
Developing Wholesome Intention Through the Four Right Efforts (Sammappadhāna)

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Abstract

This mixed-methods action research study examined the development of wholesome intention among student volunteers at the International Buddhist Studies College (IBSC), with particular attention to volunteer fatigue, expectation-related distress, and intention–behavior consistency. The study had three objectives: (1) to identify current challenges affecting wholesome intention among IBSC student volunteers; (2) to develop a structured cultivation process based on the Four Right Efforts (Sammappadhāna); and (3) to evaluate preliminary changes following the intervention. The research proceeded in three phases. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 expert informants from Buddhist studies, psychology/mindfulness, volunteer management, and field practice. Second, the qualitative findings informed development of a 12-session iDANA training program integrating the Four Right Efforts with selected cognitive-behavioral tools, including the STOP technique and a 4C Response process. Third, 15 IBSC student volunteers completed a single-group pre-test/post-test evaluation using the 12-item Questionnaire-XJ. Qualitative findings highlighted tension between wholesome aspiration (chanda) and rigid, outcome-dependent expectation (taṇhā) as a recurring challenge in volunteer service. Quantitative results showed significant pre–post improvement on several questionnaire items, including maintenance of original wholesome intention (Q01: $M = 3.73$ to 4.27 , $p = .006$, Cohen's $d = 0.83$) and use of the 4C tool (Q12: $d = 2.16$). Overall training satisfaction was $4.70/5.00$. Because the study used a small single-group sample and a researcher-developed instrument, the findings should be interpreted as preliminary evidence of feasibility and potential benefit rather than proof of intervention efficacy. The study proposes the Dynamic Consistency Model as a Buddhist-informed framework linking mindful awareness, cognitive reframing, committed action, and the Four Right Efforts in volunteer development.

Keywords: Wholesome intention; Four Right Efforts; Sammappadhāna; Student volunteers; Buddhist psychology; Dynamic Consistency

Introduction

Volunteer service is widely associated with prosocial values, community engagement, and psychological well-being, yet sustained volunteering can also involve emotional exhaustion, declining motivation, role strain, and withdrawal when personal resources or expectations are repeatedly challenged. Research on volunteer motivation suggests that motivation quality is particularly important for satisfaction, persistence, and well-being. Values-oriented and relatively self-determined motives tend to be associated with more favorable outcomes than motives dominated by external pressure, self-enhancement, or controlled regulation (Stukas et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). More recent evidence also indicates that volunteering can benefit social, mental, and physical well-being, although these effects vary according to individual characteristics, volunteering context, motivation, and the quality of available evidence (Nichol et al., 2024).

Mindfulness, compassion, and related contemplative practices have increasingly been investigated as resources for sustaining prosocial functioning. Loving-kindness and compassion meditation may support emotional regulation and compassionate responding (Hofmann et al., 2011), while meta-analytic evidence suggests that meditation-based practices can produce small-to-moderate improvements in empathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior (Luberto et al., 2018). Mindfulness has likewise been positively associated with prosocial behavior across both correlational and intervention studies (Donald et al., 2019). Nevertheless, these findings do not imply that mindfulness alone can prevent volunteer burnout. Research from demanding helping professions suggests that burnout and compassion fatigue are multidimensional phenomena influenced by both personal and contextual factors, and that mindfulness-based programs show variable effects across outcomes (Conversano et al., 2020).

Within Buddhist ethical psychology, the problem of sustaining wholesome service can be examined through the distinction between *chanda* and *taṇhā*. *Chanda* may denote a wholesome aspiration or willingness to undertake skillful action, whereas *taṇhā* refers to craving and attachment. In volunteer settings, an initial wish to help may become entangled with rigid expectations concerning recognition, recipient response, or visible outcomes. When those expectations are frustrated, emotional reactivity, disappointment, or disengagement may follow. The Four Right Efforts (*Sammappadhāna*) provide a

systematic Buddhist framework for regulating this process through preventing unarisen unwholesome states, abandoning those already arisen, cultivating unarisen wholesome states, and maintaining wholesome states that have already developed (Bodhi, 2012). Rather than functioning merely as a moral checklist, the Four Right Efforts describe an active process of mental cultivation that links intention with repeated behavioral practice.

Contemporary psychological approaches provide complementary, although conceptually distinct, resources. Cognitive therapy emphasizes the role of appraisals, assumptions, and beliefs in shaping emotional and behavioral responses (Beck et al., 1979). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy emphasizes psychological flexibility, values clarification, acceptance of difficult internal experiences, and committed action (Hayes et al., 2011). Self-Determination Theory further distinguishes autonomous from controlled forms of motivation and proposes that internalized, self-endorsed motivation is more conducive to sustained functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In volunteer research, self-determined motivation has similarly been associated with greater satisfaction and more sustainable participation.

At the International Buddhist Studies College (IBSC), student volunteers operate within a distinctive environment in which academic demands, multicultural interaction, Buddhist values, and community-service responsibilities converge. The original study identified recurring difficulties when wholesome aspiration became fused with rigid expectations about service outcomes. However, little research has examined how the Four Right Efforts can be operationalized as a structured developmental process for volunteer self-regulation and then evaluated through both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Accordingly, this study develops and preliminarily evaluates a 12-session iDANA training program integrating the Four Right Efforts with selected cognitive-behavioral and acceptance-based tools. The study does not assume that Buddhist concepts, CBT, ACT, and motivational theories are theoretically equivalent. Instead, it uses them in functional dialogue to examine whether mindful awareness, cognitive reframing, committed action, and Buddhist mental cultivation can strengthen wholesome intention and intention–behavior consistency among IBSC student volunteers. The resulting framework is conceptualized as Dynamic Consistency: the capacity to maintain a stable wholesome orientation while adapting behavior appropriately to changing interpersonal and service conditions.

Research Objectives

1. To examine current challenges affecting the development and maintenance of wholesome intention among IBSC student volunteers.
2. To develop a structured cultivation process for wholesome intention based on the Four Right Efforts (Sammappadhāna).
3. To evaluate preliminary changes in intention stability, intention–behavior alignment, and participant experience following the training program.

Literature Review

Within Buddhist ethical psychology, *cetanā* refers to intention or volition and is central to the moral quality of action, while the Four Right Efforts provide a practical structure for regulating wholesome and unwholesome mental states (Bodhi Bhikkhu, 2012). For the present study, the distinction between *chanda* and *taṇhā* is particularly important. Wholesome aspiration can orient service toward skillful action, whereas attachment to a predetermined outcome may generate frustration when reality does not conform to expectation. The Four Right Efforts therefore offer a process model: prevent conditions likely to undermine wholesome service, abandon unwholesome reactions that have arisen, cultivate wholesome qualities not yet established, and sustain wholesome qualities already present.

Contemporary psychological research provides complementary but conceptually distinct perspectives. The empathy–altruism hypothesis proposes that empathic concern can generate other-oriented helping motivation (Batson, 2011). Loving-kindness and compassion practices have also been examined as potential psychological interventions for affect regulation and prosocial functioning (Hofmann et al., 2011). Cognitive therapy focuses on identifying and evaluating maladaptive appraisals (Beck et al., 1979), while ACT emphasizes acceptance, values clarification, and committed action (Hayes et al., 2011). Self-Determination Theory further suggests that more autonomous and internalized forms of motivation are associated with stronger self-regulation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Despite these convergences, Buddhist concepts should not be reduced to modern clinical constructs. *Sammappadhāna* is embedded in a path of ethical and contemplative development, whereas CBT, ACT, and motivation theories were developed for different explanatory and applied purposes. The research gap addressed here is therefore not the absence of stress-management techniques, but

the limited study of how a Buddhist framework of active mental cultivation can be operationalized for volunteer development while retaining conceptual clarity. The study responds to this gap through the iDANA program and the proposed Dynamic Consistency Model.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates the Four Right Efforts with selected cognitive-behavioral processes to explain how wholesome intention may be maintained across changing service conditions. The central proposition is that volunteer strain can emerge when intrinsic aspiration becomes fused with rigid outcome expectations. Training therefore targets awareness of this distinction, regulation of unwholesome reactions, cultivation of skillful responses, and maintenance of value-consistent action. The term Dynamic Consistency refers to the capacity to preserve a stable wholesome orientation while adapting behavior appropriately to changing interpersonal and situational demands.

1. Intervention: The 12-session iDANA training program based on the Four Right Efforts, incorporating the STOP technique, 4C Response, reflective practice, and field-based exercises.
2. Practice Context: Application of training skills in volunteer service settings, including the Camp Son field site.
3. Outcomes: Intention stability, intention–behavior alignment, self-reported coping, and participant satisfaction, assessed through Questionnaire-XJ and qualitative field evidence.

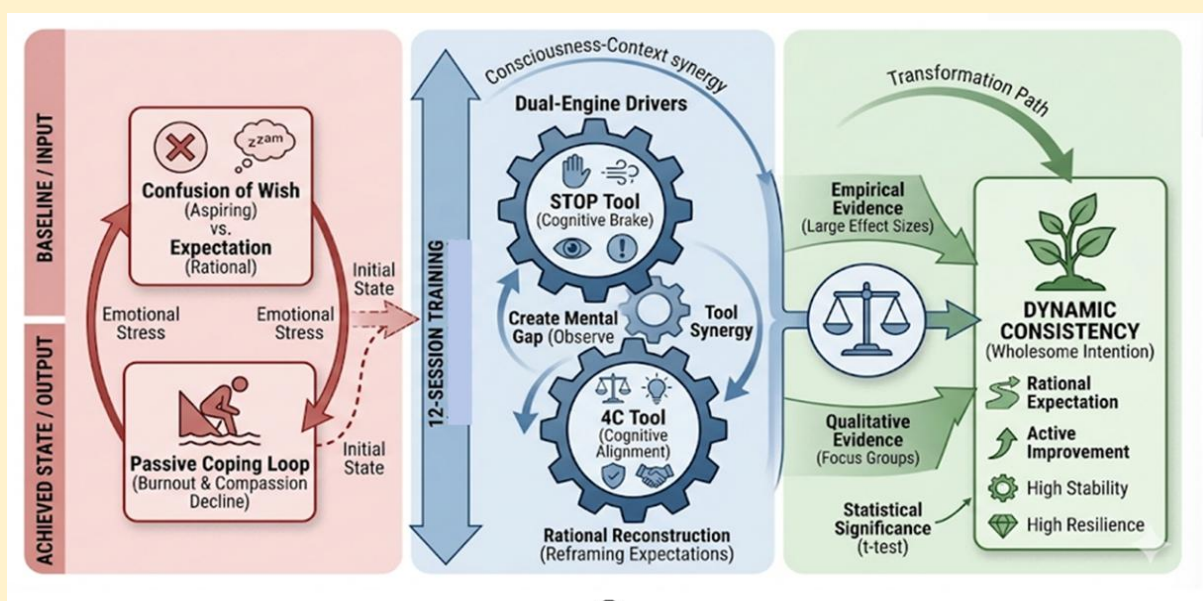


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Wholesome Intention Development

Research Methodology

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods action research design involving qualitative exploration, intervention development, and a quantitative single-group pre-test/post-test evaluation. The three phases were linked sequentially so qualitative findings informed the training design, and the quantitative phase provided preliminary evidence of changes following implementation.

Phase 1: Qualitative Exploration and Needs Assessment

- **Participants and Selection Criteria:** Purposive sampling was used to select 15 expert informants representing four groups: Buddhist scholars (n = 2), mindfulness and psychology experts (n = 3), volunteer managers (n = 6), and field practitioners (n = 4). Selection emphasized relevant academic, clinical, administrative, or field experience. The expert sample identified recurring challenges in volunteer service and assessed the conceptual and practical relevance of the proposed training components.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide reviewed through the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) procedure, with reported item scores ranging from 0.67 to 1.00. Interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring cognitive, emotional, motivational, and organizational factors affecting wholesome intention and volunteer fatigue.

Phase 2: Qualitative-Informed Intervention Development

- **How Qualitative Findings Informed the Intervention:** Qualitative findings indicated recurring tension between aspiration (chanda) and rigid expectation (taṇhā), together with a need for strategies that could be applied during emotionally demanding service encounters. These findings informed the development of the 12-session iDANA training program. The Four Right Efforts provided the organizing Buddhist framework, while the STOP technique and 4C Response were used as practical tools for interrupting reactivity, examining craving or complaint, generating a skillful alternative, and committing to appropriate action.

Phase 3: Quantitative Implementation and Evaluation

- **Participants and Selection Criteria:** The intervention was implemented with 15 IBSC student volunteers selected on the basis of current enrollment, active involvement in volunteer service, reported strain or motivation depletion related to academic-service demands, and willingness to complete the full training program. Because no control group was included, interpret the quantitative phase as a preliminary within-group evaluation rather than a controlled efficacy trial.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Participants completed Questionnaire-XJ before and after the intervention. The instrument contained 12 competency items rated on a five-point Likert scale and had an internal consistency coefficient of Cronbach's $\alpha = .745$ in the study sample. Pre-post item scores were analyzed using paired-samples t tests and Cohen's d effect sizes in JAMOV. Given the small sample, multiple item-level tests, and absence of a control condition, statistical findings were interpreted cautiously.
- **Integration of Findings:** Quantitative results were interpreted together with post-training interviews and field observation notes from Camp Son. This integration examined whether changes in questionnaire scores were accompanied by participants' reports and observed examples of calmer, more reflective, and more value-consistent responses in volunteer settings.

Research Results

Objective 1. Qualitative findings indicated that a recurring challenge among IBSC volunteers was shifting from an initial aspiration to help to rigid expectations about how recipients, colleagues, or situations should respond. When expected outcomes were not achieved, participants and experts described frustration, helplessness, emotional reactivity, and disengagement. These findings support the study's working distinction between chanda-oriented service and taṇhā-like attachment to outcomes; however, they should not be interpreted as establishing a single causal explanation for volunteer burnout.

Objective 2. The qualitative findings were translated into the 12-session iDANA training process structured around the Four Right Efforts. The 4C Response helped participants recognize craving or complaint, interrupt reactive patterns, generate a more skillful response, and commit to action. The process has

functional similarities with acceptance- and values-based approaches, particularly the emphasis on responding flexibly to difficult internal experiences while acting in accordance with chosen values (Hayes et al., 2011). The iDANA reflective log supported self-monitoring and review of the relationship among intention, context, and behavior.

Objective 3. The single-group pre-test/post-test evaluation showed improvement on several Questionnaire-XJ items after the intervention. These results provide preliminary evidence of change within the participating group but do not, by themselves, establish that the intervention caused the observed improvements.

Table 1. Paired-Samples t-Test Results for the Intervention Group

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
Table 4.1									
Paired Sample t-Test Results with Effect Sizes for Pre- and Post-Training Scores									
Item	Pre-test M	Post-test M	t	p	Cohen' s d	Effect Size			
Q01	3.73	4.27	3.23	.006**	0.83	Large			
Q02	4.00	4.33	2.09	.055	0.54	Medium			
Q03	2.00	2.27	1.47	.164	0.38	Small			
Q04	3.73	4.20	2.17	.048*	0.56	Medium			
Q05	3.20	3.80	2.36	.033*	0.61	Medium			
Q06	2.27	2.60	2.09	.055	0.54	Medium			
Q07	2.93	3.27	1.58	.136	0.41	Small			
Q08	2.27	2.87	2.36	.033*	0.61	Medium			
Q09	3.20	3.87	2.32	.036*	0.60	Medium			
Q10	3.40	3.53	0.56	.582	0.15	Small			
Q11	3.40	3.60	1.38	.189	0.36	Small			
Q12	2.07	3.40	8.37	<.001***	2.16	Very Large			
Note. N = 15. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.									
Effect size interpretation: Small (d ≈ 0.2), Medium (d ≈ 0.5), Large (d ≥ 0.8).									

Quantitative results showed a statistically significant increase in maintaining original wholesome intention (Q01), from a pre-test mean of 3.73 to a post-test mean of 4.27 ($p = .006$), with a large standardized mean difference (Cohen's $d = 0.83$). Q12, representing use of the 4C tool to transform external demands into internal action commitments, showed the largest observed change ($d = 2.16$). Several other items also improved, although the pattern was not uniform across all 12 items. Mean participant satisfaction was 4.70/5.00. Post-training interviews and field notes provided convergent examples of participants

reporting greater calm, reflection, and conflict management during service activities. Because the sample included only 15 participants and no comparison group, these findings should be regarded as preliminary rather than as evidence of established effectiveness.

Discussion

The findings provide preliminary support for understanding volunteer strain as partly related to the way aspirations, expectations, and service outcomes are cognitively organized. Participants described difficulty when an initial wholesome wish to serve became fused with demands for particular recipient responses, recognition, or visible results. From a Buddhist perspective, the distinction between *chanda* and *taṇhā* offers an ethical-psychological vocabulary for differentiating skillful aspiration from attachment to outcomes. Contemporary psychological evidence supports a related, though not equivalent, interpretation. Research on psychological flexibility indicates that distress is often intensified when individuals become rigidly fused with thoughts, expectations, or internal demands and are less able to respond adaptively to changing circumstances. A 2024 systematic and meta-analytic review of ACT mechanisms found that reductions in psychological inflexibility and increases in values-based committed action were consistently associated with reductions in psychological distress (Macri & Rogge, 2024). The present findings therefore suggest that volunteer strain may involve not only negative cognitions but also reduced flexibility in relating to expectations. At the same time, the data do not support treating the *chanda–taṇhā* distinction as the sole cause of burnout. Volunteer well-being is also shaped by workload, organizational support, role demands, social climate, and motivational quality. Recent volunteer research shows that supportive work climates and more autonomous forms of motivation are associated with lower emotional exhaustion and stronger continuation intentions, whereas controlled motivation is associated with greater exhaustion.

The second contribution is operationalizing the Four Right Efforts within a structured volunteer-training process. Rather than treating mindfulness as a stand-alone relaxation technique, the iDANA program organizes practice around preventing unwholesome states, abandoning those that have arisen, cultivating wholesome states, and maintaining them over time. This active regulatory sequence has functional similarities with contemporary process-based approaches that combine awareness, acceptance, cognitive flexibility, and committed action. Recent evidence from workplace ACT-informed training indicates that increases in psychological flexibility are associated with lower

burnout and greater resilience (Archer et al., 2024). Nevertheless, conceptual boundaries should remain clear. ACT is a psychological intervention model centered on flexibility and values-guided behavior, whereas *Sammappadhāna* belongs to a Buddhist ethical and soteriological framework. Their relevance to one another is therefore best described as *functional dialogue rather than theoretical equivalence*.

The quantitative findings further suggest improvement in several targeted competencies, particularly maintaining original wholesome intention and using the 4C Response. The large effect for Q01 ($d = 0.83$) and the very large effect for Q12 ($d = 2.16$) are notable, but they should be interpreted cautiously because the study involved only 15 participants, no control group, repeated measurement, and a researcher-developed instrument. These findings are more appropriately treated as evidence of feasibility and possible benefit than as confirmation of efficacy. The motivational interpretation is nevertheless consistent with Self-Determination Theory and more recent volunteer research. A 2023 study of sport volunteers found that controlled motivation predicted later emotional exhaustion, whereas emotional exhaustion negatively predicted intention to continue volunteering (Li et al., 2023). Research with food-bank volunteers similarly found that intrinsic motivation strongly predicted both commitment and subjective well-being, while prosocial activity was not necessarily beneficial when the underlying motivation was less self-determined (Sheldon et al., 2023). These findings strengthen the present study's argument that shifting from outcome-dependent pressure toward internalized prosocial values may support more sustainable volunteer engagement.

Importantly, the results also indicate that individual mental cultivation should not be separated from organizational conditions. Studies of volunteers show that organizational support, work climate, time demands, and the quality of motivation are all related to burnout and well-being (Dekel, Geldenhuys & Harris, 2022). The practical implication is that the iDANA model should complement, rather than replace, organizational measures such as workload management, supervision, role clarity, and supportive volunteer climates.

New Knowledge from the Research

The principal new knowledge generated by this study is the Dynamic Consistency (DC) Model, which explains wholesome volunteer intention as a regulated relationship among aspiration, expectation, awareness, context, and action. Dynamic consistency does not mean maintaining identical emotions or behaviors across situations. Rather, it refers to maintaining a stable wholesome

orientation while adapting one's response to changing interpersonal and service conditions.

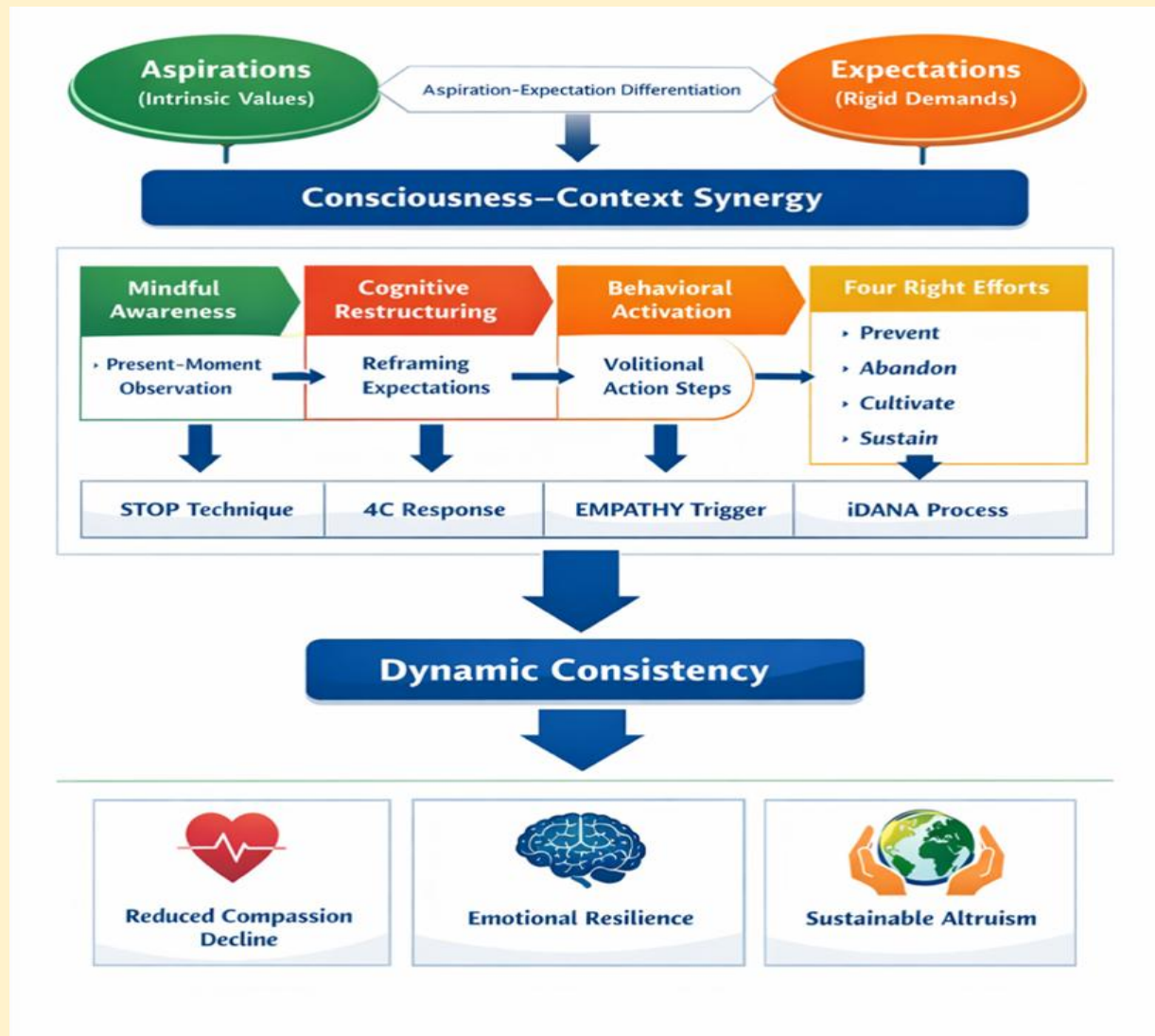


Figure 2. Dynamic Consistency Model Developed from the 12-Session iDANA Training Program

The model contains three linked propositions. First, the Aspiration-Expectation Differentiation distinguishes *chanda*, understood here as a wholesome orientation toward skillful service, from rigid outcome-dependent expectation associated with *taṇhā*. This distinction helps participants identify when altruistic motivation has become entangled with demand, recognition, or control. Second, Consciousness-Context Synergy describes the interaction between mindful awareness and real-world service conditions. The STOP technique, 4C Response, empathy-based field exercises, and reflective logs function as practice tools through which participants can notice reactivity, reconsider interpretation, and select a value-consistent action. Third, the Four

Right Efforts provide the regulatory architecture: prevent unwholesome patterns before they intensify, abandon those already present, cultivate wholesome responses, and sustain them through repeated practice. The expected outcome is dynamic consistency expressed through greater emotional resilience, reduced reactive withdrawal, and more sustainable altruistic behavior. This model remains a conceptual product of the present small-scale action research study and requires replication and independent validation.

Potential Application: The DC Model may be adapted for volunteer-development programs in universities, Buddhist organizations, and nonprofit settings. Such transfer should not be assumed to produce equivalent outcomes in different cultural or institutional contexts. Future applications should preserve the voluntary nature of Buddhist content, clarify facilitator competencies, and evaluate outcomes with validated measures and comparison groups.

Conclusion

This study developed and preliminarily evaluated a 12-session Buddhist-informed training program designed to strengthen wholesome intention among IBSC student volunteers. Qualitative findings identified recurrent tension between aspiration and rigid outcome expectation, while the intervention translated the Four Right Efforts into a structured sequence of awareness, interruption of unwholesome reactions, cultivation of skillful alternatives, and maintenance of value-consistent action. The quantitative phase showed meaningful pre-post improvements on several targeted items, including maintenance of original wholesome intention (Q01, $d = 0.83$) and use of the 4C Response (Q12, $d = 2.16$), together with high participant satisfaction.

Limitations and Recommendations

These findings should be interpreted in light of important limitations. The intervention group was small ($n = 15$), no control group was used, Questionnaire-XJ was researcher-developed, and multiple item-level statistical tests were conducted. The study therefore cannot establish causal efficacy, long-term retention, or generalizability beyond the participating IBSC volunteers. Future research should replicate the model with larger samples, validated measures of burnout, compassion fatigue, psychological flexibility, and volunteer retention, and preferably controlled or quasi-experimental designs with follow-up assessment. Qualitative research should also examine whether the *chanda-taṇhā* distinction is experienced similarly across Buddhist and non-Buddhist volunteers. For institutional application, psychological monitoring and volunteer support

should emphasize both individual self-regulation and organizational factors such as workload, supervision, role clarity, and social support.

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