
Integrating Mahāsi Sayādaw's Meditation Techniques for Effective Management of Guilt: A Comparative Study of Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives

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Submitted: 04/07/2024 * Revised: 05/08/2024 * Accepted: 13/08/2024*

Abstract

This research article aims to: (1) study the concept of the feeling of guilt and its causes as mentioned in psychology and the Buddhist Scriptures, (2) examine the technique of meditation practice as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, and (3) propose the effective ways to deal with the feeling of guilt based on the technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation practice. The research methodology is qualitative, documentary, and involves in-depth interviews.

The findings reveal that the feeling of guilt, denoted as kukkucca in Buddhist literature, is interpreted differently in the field of psychology compared to Buddhist texts. In psychology, it is considered a double-edged emotion, stemming from the notion of self and values, along with cognitive patterns and beliefs. Whereas, according to Buddhist doctrine, its nature is unwholesome, regardless of how it is explained, and unwholesome deeds that have been done, wholesome deeds that have not been done, ignorance, unsettledness of mind, and frequently giving careless attention to it are its causes. Notwithstanding the divergent interpretations, both psychology and Buddhism converge on the efficacy of mindfulness practice in coping with guilt. **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation technique offers a practical approach to mindfulness practice to help cope with guilt effectively. The effective ways of meditation practice that address guilt based on his teachings use the acronym LOVE, meaning: L: loving-kindness development, O: observing, V: vivid insight, and E: embracing change. Additionally, endeavoring to cultivate mindfulness and associating with good friends are also suggested to surmount possible obstacles during the implementation of this approach. By engaging in this process, individuals may calm the mind, cultivate present-moment awareness, gain wisdom, and enact positive behavioral changes. This practice not only enables the effective overcoming of the feeling of guilt but also precludes its potential future manifestation. These findings have significant implications for understanding and effectively coping with guilt.

Keywords: Guilt; **Mahāsi Sayādaw**; Meditation Techniques; Kukkucca; Buddhist Perspective; Psychology Perspective

Introduction

Guilt, a complex emotion, merits further examination given its importance in many people's lives. It is a nagging perception of unease that individuals experience when recalling past actions that should have been executed or should not have been executed (Carrell, 2008). People can experience guilt for various reasons, such as when they utilize others, neglect responsibilities, act selfishly, and procure disproportionate profits (Katchadourian, 2010). Regardless of the cause, guilt may exert a dichotomous impact on the lives of individuals, encompassing both beneficial and detrimental. On the one hand, it shapes their behavior by monitoring the morality of actions, which is a necessary component of civilized behavior (Carrell, 2008). On the other hand, if it attains a state of excess, it can cause self-doubt (Carrell, 2008), negatively affect mental tranquility, and damage valued relationships (Winch, 2013).

According to Buddhism, guilt is encapsulated by the Pali term *kukkucca* (SuttaCentral, n.d.). This term is defined as “mental agitation (arising from anxiety that one has done or might do wrong, or might fall to do right); a feeling of guilt; remorse; worried; (over-) scrupulousness” (SuttaCentral, n.d.). From a Buddhist perspective, *kukkucca* is considered one of the mental hindrances that serve as a barrier to an individual's progress and obstacles to the process of attaining enlightenment and celestial spheres (Nārada, 2011). Hence, finding effective strategies to manage guilt is of paramount importance for the salutary effects of psychological well-being and the pursuit of spiritual progression. Throughout history, the cultivation of present-moment awareness has been applied to achieve a state of liberation, inner peace, and true joy (Ven. Nyanabhadda Pháp Tử et al., 2023). **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, a renowned Theravada meditation master, has developed a systematic approach to mindfulness meditation praxis, also termed *vipassana*, with the ultimate objective of extinguishing mental pollutants, such as guilt, from the mind wholly (Sīlānanda, 1999). This praxis involves paying attention to any mental or physical object, such as thoughts, emotions, body postures, or movements, and experiencing only the present moment (Pasri et al., 2021). In particular, this process of purification can be undertaken by any individual, regardless of their religious beliefs, to nurture

authentic humaneness, promote emotional well-being, and foster holistic mental well-being (Namto, 2011). Notably, engaging in this technique may not only assist individuals' triumph over guilt but also lead them to possess impeccable conduct (Sirimangalo International, n.d.), thereby attenuating the likelihood of guilt emergence in the future (Tan, 2013). As the Buddha declared:

Bhikshus, for the morally virtuous, there is no need of the intention [an act of will], May freedom from guilt-feeling arise in me!" (**avippaṭisāro** me uppajjatu). It is natural [the nature of things], bhikshus, that freedom from guilt-feeling will arise for the morally virtuous, possessed of moral virtue (Tan, 2013, p. 111).

This research studies the concept of guilt and its causes through the lens of psychology and the Buddhist Scriptures, thereby enhancing a more nuanced understanding of this intricate emotion. Furthermore, it delves into the meditation technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, highlighting its efficacy in overcoming this challenging emotion. Building upon these insights, the study proposes effective ways based on **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation method to deal with guilt. By pursuing the aforementioned goals, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge of mental health and well-being, especially within the framework of guilt management. Not only that, it also aims to furnish a holistic approach to understanding guilt, drawing from ancient insights of Buddhism and contemporary psychology, along with effective strategies in guilt management based on the meditation technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**. It is hoped that these strategies may promote greater emotional resilience among individuals struggling with guilt, thereby fostering healthier social communities.

Research Objectives

1. To study the concept of the feeling of guilt and its causes as mentioned in psychology and the Buddhist Scriptures.
2. To examine the technique of meditation practice as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**.
3. To propose the effective ways to deal with the feeling of guilt based on the technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation practice.

Literature Review

Nārada (1987) provided the basis of knowledge for enhancing one's insight into the essence of phenomena. Through meticulous study of this book, one may facilitate a pathway towards the ultimate truth mentioned in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

Mahāsi (2013) offered valuable insights into the path to liberation, encouraging the practice of insight meditation to achieve liberation within one's lifetime, in the book "A Discourse on the Purābheda Sutta." The types of regret and their solutions were also discussed in the book, making it contribute significantly to this research, both theoretically and practically, in the context of dealing with guilt based on Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation method.

Mahāsi (1990) explained the ways to practice vipassanā meditation according to the teachings of the Buddha for achieving liberation in his book "Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā: Insight Through Mindfulness." It involves ways to practice insight meditation or vipassanā meditation through various exercises, such as sitting, walking, lying down, and so on. By practicing insight meditation, one can develop wisdom into the nature of mind and body, thereby attaining liberation from saṃsāra.

Sujiva (2004) presented a range of subjects with reference to meditation practice both in theoretical and practical application in the book "Essentials of Insight Meditation Practice." Additionally, the book also functions as a comprehensive guide in the context of meditation exercises by illuminating the potential obstacles and strategies to address them. This may assist the practitioners in engaging in the practice properly and facilitating progress.

Carrell (2008), in her book "Escaping Toxic Guilt: Five Proven Steps to Free Yourself from Good!" described the way to overcome feeling guilty. Specifically, this book not only provides valuable insights into the characteristics of guilt and its dynamics through the lens of psychology but also identifies common guilt-inducing scenarios and outlines strategies for overcoming guilt.

Sayadaw U. Panditābhivamsa (2008), in his book "Spiritual Cultivation," expounded on an array of topics in both theoretical and practical terms in pursuit of happiness pertaining to the current and prospective. This includes the practice of generosity, morality, mental development, and so forth. Furthermore, this book also serves as inspiration and instructions for individuals seeking to derive benefit from the teachings of the Buddha.

Chanmyay (2017) mentioned in the book “Talks and Questions & Answers on Miscellaneous Topics” topics relating to meditation praxis, such as the guidance, advantages, and consequences of samathā and vipassanā meditation. Ultimately, some interviews with Chanmyay Sayādaw in South Africa in 1999 were also included in this book.

Burton (2020) presented valuable lessons in addressing the feeling of guilt in the book “Let Go of the Guilt: Stop Beating Yourself Up and Take Back Your Joy.” Additionally, this book illuminates the impacts of guilt on individuals lives, its causal factors, and coping strategies. Through the acquisition of these strategies, individuals may achieve emotional equilibrium in their lives.

Ven. Tayzaw Thara (2021) demonstrated a comprehensive picture of the meditation method as instructed by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, including the characteristics, the methods of implementation, and the efficacy of this approach in his research, “A Study of Vipassanā Teaching Techniques in English of Vipassanā Masters at Mahāsi Meditation Center in Bahan Township, Yangon, Myanmar.” This thesis can be of tremendous utility for individuals who are seeking to enhance their understanding of the meditation technique taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**.

In summary, the literature review has examined a wide range of studies with reference to **Mahāsi Sayādaw**’s meditation method, along with the issue of guilt and its management in psychology, providing a comprehensive overview of this meditation method and psychology’s perspective on this complex emotion as well as the way to deal with it. However, there are still gaps, particularly in the ways to deal with the feeling of guilt effectively through the meditation technique as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, which have not yet been extensively studied in the academic field. Thus, this research will contribute to filling this gap by studying the effectiveness of the meditation technique as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw** in dealing with the feeling of guilt. By addressing this gap, this research will contribute to the field by providing a new way of managing the feeling of guilt through exploration of the meditation technique as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, thereby helping individuals equip effective strategies to enhance mental health as well as their spiritual journey.

Conceptual Framework

This research is a research study. The conceptual framework of this research exhibits the significant research process in terms of input, process, and output as follow:

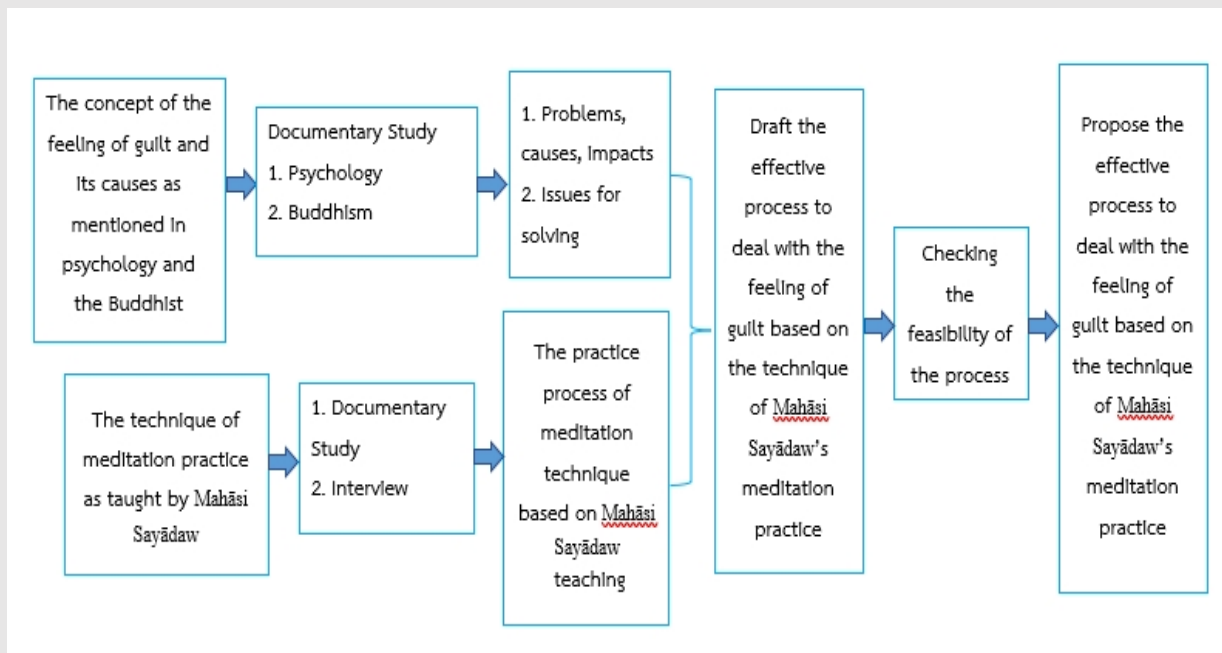


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative. The research methodology can be divided into six stages, as follows:

Data Collection

Collecting data for this research will be from the primary sources of the English translation series of the Pāli Canon and commentaries, as well as the secondary sources, which are Buddhist textbooks, psychology books, dictionaries, articles, journals, and other relevant literature, specifically the works on meditation of Mahāsi Sayādaw and his students. The reason for choosing these sources is because they can provide a comprehensive overview of the topic, from original texts to later interpretations. This leads to a clear comprehension of the topic.

In-dept Interviews

Interviewing the Buddhist scholars and meditation masters in present-day Thai society to gain contemporary viewpoints. The name lists are as follows:

1. Venerable Phrakhrughositbuddhisat, Dr. Vipassana Master, Watrakang. Bangkok.
2. Venerable Phrakhrubhawana Waralangara, Vipassana Master, Wat Bhaddanta Asabharam, Chonburi.
3. Venerable Phramaha Nopadol Saisuta, Assistant Professor Doctor of Department of Pali and Sanskrit, Faculty of Buddhism, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya.
4. Ven. Phramaha Duangthip Pariyattidhari, Dr. Lecturer, IBSC, MCU Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya.
5. Venerable Phramaha Weerasak Abhinandavedi, Dr. Vice-Director of Vipassanā Meditation, IBSC. MCU. Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya.

Analysis and Synthesis

Analyzing and synthesizing the raw data, as well as systematizing the collected data, in order to give a clear picture of the concept of guilt through the lens of psychology and the Theravada Buddhist perspective, together with the technique of meditation practice as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, and also proposing the effective ways to deal with the feeling of guilt based on the technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation practice.

Outline Construction

Constructing the overall outline of the work in all related dimensions corresponding to the objectives.

Problem Discussion

Discussing the problems encountered according to the significance of the studies.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Formulating conclusions, identifying significant research findings, and suggesting useful information for further research.

Research Results

Objective 1: The results showed that in the field of psychology, the feeling of guilt is common among individuals when they recall past actions that should have been done or should not have been done, deliberately or inadvertently, in actuality or in their imagination. According to the Buddhist perspective, it is a type of mental hindrance called *kukkucca*, a mental factor that emerges when one regrets unwholesome deeds done and wholesome deeds not done. There are two main types of feelings of guilt: healthy and unhealthy, as mentioned in psychology's view, each with its own characteristics. In Buddhism's view, there

are also two types of feelings of guilt, but they have the same attributes. The causes leading to the feeling of guilt, as mentioned in psychology, can be summarized in these main factors: the concept of self and values, and cognitive patterns and beliefs. In the view of Buddhism, the causes leading to the feeling of guilt are unwholesome deeds that have been done, wholesome deeds that have not been done, ignorance, unsettledness of mind, and frequently giving careless attention to it. Due to ignorance, individuals commit inappropriate actions and neglect actions in which they should have been engaged, which results in a feeling of guilt when recollecting these previous experiences. Careless attention to it (unsettledness of mind) refers to cultivating an unwholesome mental state, restlessness, and remorse. The effects of the feeling of guilt on people's lives through the lens of psychology are varied, both positive and negative, toward oneself and others. However, through a Buddhist lens, its inherent nature cannot be wholesome, regardless of interpretation. Ultimately, there are numerous strategies to address the feeling of guilt within the realms of both psychology and Buddhism. Amidst these, mindfulness practice may be regarded as a great way to deal with guilt, as it may foster the necessary qualities to overcome this complex emotion, such as letting go, acceptance, forgiveness, and so forth.

Objective 2: it was found that **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, a preeminent meditation teacher, has devoted his life to the development of *BuddhaDhamma*, particularly in meditation praxis. The vipassana meditation technique as taught by him is simple, easy, yet effective. The characteristics of his technique can be known as: direct insight, labeling objects, slowing down activities, and observing the movement of the abdomen. The way to practice can be in any posture and at any time. Nevertheless, at the initiation, it is suggested to perform primarily in sitting, walking, and in routine activities. When practicing the meditation technique as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**, there are many advantages, encompassing overcoming the feeling of guilt. However, if an individual is incapable of easily observing things in their true nature at the beginning owing to the influence of guilt, one may engage in tranquility meditation, particularly loving-kindness meditation, to calm the mind to a certain degree. Subsequently, one may practice the meditation technique as taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw**.

Objective 3: the effective ways to deal with the feeling of guilt based on the technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation practice can be called a process of LOVE, which means L: loving-kindness development, O: observing, V: vivid insight, and E: embracing change. In particular, when individuals are unable to easily observe things as they really are, instead of

endeavoring to observe, they may engage in loving-kindness mediation toward either all human beings or a specific person. Once their minds have calmed to some extent, they can proceed to the next step, which is the step of observing. In this step, they will engage in insight meditation in sitting, walking, and daily activities repeatedly and diligently until wisdom into the nature of mind and body emerges. That is also the next step—the step of vivid insight. During this subsequent step, they attain a profound comprehension of the specific and general characteristics of the mind and body. As a result, they come to understand that everything is impermanent and empty in the sense of non-self.

Although their mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom in this stage have been enhanced to a certain extent, this does not preclude the possibility of being overpowered by the feeling of guilt again. The state of purification gained from the practice of observing is not permanent; it will soon vanish if the practice is not maintained. As a result, they will sooner or later be overwhelmed by the feeling of guilt again. Therefore, they will need to progress to the last step, the step of embracing change. That is, to utilize what they have practiced and achieved in the initial three steps into their daily lives in order to ameliorate their *modus vivendi*. In this way, they will not only overcome the feeling of guilt when it arises but also prevent it from arising in the future. In the course of implementation, some potential challenges may arise that hinder the progress of practice. The suggestions to overcome those issues are to endeavor diligently to cultivate mindfulness with the right attitude as well as be able to associate with good friends. Through these means, they will be able to overcome those issues and attain the intended outcomes.

Discussions

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into dealing with guilt effectively based on the meditation technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**. Specifically, the findings of the first objective align with several existing research from both psychological and Buddhist standpoints on the concept of guilt and its management in general. For instance, through the lens of psychology, guilt is common among individuals when they recall previous deeds that should have been executed or should not have been executed, intentionally or unintentionally, in reality or in their imagination, and may cause positive and negative effects. This aligns with the concepts discussed by Miceli and Castelfranchi (2019), who explores the prevalence of guilt and its varied impacts. Regarding the causes of guilt, the current research

aligns with the findings of Luck & Luck-Sikorski (2022) on the causes of guilt by indicating that guilt may emerge because of patterns of thought, the notion of self, and value. However, this research expands upon their work by illuminating the role of beliefs individuals hold towards their thoughts in the formation of guilt experiences.

According to Buddhism, guilt is regarded as a mental hindrance called *kukkucca*; its nature is considered unwholesome and stems from unwholesome deeds that have been done, wholesome deeds that have not been done, ignorance, unsettledness of mind, and frequently giving careless attention to it. This finding largely aligns with the research by Do (2021) on the nature and various causes of *kukkucca*. Nevertheless, while the present study identifies ignorance as a cause of *kukkucca*, Do (2021) identified its root as hatred. This difference may stem from varying interpretations of the causes of this state of mind in Buddhist scriptures. Additionally, the finding that guilt is regarded as a mental hindrance called *kukkucca* has not been explicitly mentioned in previous research. This enriches the overall understanding of guilt within Buddhist thought.

Albeit offering distinct perspectives, both the fields of psychology and Buddhism concur on the efficacy of mindfulness practice in managing this nuanced emotion. This finding aligns with Hafenbrack et al. (2021), which demonstrate the effectiveness of mindfulness in dealing with guilt on the psychological side, and Bach (2022) on the advantages of developing mindfulness from a Buddhist perspective.

As for objective 2, the findings of this research match previous research by Thara (2021) on the core principles, method, and efficacy of the meditation technique taught by **Mahāsi Sayādaw** in overcoming mental defilements. However, they go a step further by delving into a specific type of mental impurity, which is the feeling of guilt, and demonstrating that to deal with it, it is necessary to engage in tranquility meditation, especially loving-kindness meditation, to calm the mind before transitioning to **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation method. This suggests that **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation method can be combined with other available meditation techniques to address specific emotional challenges more effectively.

In reference to the last objective, the process of LOVE - involving loving-kindness, observation, vivid insight, and embracing change—is proposed to aid individuals in cultivating a mindset resilient to guilt. Besides, the suggestions endeavor to the utmost degree to cultivate mindfulness with an appropriate attitude and associate with good friends to overcome

potential challenges when engaging in this process. This approach, encompassing the LOVE process and the suggestions, not only represents a new finding that has not been explored in previous research but also offers a novel and practical approach to guilt management.

Knowledge from Research

This research has proposed the effective ways to deal with the feeling of guilt based on the technique of Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation practice, as shown in the figure 2.

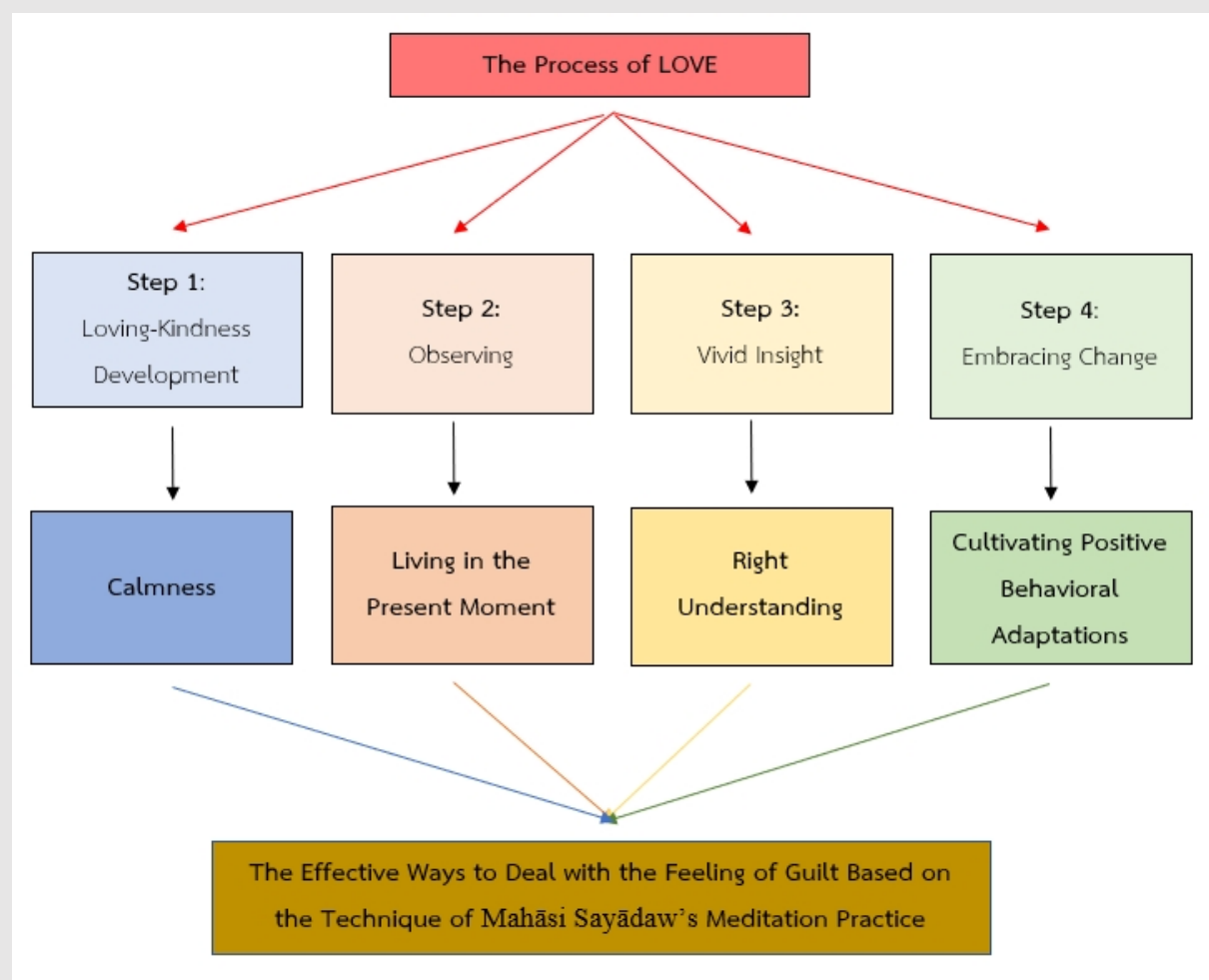


Figure 2 The Process of LOVE

Notably, a number of highly respected Buddhist thought leaders, (Ven. Dr. Phrakhrugositbuddhisat, personal communication, January 19, 2024; Ven. Dr. Phramaha DuangThip Pariyattidhari, personal communication, February 3, 2024; Ven. Asst. Prof. Dr. Phramaha Nopadol Saisuta, personal communication, February 6, 2024; Ven. Phramaha Weerasak Abhinandavedi, personal communication, January 23, 2024; Ven Phrakhrubhawana

Waralangkara, personal communication, January 28, 2024), were consulted on the matter of guilt and methods for addressing this complicated emotion. They all expressed a similar perspective that this approach is both viable and efficient in addressing guilt. This may not only contribute to the field of mental health and well-being by providing better solutions regarding guilt management but also in line with the main objective of this research is to propose the effective ways to deal with guilt based on the meditation technique of **Mahāsi Sayādaw**. More importantly, the research result above can be expanded and transferred in various aspects by the following methods:

Academia: The above process can be integrated into science curricula and research programs to assist other researchers in enhancing the efficacy of the process or finding more effective ways to deal with guilt.

Communities: community workshops and training sessions can be conducted to discuss the implications of the process and tailor it to community needs.

Society: compose material to disseminate the process to the general public.

Economy: collaborating with institutions or businesses that may gain benefits from using this process for business operations. This may potentially lead to increased economic advantages.

Conclusions

This study has delved into the multifaceted nature of guilt, comparing its conceptualization and causes in both psychological and Buddhist contexts. By examining **Mahāsi Sayādaw**'s meditation techniques, the research highlights the potential of mindfulness practices in effectively managing guilt.

Psychology views guilt as a complex emotion tied to self-perception, values, and cognitive patterns, while Buddhism categorizes it as an unwholesome state arising from past actions, ignorance, and mental unrest. Despite these differing perspectives, both disciplines acknowledge the power of mindfulness in addressing guilt.

Mahāsi Sayādaw's meditation techniques, summarized by the acronym **LOVE** - Loving-kindness development, **O**bserving, **V**ivid insight, and **E**mbracing change—offer a structured approach to cultivating mindfulness. These practices, along with the support of virtuous friends, enable individuals to calm their minds, enhance present-moment awareness, gain wisdom, and foster positive behavioral changes.

Ultimately, this research underscores the efficacy of integrating **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation techniques for managing guilt, providing a valuable framework for both scholars and practitioners. By adopting these practices, individuals can not only overcome the feeling of guilt but also prevent its future occurrence, leading to a more balanced and mindful life.

Suggestions

While the effective ways to deal with guilt more effectively based on **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation method have been proposed in this research, the important thing is that they can be applied to aid individuals in cultivating a mindset resilient to guilt. Nevertheless, specific types of guilt and individuals' characteristics should be given importance to apply this process efficiently. These suggestions can help broaden the scope of research for future studies on integrating **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation techniques for managing guilt:

1. Integration with Modern Therapies: Explore the integration of **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation techniques with contemporary psychological therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), to enhance guilt management.
2. Digital Interventions: Develop and assess digital platforms or mobile applications that guide users through **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** meditation techniques, making them more accessible and evaluating their effectiveness in managing guilt.
3. Interdisciplinary Approaches: Collaborate with experts from various fields, such as psychology, neuroscience, and religious studies, to create a comprehensive framework for understanding and managing guilt through meditation.
4. Comparative Analysis: Compare the effectiveness of **Mahāsi Sayādaw's** techniques with other meditation practices, such as Zen or Tibetan, in managing guilt.

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