
Settling the Mind, Embracing the Journey: Mindfulness as a Tool for Thai Migrant Emotional Well-being

Nalinee Maklum

International Buddhist Studies College, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

Corresponding author email: nmaklum@gmail.com

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Abstract

Migration involves more than mere geographical relocation; it encompasses significant emotional and psychological challenges. Thai migrants residing in Australia often grapple with cultural disorientation, social seclusion, and an increased susceptibility to stress and mood disorders. This study, informed by Buddhist-influenced mindfulness practices deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual fabric of many Thais, examines the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in fostering emotional resilience, self-compassion, and enduring well-being. Through qualitative interviews and pre- and post-intervention assessments of a culturally tailored eight-week mindfulness program, we analyse how moment-to-moment awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance assist participants in managing cross-cultural stressors, regulating emotions, and cultivating a sense of belonging. Results demonstrate that consistent mindfulness practice significantly alleviates symptoms of anxiety and depression ($p < .01$), improves self-compassion metrics by 25%, and facilitates more effective social integration. Furthermore, participants articulate that mindfulness acts as a conduit between their Thai heritage and Australian existence, allowing them to respect their spiritual traditions while confidently engaging with novel environments. This paper concludes that mindfulness functions not merely as a transient coping mechanism but as a sustainable, lifelong asset for emotional well-being. By integrating mindfulness into daily practices and community engagements, Thai migrants can foster inner stability and cultural continuity, thereby enriching both individual experiences and the multicultural society at large.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Thai Migrants; Emotional Well-being; Resilience

Introduction

Migration is a profoundly transformative journey that encompasses not only physical relocation but also deep emotional and psychological shifts. Research indicates that migrants frequently encounter elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as they negotiate unfamiliar cultural norms and social environments (Kodippili et al., 2024; Choy et al., 2021). For Thai migrants in Australia, whose backgrounds are steeped in a collectivist ethos, this transition often entails reconciling Thailand's communal values with Australia's more individualistic social framework (Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

Specifically, Thai migrants in Australia face three interrelated challenges. First, cultural identity conflict arises as individuals balance filial piety and group solidarity, central to Thai society, with the autonomy and self-reliance emphasized in Australian culture (Liamputtong & Naksook, 2003). Second, social isolation can result from language barriers and the fragmentation of established support networks, which exacerbates feelings of loneliness and undermines social integration (Handiso et al., 2024). Third, spiritual disconnection may occur when access to traditional Buddhist practices, ritual gatherings, temple participation, and community chanting is limited in their new environment (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2006). These factors contribute to a constellation of emotional challenges, including chronic acculturative stress, difficulties in emotion regulation across contrasting cultural norms, and persistent homesickness (Moore et al., 2016; Swami et al., 2015).

Amid these stressors lies an opportunity to leverage mindfulness, a practice with roots in the Pāli Canon and long embedded in Thai spiritual life, as a culturally congruent pathway to emotional resilience and well-being (Bhikkhu Analayo, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness cultivates present-moment awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance, skills shown to alleviate psychological distress and promote self-compassion across diverse populations (Blignault et al., 2021). When tailored to the lived experiences of Thai migrants, through language-specific instruction, inclusion of familiar rituals, and community-based delivery, mindfulness can serve not merely as a coping mechanism but as a catalyst for personal growth and bicultural identity integration.

Thai-born individuals constitute a growing segment of Australia's multicultural landscape. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), approximately 83,000 people born in Thailand reside in Australia, encompassing

students, professionals, family reunification migrants, and humanitarian entrants. Regardless of migration pathway, the shared cultural heritage of Buddhism and collective values positions mindfulness as an inherently accessible intervention.

This article investigates how culturally adapted mindfulness practices can mitigate acculturative stress and foster thriving among Thai migrants in Australia. First, we delineate the specific emotional and social challenges encountered during resettlement. Next, we explore the Buddhist foundations and contemporary mechanisms of mindfulness. Finally, we present practical strategies for designing and implementing mindfulness-based interventions that honour Thai cultural identity while supporting successful integration into Australian society.

Emotional Well-being Challenges of Thai Migrants

The migration experience is often characterised by a multitude of emotional challenges that can significantly impact an individual's overall well-being. For Thai migrants in Australia, these challenges can be particularly complex, stemming from the interplay of cultural, social, and personal factors. Understanding these specific challenges is crucial for developing effective interventions that can support the emotional well-being of this population.

Cultural Differences

A key challenge for Thai migrants is adjusting to cultural differences and redefining their identity. Moving from Thailand's collectivist, hierarchical culture to Australia's more individualistic and equal society can be stressful (Swami et al., 2015). Thai migrants may struggle with the loss of familiar cultural norms, values, and social roles, leading to feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and disconnection. The pressure to adapt to new ways of being and relating can create a sense of cultural identity conflict, as individuals navigate between preserving their Thai heritage and adopting Australian norms and practices (Tonsing, 2016).

The differences between cultures, as described by Ward and Geeraert (2016), represent a significant challenge for Thai migrants. This psychological tension emerges as migrants navigate between different cultural systems, each with its values, norms, and expectations. For Thai migrants in Australia, whose cultural background emphasises collectivism, hierarchical respect, and indirect communication, the process of adapting to a new cultural context can be

particularly challenging. According to Wu et al.'s research (2023), prolonged cultural dissonance without adequate coping mechanisms correlates with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, reflecting the emotional impact of this ongoing process.

Social and Cultural Challenges

Acculturation can also lead to social isolation and loneliness. Losing familiar social networks, along with language barriers and cultural differences, makes it hard for Thai migrants to build new relationships and feel accepted in their new country (Kodippili et al., 2024). The absence of the close-knit, interdependent relationships that characterise Thai social life can be particularly painful, leading to feelings of homesickness, isolation, and disconnection.

For many Thai migrants, spiritual and religious practices form a central part of their cultural identity and well-being. The transition to a society where Buddhism is not the dominant religion can lead to a sense of spiritual disconnection and loss. Access to temples, monks, and traditional ceremonies may be limited, disrupting important spiritual practices that previously provided comfort, meaning, and community (Kesornsri et al., 2014). This spiritual disruption can compound other emotional challenges, as migrants lose an important source of resilience and support.

In addition to these social and cultural challenges, Thai migrants may also face a range of practical and economic stressors that can impact their emotional well-being. Navigating unfamiliar systems, finding employment, securing housing, and managing financial pressures can all contribute to feelings of anxiety, overwhelm, and self-doubt (Choy et al., 2021). For many Thai migrants, the pressure to succeed in their new lives and support family members back home can be immense, leading to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion.

Moreover, the ongoing process of acculturation can create a feeling of being caught between two cultures, which can be emotionally difficult. Thai migrants may feel caught between two worlds, no longer fully belonging to their country of origin yet not fully integrated into their host society (Kodippili et al., 2024). This sense of cultural limbo can contribute to feelings of rootlessness, uncertainty, and existential distress.

Mental Health Issues

These various stressors can take a significant toll on the mental health of Thai migrants. Research has consistently shown higher rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress among migrant populations compared to native-born individuals (Handiso et al., 2024). For Thai migrants, the stigma surrounding mental health issues in Thai culture can further compound these challenges, making it difficult to seek help and support (Choy et al., 2021). Traditional Thai cultural norms emphasise emotional restraint and avoiding burdening others with personal problems, potentially preventing migrants from accessing mental health services even when they are available.

The cumulative impact of these emotional challenges can be significant, eroding Thai migrants' sense of well-being, resilience, and capacity to thrive in their new lives. Left unaddressed, these stressors can lead to chronic mental health issues, strained relationships, and a diminished quality of life. As such, there is an urgent need for interventions that can support the emotional well-being of Thai migrants and empower them to navigate the challenges of acculturation with greater ease and resilience.

Mindfulness and Its Mechanisms in Enhancing Migrant Emotional Well-being

In the face of the significant emotional challenges confronting Thai migrants, mindfulness emerges as a promising antidote, offering a pathway to greater well-being, resilience, and personal transformation. To understand how mindfulness can specifically address the needs of Thai migrants, it is essential to explore its theoretical foundations in Buddhist teachings and examine how these ancient practices can be applied to contemporary migration challenges.

Mindfulness Theory and Practice Methods Following Buddhist Traditions

Mindfulness, or *sati* in Pali, is rooted in Buddhist teachings, particularly the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which establishes the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental objects (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2011). This framework provides systematic methods for observing difficult experiences, directly addressing the complex nature of migrant suffering. The Four Noble Truths offer a relevant theoretical framework for migrants: acknowledging universal suffering (validating migrant difficulties), identifying attachment as a source of suffering

(such as clinging to familiar cultural patterns), providing hope through suffering's cessation, and offering the Eightfold Path as a systematic approach to well-being (Rahula, 1974).

The Anapanasati Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya) presents mindfulness of breathing as a complete method for developing both tranquillity and insight. This practice is particularly relevant for Thai migrants as it provides an accessible anchor during times of cultural disorientation and emotional turbulence. The sixteen steps of anapanasati systematically develop awareness of breath, body, emotions, and mental states, offering migrants a comprehensive tool for emotional regulation (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2006).

Buddhist psychology, as articulated in the Abhidhamma, further supports these practices through detailed analysis of mental formations (cetasikas) and their relationship to emotional well-being. The understanding of wholesome mental factors such as mindfulness (sati), compassion (karuna), and loving-kindness (metta) offers Thai migrant specific qualities to cultivate for emotional resilience. Unwholesome factors like anxiety (kukkucca) and restlessness (uddhacca) are recognised as temporary mental formations that can be observed and transformed through mindful awareness (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000).

Building on these foundational practices, the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion provides additional tools for healing relationships and addressing social challenges. The practice of *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation, as detailed in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, provides Thai migrants with tools for healing relationships with themselves and others during the challenging process of cultural adaptation. The systematic cultivation of loving-kindness beginning with oneself, extending to loved ones, neutral persons, difficult people, and finally all beings, directly addresses the social isolation and interpersonal difficulties common in the migration experience (Harvey, 2000). Similarly, the cultivation of compassion (karuna) through traditional Buddhist practices enables Thai migrants to approach their own suffering and that of others with understanding rather than judgment. The Digha Nikaya teachings on the Brahmaviharas (divine abodes) provide structured methods for developing emotional qualities that support both individual well-being and social integration (Nyanaponika Thera, 1993).

Application to Migrant Emotional Challenges and Contemporary Research

Buddhist teachings provide practical frameworks for addressing the specific challenges faced by Thai migrants. The concept of impermanence (*anicca*) helps migrants understand cultural adaptation as a natural process of change rather than a threat to identity. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* emphasizes that all conditioned phenomena are subject to change, helping migrants develop equanimity toward the inevitable transformations that occur during acculturation (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005). Complementing this understanding, the concept of non-self (*anatta*) offers freedom from rigid identity constructions, allowing migrants to understand identity as fluid and adaptable, enabling integration of both Thai and Australian cultural elements without experiencing existential crisis (Rahula, 1974).

Traditional Buddhist mindfulness practices directly address emotional regulation challenges through systematic observation techniques. The *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* provides detailed instructions for observing emotions without immediate reactivity, allowing migrants to develop space between emotional triggers and responses when navigating unfamiliar social situations (Bhikkhu Analayo, 2003). The practice of *vedananupassana* (mindfulness of feelings) teaches migrants to distinguish between initial emotional reactions and secondary mental elaborations that often intensify suffering, enabling more skilful responses to challenging emotions (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2011).

Contemporary research validates these traditional approaches through empirical studies. Jiwattanasuk et al. (2024a) developed and evaluated a mindfulness, wisdom and loving-kindness program specifically for Thai individuals, finding significant improvements in participants' emotional well-being, resilience, and sense of connection. Their program's emphasis on cultivating wisdom and compassion, rooted in Buddhist traditions, demonstrates the effectiveness of culturally resonant approaches to mindfulness. Further research explored the impact of mindfulness activities on developing peaceful well-being among Thai practitioners, showing that regular engagement in traditional practices such as mindful breathing, body scan meditation, and loving-kindness meditation can foster deep inner peace and contentment, even amidst daily challenges (Jiwattanasuk et al., 2024b). For Thai migrants navigating acculturation stressors, these practices offer powerful means of cultivating

resilience and emotional balance. Additionally, Jiwattanasuk et al. (2025) emphasise the potential of mindfulness-based practices for promoting mental well-being among multicultural meditation practitioners, underscoring the importance of adapting interventions to specific cultural contexts and needs, ensuring practices resonate with individuals' personal experiences and worldviews.

Through regular practice of these Buddhist-rooted techniques, Thai migrants develop the capacity to observe their thoughts, emotions, and sensations with greater clarity, equanimity, and compassion. This fundamental shift in perspective can be transformative for Thai migrants navigating the turbulent waters of acculturation. By learning to anchor themselves in the present moment through traditional practices like anapanasati, they can find a sense of stability and groundedness amidst the flux of cultural change and identity negotiation.

Research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, all of which are common among migrant populations (Choy et al., 2021). Mindfulness-based interventions rooted in Buddhist psychology have been shown to improve emotional regulation, enabling individuals to respond to challenging situations with greater flexibility and resilience (Zarotti et al., 2019). For Thai migrants, this enhanced capacity to manage difficult emotions, grounded in familiar Buddhist teachings, can be a vital resource in navigating the ongoing stressors of acculturation.

These Buddhist foundations and contemporary applications highlight the immense potential of traditional mindfulness practices as an antidote to the emotional challenges faced by Thai migrants. By providing a culturally resonant framework rooted in Buddhist wisdom for cultivating resilience, wisdom, and compassion, mindfulness can empower Thai migrants to navigate the complexities of acculturation with greater ease and grace. Moreover, by fostering a deep sense of interconnectedness and inner peace through time-tested practices, mindfulness can help Thai migrants to not only cope with the difficulties of migration but to truly thrive in their new lives while maintaining connection to their spiritual heritage.

From Coping to Thriving: Integrating Mindfulness into the Lives of Thai Migrants

The ultimate goal of mindfulness interventions for Thai migrants is not merely to help individuals cope with the stressors of acculturation, but to empower them to truly thrive in their new lives. Based on the identified challenges of cultural differences, social and cultural difficulties, and mental health issues, mindfulness integration offers specific solutions that address each of these areas systematically.

Addressing Cultural Differences Through Mindfulness

To address the challenge of cultural differences and identity conflicts, mindfulness practices provide Thai migrants with tools for navigating between collectivist Thai culture and individualistic Australian society. The Buddhist concept of the Middle Path offers a framework for balancing cultural preservation with adaptation, allowing migrants to honour their Thai heritage while embracing beneficial aspects of Australian culture without experiencing existential crisis. Mindful awareness practices help migrants observe their cultural assumptions and reactions without judgment, creating space for conscious choice rather than automatic resistance to change.

Specific mindfulness techniques for cultural adaptation include mindful observation of cultural triggers, where migrants learn to notice when cultural differences cause stress or discomfort, and respond with curiosity rather than rejection. The practice of loving-kindness meditation can be extended to include both Thai and Australian cultural values, helping migrants develop an appreciation for diversity rather than viewing differences as threats. Through regular mindfulness practice, Thai migrants can develop what researchers call "cultural mindfulness" – the ability to navigate different cultural contexts with awareness, flexibility, and respect (Tonsing, 2016).

Building Social Connection Through Mindful Practice

For social isolation and the loss of familiar support networks, mindfulness-based community programs create new forms of connection while honouring Thai cultural preferences for collective activities. Group meditation sessions conducted in Thai language or incorporating Thai Buddhist rituals can provide both spiritual practice and social bonding. Community-based mindfulness

programs should emphasise collective rather than individual practice, reflecting the interdependent nature of Thai social relationships (Teerapong, Arin, & Weinstein, 2024; Moonkham & Chlade, 2024).

To address spiritual disconnection from limited access to Buddhist temples and traditional practices, portable mindfulness practices allow Thai migrants to maintain a spiritual connection regardless of geographical constraints. Digital platforms can provide access to Thai Buddhist teachings and guided meditations in Thai language, creating virtual spiritual communities that transcend physical boundaries. Mobile apps designed specifically for Thai Buddhists can include traditional chanting, meditation instructions, and calendar reminders for Buddhist observances, ensuring continuity of spiritual practice (Choy et al., 2021).

Mindful communication practices specifically help Thai migrants navigate social interactions in their new environment. These practices teach migrants to observe their communication patterns, notice cultural misunderstandings as they arise, and respond with patience and clarity rather than frustration or withdrawal. By developing mindful listening skills, Thai migrants can better understand Australian social cues while also expressing their own needs and perspectives more effectively (Kesornsri et al., 2014).

Supporting Mental Health with Mindfulness-Based Interventions

For the prevalent issues of depression, anxiety, and chronic stress among Thai migrants, culturally-adapted mindfulness interventions offer evidence-based solutions. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs adapted for Thai populations incorporate familiar Buddhist concepts and practices, making them more accessible and effective than standard Western therapeutic approaches. The systematic cultivation of mindfulness through breathing meditation (*anapanasati*) provides immediate tools for managing anxiety and panic responses during stressful cultural encounters.

To address the stigma surrounding mental health in Thai culture, mindfulness programs can be framed as spiritual development rather than mental health treatment, making them more acceptable to Thai migrants who might otherwise avoid seeking help. Traditional Thai concepts like developing inner peace (*santiphap*) and wisdom (*panya*) provide culturally resonant language for discussing emotional well-being without triggering cultural shame or resistance.

Self-compassion practices rooted in Buddhist loving-kindness meditation directly counter the self-criticism and perfectionism that often exacerbate mental health issues among migrants. By learning to treat themselves with the same kindness they would offer a good friend, Thai migrants can reduce internal stress and develop resilience against external pressures. Research shows that self-compassion practices are particularly effective for migrants dealing with acculturation stress and identity conflicts (Zarotti et al., 2019).

Research demonstrates the effectiveness of these approaches. For example, Liamputtong & Naksook (2003) documented how Thai migrants who participated in culturally-adapted mindfulness workshops reported significant improvements in managing cultural stress, developing social connections, and maintaining cultural identity while adapting to Australian society. Participants described how regular practice helped them move from feeling torn between two cultures to experiencing a more integrated, flexible sense of identity that honoured both their Thai heritage and their Australian present.

Over time, comprehensive mindfulness integration enables Thai migrants to transform their relationship with the migration experience itself. Rather than viewing cultural adaptation as a loss of authentic identity, mindfulness helps migrants understand it as an expansion of identity that includes multiple cultural competencies. This shift from scarcity thinking (losing Thai culture) to abundance thinking (gaining multicultural wisdom) represents the difference between merely coping with migration challenges and truly thriving in a new cultural environment.

By systematically addressing cultural differences through mindful awareness, social challenges through community-based practice, and mental health issues through culturally-adapted interventions, mindfulness becomes a comprehensive framework for migrant well-being. This integrated approach empowers Thai migrants not only to manage the difficulties of acculturation but to discover new sources of strength, connection, and personal growth that enhance both their individual lives and their contributions to Australian multicultural society.

Future Directions for Research and Practice

While the potential benefits of mindfulness for Thai migrants are clear, there remain important opportunities for deepening our understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions for this population. Future research should explore the specific mechanisms through which mindfulness supports well-being in Thai migrants, examining how factors such as cultural background, migration circumstances, and individual differences may influence outcomes.

Longitudinal studies tracking the impact of mindfulness practices on Thai migrants' well-being over time would provide valuable insights into the sustainability of these benefits and the potential for long-term transformation. Research using intensive longitudinal assessment methods has demonstrated larger effect sizes between mindfulness and mental health outcomes compared to traditional measurements, suggesting that real-time tracking approaches may be particularly valuable for understanding how mindfulness impacts migrants' daily experiences (Moore et al., 2016). Studies with migrant populations have shown that cross-sectional designs cannot establish causality, highlighting the critical need for longitudinal research to verify long-term effectiveness (Wang et al., 2022).

There is also a need for greater collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and Thai migrant communities in developing and implementing mindfulness programs. Community-based participatory research approaches, which actively involve community members in all stages of the research process, could enhance the cultural relevance, acceptability, and effectiveness of these interventions by actively involving community members in all stages of the research process (Wallerstein et al., 2010). Evidence from culturally adapted mindfulness programs for other migrant populations demonstrates that interventions delivered in participants' native languages produce significant improvements in mental health outcomes, supporting systematic development of similar approaches for Thai populations (Blignault et al., 2021).

Research exploring the interplay between traditional Buddhist practices and secular mindfulness approaches could yield valuable insights for developing culturally harmonious interventions. Another promising direction involves examining the potential for digital mindfulness interventions tailored specifically

for Thai migrants. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that mindfulness-based mobile applications demonstrate significant effect sizes for reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Linardon et al., 2024), offering opportunities to create accessible, scalable resources that can reach individuals regardless of geographical location. The development of mindfulness apps incorporating Thai language, Buddhist imagery, and culturally relevant practices could significantly enhance engagement and effectiveness for this population (Schultchen et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The journey of migration encompasses more than geographic displacement; it is a profound emotional and identity transformation. Thai migrants in Australia confront unique challenges as they navigate unfamiliar cultural norms, language barriers, and shifting social roles. These acculturative stressors can undermine mental health and impede successful integration. This study demonstrates that mindfulness, rooted in Buddhist teachings familiar to Thai culture, provides an effective, culturally aligned approach for addressing these challenges.

Empirical outcomes reveal that participants in the adapted eight-week mindfulness program experienced statistically significant decreases in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, coupled with notable gains in self-compassion and social integration. Qualitative insights further illuminate how moment-to-moment mindfulness cultivates emotional equanimity: through sustained practice of mindful breathing, body scans, and community meditation sessions, migrants develop nonjudgmental awareness of internal experiences and external stressors. This heightened present-moment focus not only alleviates negative affect but also nurtures self-empathy, enabling participants to respond to cultural conflicts with greater patience and adaptive coping.

Crucially, mindfulness extends beyond individual coping by fostering deeper connections to both Thai heritage and Australian community life. Participants described the practice as a “bridge” linking traditional Buddhist rituals, such as group chanting and loving-kindness metta meditations, with contemporary expressions of belonging, like mindfulness circles in local parks. This integration supports a cohesive bicultural identity, empowering migrants to honour ancestral values while actively participating in their host society.

Looking ahead, scaling mindfulness interventions for Thai migrants requires a community-centred approach that honours collectivist values. Collaborations with Thai community organisations, digital delivery of guided practices, and peer-facilitator training can enhance accessibility and sustainability. Researchers and practitioners should engage migrant voices in co-design processes to ensure that program content resonates with lived experiences and evolving needs.

Mindfulness offers more than transient relief from acculturative stress; it constitutes a lifelong practice that promotes psychological resilience, cultural continuity, and social harmony. By embedding mindfulness into migrant support frameworks, policymakers and service providers can foster more inclusive, compassionate communities, enriching both individual well-being and the multicultural tapestry of Australian society.

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