view the problem is an opportunity, meaning there is a possibility to learn from every problem. This understanding could be imprinted on them before having to face the problem, or learned afterward by overcoming them. P1 elaborated his understanding that there will be a solution as follows:

> If I face a problem, I could just gently take it. It made me see the world as neutral. There are problems and solutions for everyone. That made me view problems, from big to small. (P1)

P10 described how he felt like he has inherited thoughts from his mother:

> My mom always told me to see that everything that happened is for good luck. Doesn't matter if that was good or bad. If it is really bad, just view it as we are only one in a hundred or thousand that this specific thing happens to us. It is also a good part that challenges our spirit. (P10)

For an understanding of life and the ways of life, most respondents (n = 12) mentioned that their views of a virtuous life, or the nature of living, were mostly in congruence with their religion or philosophical beliefs. Common points of this understanding were the views that made them become flexible and adaptable when facing dissatisfaction, disappointment, change, and uncertainty in life. P13 described her understanding of change and how she coped with it as follows:

> It isn't like that, like it has to be according to what I thought, sometimes things don't go that way. I accept that ...when I said it shall pass, I said it internally. I didn't say it out loud. Since, I think that voice in our mind is the loudest. I tried to tell myself that it shall pass and that helped lessened the heavy feeling. It was like… it shall pass... everything shall pass. Being attached doesn't make me happy. Doesn't matter whether it was happiness in the past or suffering in the past, if we think that we have to be all happy or always suffer, we would always be struck by it. I tried to soothe myself that anything shall pass. (P13)

P12 described her adopted way of virtuous life from her mom as follows:

> Mom told a story about Nabi. He was always abused by an old man on his way to Mosque, being thrown by rocks, and more. But when that old man was sick, Nabi still came to visit him. It really showed his endurance and understanding. He had gone through so many things much more than I. He overcame it. Why couldn't I? He was so kind. (P12)

All respondents (n = 15) mentioned their view of executing one's own suffering as their perspective. They were aware of the parts they could engage and deal with regarding problems and suffering, which included the awareness and insight that they were responsible for their own suffering and happiness, and that they had the ability to deal with it, as P5 stated:

> I do my best. Whatever is going to happen, happens. I see it like that. For other's minds, we cannot change it, so I would rather change mine. (P5)

Category 2: Prepare mentally to solve problems. Most respondents (n = 12) mentioned the actions that calmed their psychological suffering down. This was the preparation process of problem-solving. It started with a concentration-seeking action, such as talking to others, doing something they like, mindful awareness, or restraining their mind. Then the derived concentration would shift their focus from an occupied mind to a calm mind, as P12 described in her chosen talking-to-other experience:

> If I face a problem, I would talk to my friend. This would soothe me up and made me feel slightly better. The problem is still there, yes, but I feel better. I feel better I am ready to deal with it. (P12)

P11 also mentioned her preference for meditation:

> I always meditate. It helps me feel more stable and at ease. When a problem came, I would set my mind to be mindful, and see what I can do, step by step. (P11)

Category 3: Deal with suffering internally. This category contains ways that respondents dealt with their problems and thus depleted psychological suffering using their own psychological processes. The results also revealed specific processes that respondents implemented to deal with their suffering internally; 1) set goals and solutions, and 2) reframe their thoughts.

To set goals and solution, most respondents (n = 13) mentioned how they set out their problem-solving goals and solutions to deal with problematic situations and distresses by planning a specific goal and solution, which could be either an external or internal factor, or both. P12 described her plan to cope with her family issue as follows:

> I chose to listen to my mom to ease up her pain. Then I could deal with my pain afterwards. This time I had a thought that I would like to talk to my dad once more. There was no one else who dare to talk to him, except me. I would like to try to talk to each other openly. (P12)

Meanwhile, P3 mentioned her plan to change her mind:

> My first thought was I want to try. I want to try changing myself. I would like to deal with the mind that kept repeating to be upset and disappointed. Reduce it, calm it down, and listen to others' reasons more. (P3)

To reframe one's thoughts, all respondents (n = 15) mentioned their ways of changing their own perspectives, thoughts and beliefs to alleviate suffering. There were abundant ways recalled that were beneficial to them, such as reducing one's desires, looking at the positive side, looking for opportunities, being in the present moment, etc. These options removed respondents' suffering and synchronized them with the understanding of life and ways of life. P4 described how she reduced her desires, so that she could regulate her thoughts:

> Nowadays, I just depend on myself, don't have to be demanding of anyone. Just only see it as it is. If I don't have money, I just need to work to get it. I don't need to demand someone to give me any more. Then that would make me sad. So, when my mom says she doesn't have money, I would just take it as she doesn't have money. That's it. It doesn't mean that she doesn't love me. (P4)

P3 gave an example of how she saw the positive side as follows:

> Beneath an act of her reprimand, there is love and care. It was just my thought thinking that she just wanted to scold me. (P3)

P5 explained how he saw his suffering as an opportunity:

> I felt so much pity. It was my biggest mistake. So, I took that as a mistake. I would learn to care for others' feeling more when engaging in the new relationship. (P5)

P10 also described his way of being in the present moment:

> Instead of being regretful, I thought "I would make today the best". All I have to do is do my best. I could study wherever. (P10)

Category 4: Put the solution into action. Most respondents (n = 13) mentioned their verbal, physical, and psychological actions that were congruent with their planned goals, solutions and understanding of problems and life. These actions usually were considerate, compassionate, and consisted of peaceful intention. Each action was utilized based on the situation; for example, some incidents might only need either verbal or physical action, or maybe both, some require inaction, and some only need psychological action in order to overcome the problematic situation and psychological suffering. P9 mentioned her action of cutting down her toxic relationship as follows:

> He tried to contact me in every way, but I was done with him. I chose to be silent and chose to get over him. I was totally done. (P9)

P14 described two different ways to deal with her personal issues:

> When I had a problem, sometimes I spoke out to make it clear to someone that I was having an issue with it. But sometimes, I chose to deal with my own feeling. (P14)

Witness the Alleviation of Suffering

As related to results in previous themes, after the respondents dealt with their suffering according to how they recognized and identified the causes of their problems and psychological suffering, they described

how they observed the alleviation of their suffering. To *witness the alleviation of suffering*, respondents had to observe and be aware of two main areas that made them aware of changes in contexts and their own feelings. Respondents also used this observation as feedback to evaluate their solutions and outcomes from problem-solving. This theme was divided into 2 categories: 1) observe the resolution, and 2) observe the feeling when the suffering is alleviated.

Category 1: Observing the resolutions. Most respondents (n = 12) mentioned that their observation of resolutions began after the solution proceeded. Resolutions could be observed via given feedback from others, because of the resolution of the problematic situation, or through their own selves and behaviors as reflected in their problems and psychological suffering being resolved. P15 mentioned the feedback that he observed and received from his friend as follows:

> After that, my friends were happier with me. I was also happier living with them. There was one friend who told me that I had changed a lot. When I heard that I also thought that I really changed from that point, from me who had a problem with friends, seniors, religion, and traditions, to a total other me. (P15)

P2 described his current affection and relationship with his ex-girlfriend:

> After that my feeling for her has become more neutral. I feel less attached to her. Nowadays, we are friends again. (P2)

P5 explained how he observed change within himself as follows:

> I had really overcome it. I am surely not letting myself get trapped in that state anymore. I don't want to scold myself any further. I have done my best. (P5)

Category 2: observe the feeling when the suffering is alleviated. Almost all respondents (n = 14) mentioned their observations on the transformation of feelings; when suffering dissolves and brings ease, with a lighter, happier, more peaceful, or neutral state. These feelings of alleviated suffering also led respondents to be proud of themselves, more motivated to develop themselves to experience less suffering, and open up their minds for more happiness and new chances in their life. P7 described his feelings of suffering alleviation like this:

> My feeling at that moment was... I almost cried. I felt so grateful to my teacher and for everything. It was a really good moment in my life. I was out from a hole that I had long been lost in. (P7)

And P4 expressed how she felt proud of herself, as she could overcome her problem and suffering:

> Those questions I had were all gone. The only understanding left is that I can do it myself. I don't have to ask for help from anyone. No one had, to be in short, to support me, they also didn't really have anything. ...All of those why questions have changed. I was proud. It changed to that I don't have to blame anybody. I had changed from me who blamed others, to be me who was proud of myself. This made me feel prouder about myself and stop blaming anyone. (P4)

Discussion and Conclusion

This research aimed to study the experience of Thai undergraduate students when employing problem-solving within the Buddhist context. The results showed that students' experiences of the problem-solving process, which consisted of *recognize problems and psychological suffering*, *identify causes of*

problems and psychological suffering, *deal with problems and psychological suffering*, and *witness suffering alleviation,* shows similarities and differences with rational/planful problem-solving (Nezu et al., 2013). Both the students' experience of the problem-solving process and their rational/planful problem-solving have started the process of problem-solving by making them aware of what a problem actually is, the problem's definition, and how to perceive a problem and suffering. But, the theme for '*recognize problems and psychological suffering'* is to identify the problem from both situational and psychological perspectives, because the respondents included an awareness of their psychophysiological experience in order to conceive of the problem and the suffering. Meanwhile, the problem's definition delineates why a given situation is a problem, and gives a set objective goal that leads to problem solving (Nezu, 2004). Even though the process started with the same action of conceiving the situation as a problem, the results showed that respondents had paid attention and put their effort on dealing with the psychological suffering, from the very beginning and throughout the problem-solving process. This is similar to how problem-solving is dealt with in a Buddhist perspective, which aims to deal with both psychological and situational problems, starting with one's sanity (Payutto, 2012).

Problem-solving therapy and problem-solving appraisal mentions how views and beliefs about problem-solving (i.e., problem orientation) and self-efficacy (i.e., problem solving confidence) can impact the problem-solving process (Nezu et al., 2013; Nezu, 2004; Heppner, 1982; Heppner et al., 2004), as more positive beliefs usually lead to more motivation for problem-solving and also better mental health. Respondents also mentioned their understanding of the problem's nature and view of executing one's own suffering as how they could restore resiliency and motivate themselves to solve the problem using their own ability. Furthermore, respondents stated their understanding of life and their way of life, and how that facilitated them to be flexible and adaptable to suffering and change, and also guided them to more preferable virtues. This understanding played a role in how the respondents dealt with their psychological suffering, as it shaped how they reframed their thoughts and chose their solutions, which in turn led them to demonstrate the alleviation of their suffering. This phenomenon also consisted of *sammādiṭṭhi* (Right understanding) which plays a major role in the cessation of suffering. *Sammādiṭṭhi,* combined with The Four Noble Truths, allowed respondents to formulate the necessary tools to ease their problem and mental suffering. Having an understanding of *sammādiṭṭhi* in the law of nature as inter-relatedness, impermanence, change, and non-self, would bring an end to the causes of suffering, which are craving, clinging and ignorance. *Sammādiṭṭhi* of a virtuous life, or *lokiya paññā,* would also lead to reducing mental suffering and promoting the goodness of life and society (Buddhadãsa Bhikku, 2014; Payutto, 2012).

Better mental health was also both the intended goal and a pleasing by-product of these problem-solving approaches. Respondents reported a liberating feeling from suffering alleviation and mentioned that after their natural process of problem-solving, they felt less negative and gained more positive feelings toward themselves, which is the same tendency in anyone performing a problem-solving process in the context of counseling psychology who exhibits their undesirable psychological state reduced (Bond et al., 2002; Heppner et al., 2004). Contradictory, impulsive-careless, or avoidant problem-solving is linked with more undesirable psychological states such as worry, anxiety, or stressfulness due to problems (Aburezeq & Kasik, 2021). This is also similar to how respondents reported their perceived psychophysiological experience while suffering. An awareness of behavior that they did without a neat consideration of how to respond to their problematic issues usually kept them in an undesirable state of mind. On the other hand, when respondents were aware of their impulsive-careless or avoidant problem-solving tendencies beforehand, they performed a more considered problem–solving action that would lead them to better mental health. Moreover, better psychological well-being can also be explained by problem orientation. De la Fuente et al. (2022) found that positive problem orientation was an important predictor of life satisfaction, which is similar to how our respondents reported their understanding of the problem's nature, that it could be related to their well-being after their problem-solving process. Still, further studies are suggested to conduct more understanding of how similarities and differences between Western and Buddhist contexts of problem-solving affect well-being and mental health.

Another difference between the emerging themes of Thai undergraduate students' problem-solving and problem-solving approaches in the Western context is the process in which the causes of the problems are examined. The Buddhist perspective, which reflects on the students' experiences, emphasizes the importance of examining both the causes of suffering and the problematic situation that led to it, in order to understand the factors related to problems, which can then lead to an insight of what could be reduced or stopped or changed, as one examines the causes of suffering. In contrast, problem-solving in the context of Western psychology is based on situational emphasis, which is opposed to intra-psychic connotation (D'Zurilla & Goldfried, 1971). So, the process of examining the cause of both psychological suffering and the problematic situation is not mentioned in the problem-solving process. Interestingly, the results of Thai university students' experiences in problem-solving show how a consideration of both situational and psychological suffering perspectives have benefited them.

The results of this study show some similarities and differences between the experience of Thai undergraduate problem-solving and the *Buddha dhamma*. The emerging themes among Thai undergraduate students regarding their experience of problem-solving and the alleviation of their psychological distress consisted of *Buddha dhamma* and The Four Noble Truths, which explains how one's suffering can come to an end when the person has dealt completely with these four noble truths and each of their counsels (Buddhadãsa Bhikku, 2014; Payutto, 2012). According to the respondents, in their experience they comprehended that to 1) *recognize problems and psychological suffering*, is consistent with *dukkhā* (suffering), and its duty is to recognize one's own suffering. 2) To *identify the causes of problems and psychological suffering*, is consistent with *samudāya* (the cause of suffering), and its duty is to identify the cause of suffering. 3) To *deal with problems and psychological suffering* is consistent with *magga* (the path leading to suffering's cessation), and its duty is to practice what leads to the cessation of suffering. 4) To *witness the alleviation of suffering* is consistent with *nirodha* (suffering's cessation), and its duty is to demonstrate one's own state of cessation of suffering. At the same time, the results also showed a different sequence of how the respondents actually performed *magga*, before mentioning their sense of *nirodha*, which they had reached after their action of solving both the problematic situation and their resultant psychological suffering. These phenomena consist of what Payutto (2012) has mentioned as *samudāya*, the cause of dukkhā, and *magga*, the cause of *nirodha*. So, the respondents' experiences reflected a practical way of implementing four noble truths problem–solving, which started with *dukkha* and ended with *nirodha* as a state of suffering-less mind. The results, interestingly, could suggest a practical way to apply this *Buddha dhamma*-based problem-solving into daily life, even though the Buddhist perspective mentions that the core of how the human mind suffers and becomes suffer-less, has remained the same through countless eras (Payutto, 2012; Buddhadãsa Bhikku, 2014). Since this study collected its data in 2016, more studies about problem-solving in the Buddhist context are suggested, due to the drastic change from pandemic that might have impacted students' lives.

Moreover, the experience of Thai undergraduates' problem-solving in the *Buddha dhamma* context could also be explained by *magga*, solving their problem. *Magga* is detailed in the eightfold path, or eight practices to overcome suffering, which includes Right understanding, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration (Uthayaratana et al., 2019). As this study's participants have set their minds on the right understanding of a problem's nature, and ways of life and all things exhibit inter-relatedness, impermanence, change, and non-self, so are they aware of the parts that they could involve in dealing with problems and having the ability to deal with them. Their thoughts regarding the problem have shifted and focused more on how to set a goal and solutions, and has even led them to reframe their thoughts to healthier and less suffering ones. Then, they chose their speech (e.g., communicating about their concerns), actions (e.g., implementing their solution), and livelihood (e.g., continuing to focus on their duties) that could lead them to a less suffering state of mind. During this problem-solving process, they had to adopt their mindfulness and concentration in order to understand their current problem, suffering, and its causes. In the end, there was a required effort of both psychological and behavioral processes to move toward their solution. This study gives an initial understanding of how the eightfold path could be applied

to problem solving in the Buddhist context. More studies are recommended to elaborate a clearer understanding of this point.

On the other hand, this process of problem-solving is an action derived from a broad range of awareness and mindfulness. Respondents had shown that all four objects of mindfulness training 1) body: sensing their body, 2) feeling: observing their emotions, 3) mind: observing their thought, and 4) dhamma: understanding how problems and things are, helped them to overcome suffering (Payutto, 2012). In other words, students were practicing a daily life form of mindfulness training that related to their direct experience to evince in their daily life, the cessation of suffering. Mindfulness practice can be beneficial to promote the efficacy of this problem-solving. Practicing this form of problem-solving is, thus, practicing mindfulness, which is consistent with the finding of Van Gordon et al. (2015), who stated that the essence of mindfulness and the four noble truths could allow an individual to gain the most benefit out of a mindfulness practice, to cease suffering.

Limitations

Information obtained in this study could reflect the experience of participants at the time of the interview and might only present a segment of problem-solving experiences. The longitudinal study could also provide a long-term understanding of the phenomena and their effect on mental health. The purposive sampling method employed in this study has led to a particular understanding of problem-solving among those engaging in *Buddha Dhamma.* This has led to the limitation of possibly generalizing the findings to other populations, and therefore a recommendation for further study of this topic in other populations is warranted. It is important to note the methodological limitations involved in this study, which could be subjected to self-report biases.

Implications for Behavioral Science

In order to evidently study this problem-solving method and examine its effectiveness, the researchers suggest a further study to enable this variable to be measurable and perform comprehensive studies with other mental health and psychological variables. Further studies on the cognitive and psychological processes that are related to problem-solving in the Buddhist context are recommended in order to understand a clearer concept and process of this problem-solving implication.

Conclusion

This study has aimed at exploring the experience of problem-solving in the Buddhist context, from the experience of Thai undergraduate students who engage in Buddhist practices. The findings could help expand the perspective of psychological well-being. Even though this study was conducted in 2016, the findings could give us an initial understanding of this unique problem-solving technique that would be able to complement existing problem-solving knowledge in the context of mental health. To *recognize problems and psychological suffering*, *identify causes of problems and psychological suffering*, *deal with problems and psychological suffering*, and *witness suffering alleviation* describes physical and psychological actions that assist individuals to a more serene state of mind and healthier mental health, which is congruent with a four noble truths application of problem-solving and finding suffering's cessation. Awareness of what causes this problem in both the situational and individual mental levels, combined with an understanding of the nature of the problem and life, could enhance problem-solving skills and help acquire a state of mind that suffers less.

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