

Mindfulness, Wisdom, and Loving-Kindness as Pathways to Volunteer Development: Evidence from the Buddhamahametta Foundation*



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Abstract

This research explores the evolution of loving-kindness practice for new volunteers through Buddhist peaceful methods at the Buddhamahametta Foundation. The analysis incorporates comprehensive qualitative strategies, such as reviewing organizational documents, observing participants in natural settings, detailed interviews with 21 volunteers representing various responsibilities at Buddhamahametta Foundation, and holding focused group discussions with 9 meditation specialists and experienced practitioners. The research objectives are: (1) to study the problems and needs of new volunteers in meditation courses; (2) to study Buddhist Peaceful Means promoting loving-kindness practice; and (3) to develop and present a systematic process for practicing loving-kindness for new volunteers.

The findings of the research indicated that: (1) New volunteers encounter considerable challenges such as managing their egos when carrying out tasks deemed below their social standing, coping with physical demands and time limitations, facing communication hurdles with diverse community members, dealing with emotional regulation issues related to sensory contact (phassa), and needing to adapt in ever-changing environments while maintaining inner peace; (2) Effective Buddhist Peaceful Means that foster loving-kindness include authentic leadership modeling by Master teachers, a supportive community environment (kalyanamitta), the seamless integration of mindfulness practices into daily service activities, converting daily challenges into opportunities for spiritual practice, and being meaningfully exposed to the suffering of others to cultivate compassion. The study identified a three-stage developmental model: a preliminary task-oriented stage focused on basic service, an intermediate stage marked by mindfulness recognition and deeper awareness, and an advanced stage where tasks serve as avenues for systematic mental training. Throughout this progression, volunteers undergo a profound transformation in their understanding of happiness, shifting from material-based to service-oriented fulfillment; (3) A comprehensive five-phase process for nurturing loving-kindness consists of Foundation Building, Mindfulness Development, Attitude Transformation, Skillful Implementation, and Sustained Growth, all underpinned by consistent leadership modeling, strong community support, integrated mindfulness practices, and

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experiential learning opportunities. This study offers significant insights into the effective integration of Buddhist peaceful means within volunteer development programs, which may benefit similar organizations aiming to foster loving-kindness through service activities.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Wisdom; Loving-Kindness; Volunteer Development

Introduction

Dedication to volunteering reflects a sincere commitment of time and resources aimed at assisting others, entirely free from expectations of financial reward. Volunteers willingly participate, driven by their innate motivation and kindness, and have the freedom to withdraw whenever they choose. Volunteer motivation encompasses multiple dimensions including values expression, understanding, enhancement, career, social connections, and protective functions, with different aspects becoming prominent at different stages of the volunteer journey (Clary, and Snyder, 1999). As volunteer involvement continues to progress across different sectors worldwide, grasping the development processes that nurture sustainable service becomes increasingly vital, especially in contexts where service intertwines with spiritual practice.

The Mindfulness, Wisdom, and Loving-Kindness (MWL) program serves as a fundamental element of the Buddhamahametta Foundation's meditation practice and volunteer development approach. This holistic approach addresses various aspects of human experience—physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual—thereby creating a cohesive developmental environment. The MWL program is offered through a thoughtfully organized one-day course format that encompasses mindful walking and sitting sessions, dharma music, mindful eating practices, teachings on the law of karma, exercises aimed at fostering parental appreciation, group activities centered on cultivating loving-kindness, and dharma talks as Jiwattanasuk, Vasuratna, and Deegalle (2025) established in their work. Studies reveal that practicing loving-kindness meditation (LKM) could boost self-esteem, lessen anxiety, and nurture stronger community ties (Salzberg, 2002; Fredrickson et al. 2008; Hofmann, Grossman, and Hinton, 2011).

For volunteers, the MWL program acts as both an introductory pathway to the organization and an ongoing framework for their growth. By experiencing the program as participants prior to becoming volunteers, they attain a practical understanding of its principles and impacts. As they move into service roles, the MWL framework continues to guide their approach to tasks, interactions with practitioners, and personal growth. Volunteers assume vital operational roles that create the necessary conditions for effective practice within the Buddhamahametta Foundation, a religious non-profit organization dedicated to promoting meditation practices and dharma teachings. These one-day meditation courses heavily rely on extensive volunteer collaboration, with a typical practice day beginning with early morning

registration, progressing through meticulously organized meditation sessions, and concluding with an afternoon dharma talk delivered by the Master, wrapping up in the evening.

In this environment, volunteers tackle intricate challenges while simultaneously embarking on their own spiritual development journeys. The incorporation of loving-kindness (metta) principles into volunteer training presents both opportunities and challenges that warrant thorough examination. While existing literature has extensively analyzed either volunteering or Buddhist practice separately, insufficient focus has been placed on their integration within practical development frameworks. This research aims to fill this void by investigating how new volunteers at the Buddhamahametta Foundation cultivate loving-kindness through their service activities.

The study is driven by the need to understand the transformative potential of volunteer service when regarded as a spiritual practice, particularly within the context of Buddhist peaceful means. By exploring the contexts, challenges, developmental processes, and outcomes tied to this integration, this research aspires to contribute knowledge that could enhance volunteer experiences while bolstering organizational capacity to support meaningful transformation. The importance of this study goes beyond the specific instance of the Buddhamahametta Foundation to address broader inquiries about how traditional wisdom can be adapted to modern volunteer settings. In an age where volunteer organizations increasingly acknowledge the significance of volunteer well-being and sustainability alongside service effectiveness, understanding development processes that simultaneously cater to both aspects provides valuable insights for diverse organizational contexts.

Objectives of the Research

1. To study the concepts and theories of being a volunteer and the contexts, problems, and necessary needs of being a new volunteer in a meditation course at the Buddhamahametta Foundation.
2. To study the Buddhist Peaceful Means promoting practice of loving-kindness for new volunteers in a meditation course at Buddhamahametta Foundation.
3. To develop and present the process of practicing loving-kindness for new volunteers in a meditation course at Buddhamahametta Foundation.

Research Methodology

This study utilized qualitative methods to gain a thorough comprehension of the growth experiences encountered by volunteers at the Buddhamahametta Foundation. The research framework incorporated various approaches to guarantee data triangulation and a holistic investigation of the phenomenon being examined.

1st Step: Documentary Study

The preliminary stage encompassed an extensive examination of literature pertaining to volunteerism, Buddhist concepts of loving-kindness, and the convergence of service with spiritual practice. This encompassed scholarly articles, Buddhist scriptures, and organizational materials to create a theoretical foundation for the research. Particular focus was placed on comprehending the MWL program's framework, principles, and execution at the Buddhamahametta Foundation.

2nd Step: Field Study

The researcher engaged in participant observation while volunteering at the Buddhamahametta Foundation, meticulously recording the workflows, interactions, and practices of the volunteers. This immersive method facilitated direct observation of how volunteers enacted loving-kindness in diverse service environments and how they managed obstacles in real-time.

3rd Step: Key Informants

The research involved 21 key informants who volunteered at the Buddhamahametta Foundation. These participants comprised both relatively new volunteers (with around one year of experience) and experienced volunteers (with more than five years of service), contributing a range of perspectives on the developmental journey. The various roles they responsible for and the experiences of these volunteers provided valuable insights into the different facets of service and development.

4th Step: Research instruments and methods

1. In-depth interviews with the 21 key informants, exploring their motivations, experiences, challenges, and transformations throughout their volunteer service. The interviews utilized a semi-structured approach featuring open-ended questions aimed at drawing out comprehensive stories regarding volunteer experiences.

2. Focus group discussion with 9 sub-informants, including:

- 2.1 Meditation masters (2)
- 2.2 Full-time foundation volunteer (1)
- 2.3 Marketing professional (1)
- 2.4 Regional finance associate (1)
- 2.5 Retired Red Cross management team member (1)
- 2.6 Nuns from the meditation course management team (2)
- 2.7 Customer service professional (1)

Participant observation: The researcher engaged directly in volunteer activities to gain experiential understanding of the context and challenges. This method provided contextual understanding of volunteer experiences that might not emerge in interviews alone.

5th Step: Data collection

The collection of data spanned an entire year, featuring interviews that were transcribed and then verified for accuracy by those who took part. Observational information was captured through detailed field notes and reflective journaling. Each component of the data acquisition process complied with established ethical guidelines, securing informed consent from all contributors.

6th Step: Data analysis

Data analysis the research employed inductive content analysis to identify patterns, themes, and developmental processes in the data. This approach allowed the genuine experiences of volunteers to emerge while providing sufficient structure to develop a coherent understanding of loving-kindness development.

7th Step: Summary and presentation

Summary and presentation of the research results the findings were organized according to the research objectives and synthesized into a comprehensive model for developing loving-kindness among new volunteers.

Research Results

The 1st objective is to study concepts and theories of being a volunteer and the contexts, problems, and necessary needs of being a new volunteer in a meditation course at the Buddhamahametta Foundation.

From the research result, it was found that volunteers engage in diverse tasks including direct support for meditation courses (organizing seating arrangements, guiding attendees, creating an environment conducive to meditation), supporting the monastic community (food preparation, transportation), facility maintenance (cleaning, event logistics), administrative tasks (registration, donation coordination). Unlike conventional volunteer settings where service activities are primarily goal-oriented, the MWL framework transforms tasks into opportunities for cultivating mindfulness, wisdom, and loving-kindness.

New volunteers face significant challenges that impact their development:

1. Ego Management Challenges: New volunteers frequently encounter internal resistance when assigned tasks perceived as incongruent with their social status or comfort levels. This fundamental challenge requires ongoing ego reduction and heightened self-awareness, better understood as a development opportunity rather than merely an administrative concern.

2. Physical and Time Demands: Volunteers contend with substantial physical demands, particularly those unfamiliar with manual labor, alongside balancing service commitments with professional and family responsibilities. This challenge necessitates advanced time management strategies and realistic expectations about individual capacity for contribution.

3. Communication and Interpersonal Dynamics: The diversity within the volunteer community creates communication difficulties, especially in digital contexts where text-based interactions may cause misunderstandings. This highlights the importance of cultivating compassionate communication practices and interpersonal skills.

4. Mindset and Emotional Regulation: New volunteers must develop skills to effectively manage negative emotions that arise during service, particularly regarding phassa (sensory contact), which requires integrating mindfulness practices and emotional regulation tools.

5. Adaptability Requirements: The dynamic nature of the foundation's activities demands exceptional adaptability, requiring volunteers to reframe frequent changes through the lens of Buddhist principles of impermanence and non-self, rather than viewing them as organizational deficiencies.

The necessary needs of new volunteers include:

- A strong foundation, typically established through prior participation in meditation courses.
- Clear communication channels.
- Mentorship and community support to navigate challenges effectively.
- Practical support including time management guidance and clear role definitions.
- Specific mindsets and attitudes including faith, willingness to reduce ego, mindfulness, adaptability, compassion, commitment to ongoing learning, and a positive outlook.

The 2nd objective is to study Buddhist Peaceful Means promoting practice of loving-kindness for new volunteers in a meditation course at Buddhamahametta Foundation.

From the research result, it was found that several key Buddhist methodologies effectively promote the cultivation of loving-kindness among volunteers:

1. Leadership Modeling: The embodiment of loving-kindness by Master (the respected teacher) serves as a powerful example for volunteers. His consistent prioritization of others' wellbeing creates a tangible model that volunteers aspire to emulate, transforming loving-kindness from an abstract concept into a lived reality.

2. MWL Program Integration: The MWL meditation framework provides training for volunteers with practical tools for their service. The mindfulness component helps volunteers stay aware of their emotions and thoughts while helping others. The wisdom element prompts volunteers to view challenges as chances for growth and learning. The loving-kindness aspect encourages compassion and patience in all interactions, whether with community members or fellow volunteers. Together, these guidelines help volunteers blend personal growth with their service, making volunteering a part of their development.

3. Supportive Community Environment (Kalyanamitta): The volunteer community functions as a collective support system that reinforces loving-kindness through shared values, mentorship relationships, and mutual encouragement. This community creates a safe space for learning from mistakes while maintaining high standards of compassionate service. Volunteers described how meeting with fellow practitioners allowed them to share experiences and encourage each other, adjusting perspectives collaboratively.

4. Mindfulness Practice Integration: Volunteers intentionally incorporate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness into their service activities, transforming mundane tasks into opportunities for heightened awareness and growth. This integration enables volunteers to observe their reactions, regulate emotional responses, and develop greater self-awareness.

5. Transformation of Challenges into Practice Opportunities: Difficulties are reconceptualized as valuable opportunities for practicing loving-kindness rather than obstacles to overcome.

6. Perspective-Broadening Through Exposure to Suffering: Direct engagement with course participants experiencing hardship fosters empathy and expands volunteers' perspectives beyond personal concerns. Volunteers reported that witnessing others' suffering made their own worldly difficulties seem less intense upon returning to their regular lives.

7. Faith as Motivational Foundation: Connection to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha serves as a sustainable motivational foundation that transcends self-interest, supporting volunteers through challenges and creating resilience in their commitment to service. Volunteers emphasized that unwavering faith was essential for perseverance and that complete belief enables them to overcome any difficulty.

8. Experiential Learning Through Course Participation: The requirement for new volunteers to participate in meditation courses before serving ensures both theoretical understanding and practical experience, creating continuity between receiving and providing care.

The 3rd objective is to develop and present the process of practicing loving-kindness for new volunteers in a meditation course at Buddhamahametta Foundation.

From the research result, it was found that volunteers develop in stages. A Three-Stage Developmental Model that describes the evolution of volunteers through:

- Initial Stage: Characterized by external motivations, task focus, concern with correct performance, and separation between aspirations and service activities
- Intermediate Stage: Marked by transitional growth, recognition of mindfulness opportunities within tasks, increasing awareness of internal reactions, and explicit connections between tasks and Buddhist principles
- Experienced Stage: Distinguished by fully integrated practice, using tasks primarily as vehicles for mind training, internalized motivations, heightened awareness during routine activities, and mentoring relationships with newer volunteers

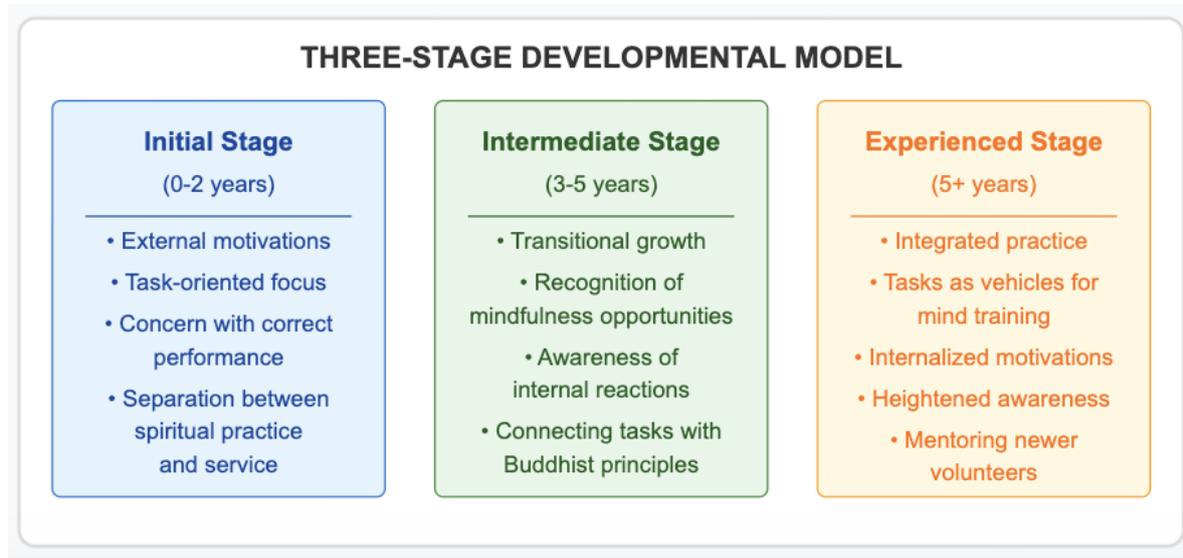


Figure 1: Three-Stage Development Model

The New Body of Knowledge

From the research result, it was found that a comprehensive five-phase process for cultivating loving-kindness in new volunteers can be implemented:

Phase 1: Foundation Building - Establishing Faith and Understanding

A solid motivational base is created through attending at least three prerequisite courses, engaging with seasoned volunteers who serve as role models, being introduced to fundamental teachings of loving-kindness, and fostering faith by observing the master's commitment and the community's dedication.

Phase 2: Mindfulness Development - Cultivating Self-Awareness

This phase enhances mindfulness through the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness during service, recognizing and managing the ego, developing awareness of sensory contact (phassa), and employing techniques for emotional recognition. This includes short guided practices, frequent check-ins, and reflective exercises.

Phase 3: Attitude Transformation - Shifting Perspective

This phase actively shifts perspective from a self-focused viewpoint to one that is centered on others through the development of empathy, the cultivation of gratitude, fostering non-judgmental awareness, and setting conscious intentions. Significant advancements comprise faith and dedication, a readiness to let go of the ego, adaptability, compassion, and a commitment to continuous learning.

Phase 4: Skillful Implementation - Embodying Loving-Kindness in Action

Inner qualities are converted into effective actions through task-specific training that merges technical skills with a compassionate mindset, the development of communication abilities, prioritizing the wellbeing of others, and enhancing conflict resolution skills. Individual strengths and appropriate pacing are thoughtfully taken into account.

Phase 5: Sustained Growth - Deepening and Maintaining Practice

The final phase emphasizes ongoing development through continued meditation practice, mentorship relationships, community support (kalyanamitta), and regular self-reflection. This phase recognizes that loving-kindness cultivation is a continuous spiritual journey rather than a destination. Volunteers engage in lifelong learning where service becomes increasingly integrated with personal practice, moving from initial external motivations to deep intrinsic commitment. The process supports continuous spiritual maturation through regular dharma study, progressive responsibility increases, and mentoring newer volunteers, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of growth and service.

These phases are supported by four crucial elements positioned at the corners of the model:

1. Role Modeling - The role of Master and other spiritual guides in modeling, teaching, and inspiring loving-kindness practice.
2. Community of Volunteers - A supportive environment providing mentorship, mutual encouragement, and collective wisdom.
3. Practical Service - The actual volunteer work serving as a laboratory for practicing loving-kindness in real situations.
4. Evaluation & Feedback - Ongoing assessment and refinement of both individual practice and the overall development process.

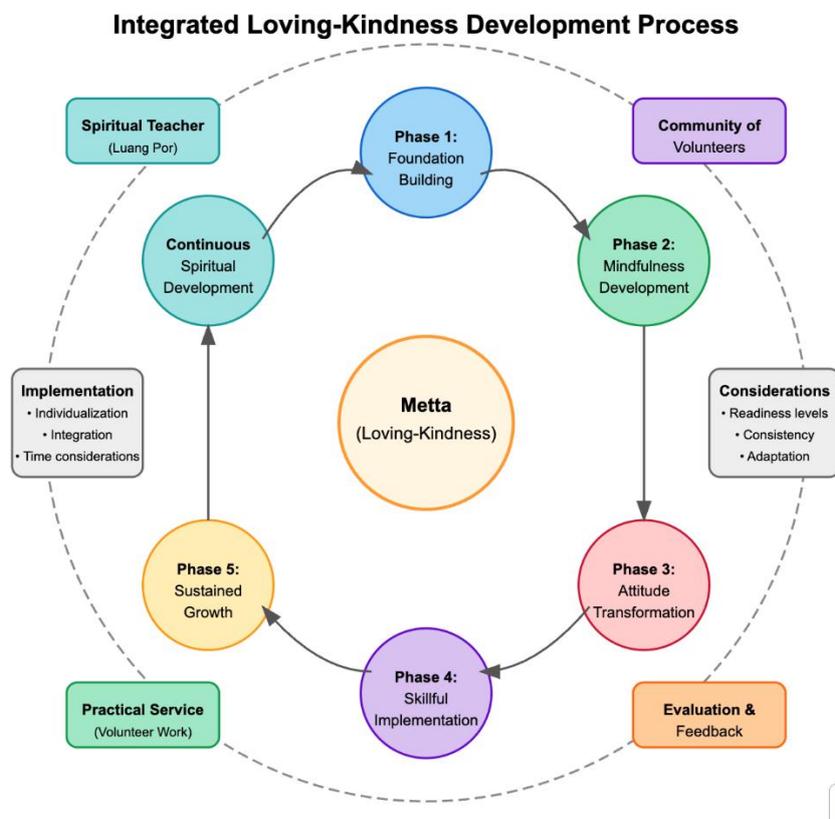


Figure 2: Integrated Loving Kindness Development Process

The framework offers a systematic yet flexible approach to volunteer development that integrates spiritual practice with service activities, addressing both individual growth and organizational needs simultaneously. It can be adapted to various volunteer contexts while maintaining its core principles, making it valuable beyond the specific case study setting.

Discussion of Research Results

From the research result of the 1st objective, the initial objective highlighted that the obstacles encountered by new volunteers at the Buddhamahametta Foundation embody both tangible challenges and opportunities for growth. Engaging in volunteer work within this Buddhist framework distinctly positions the act of service as a direct engagement with deeply rooted attachments related to self-perception and social standing. Unlike traditional volunteering, where service tasks primarily fulfill the needs of the external community, volunteering at the Buddhamahametta Foundation intentionally fosters an environment where volunteers are compelled to confront their own attachments, preferences, and ego-driven reactions as integral to their personal growth.

This research offers fresh insights by illustrating that volunteers in meditation courses face distinctive challenges that fulfill two roles: meeting practical service demands while promoting personal spiritual growth. The volunteer experience intentionally cultivates conditions that encourage individuals to confront internal barriers and enhance self-awareness through their service endeavors.

The researcher's evaluation aligns with Pagis (2009)'s theory, which highlighted how physical discomfort during meditation retreats acts as a vital catalyst for fostering embodied self-awareness. The physical challenges associated with volunteer service at the Buddhamahametta Foundation similarly present opportunities for mindfulness practice, indicating that the volunteer challenges within meditation settings function as conduits for spiritual growth rather than simply hindrances.

From the research result of the 2nd objective, it illustrated that volunteers at the Buddhamahametta Foundation undergo significant shifts in their perceptions and experiences of happiness as a result of their service activities. Engaging in loving-kindness within the volunteer framework fosters experiential understanding that contests materialistic beliefs about happiness. When volunteers regularly participate in activities that assist others without seeking personal benefit, they firsthand encounter the Buddhist teaching that true happiness arises not from accumulating desirable possessions or experiences but from nurturing virtuous mental states and ethical deeds.

This research provides fresh insights by capturing how Buddhist peaceful methods, enacted through volunteer service, facilitate direct experiential learning regarding the practice of loving-kindness. The study highlights that individuals frequently opt for time donations instead of financial support, even when it is economically inefficient, indicating that the

emotional gratification derived from direct service outweighs the monetary worth of the time invested, thereby showcasing the efficacy of Buddhist peaceful strategies in transforming happiness.

The researcher's viewpoint is consistent with previous findings by Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008), whose pioneering study revealed that utilizing resources for others yields greater happiness than spending on oneself. This finding is further supported by Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross (2008), who demonstrated that loving-kindness meditation directly increases social connectedness, even toward strangers, which aligns with the enhanced community bonds observed among volunteers at the Buddhamahametta Foundation. Their experimental research demonstrated that participants instructed to allocate money for others reported higher levels of happiness compared to those directed to spend money on themselves, providing empirical validation for the happiness transformation noted through Buddhist peaceful practices at the Buddhamahametta Foundation.

From the research result of the 3rd objective, the third objective revealed that the process of fostering loving-kindness among new volunteers ideally adheres to a five-phase framework, complemented by various supporting elements. The development of loving-kindness necessitates a multifaceted approach that simultaneously tackles cognitive comprehension, emotional growth, behavioral demonstration, and environmental reinforcement. This five-phase process recognizes that simply having an intellectual grasp or prescribing compassionate actions is inadequate—genuine loving-kindness unfolds through a cohesive developmental journey that reshapes both internal perspectives and external behaviors.

This study offers substantial new insights by illustrating that the effective development of loving-kindness for new volunteers demands a structured, multi-phase approach rather than isolated methods. The research indicates that the five-phase framework delivers a thorough outline that addresses the intricate nature of loving-kindness cultivation for those who are new to meditation and volunteer work.

The researcher's analysis aligns with Wallace (2010)'s concepts, theories, and research regarding the four immeasurables, which established mindfulness as essential for authentic loving-kindness, highlighting that appropriate mindfulness development should precede or coincide with the nurturing of loving-kindness. This finding directly reinforces the sequence outlined in the five-phase process identified at the Buddhamahametta Foundation, where the development of mindfulness is designated as the second phase in the loving-kindness growth process for new volunteers.

Conclusion

This research examined loving-kindness development for new volunteers at Buddhahammetta Foundation through Buddhist peaceful means. The study reveals that volunteering represents a comprehensive developmental journey transforming both individual volunteers and service quality.

New volunteers face challenges including ego management, physical demands, communication difficulties, and emotional regulation. These challenges become growth opportunities through Buddhist peaceful methods promoting loving-kindness practice. Transformation occurs through three developmental stages: initial task-focused stage, intermediate mindfulness recognition stage, and experienced stage where tasks become mind training vehicles.

Volunteers experience profound shifts from material-centered values toward fulfillment through service and inner development. This manifests as decreased attachment to possessions, enhanced emotional resilience, broader perspectives through exposure to others' suffering, and diminished self-centeredness.

The five-phase process—Foundation Building, Mindfulness Development, Attitude Transformation, Skillful Implementation, and Sustained Growth—provides structured yet flexible loving-kindness cultivation integrating Buddhist principles with practical volunteer development. Leadership modeling, community support, mindfulness practices, and experiential learning create comprehensive environments where loving-kindness flourishes.

The study demonstrates that volunteer service approached as spiritual practice guided by Buddhist peaceful means becomes a powerful vehicle for individual transformation and enhanced service effectiveness. This integration creates synergistic relationships where personal development and organizational mission mutually reinforce one another, resulting in volunteers experiencing greater fulfillment while providing more compassionate service.

Findings highlight the value of intentional development processes addressing both volunteers' inner landscape and external actions, suggesting organizations seeking to cultivate loving-kindness would benefit from holistic approaches honoring both dimensions simultaneously.

Suggestions

From the results of the research, the researcher has the suggestions as follows:

1. The suggestions from the research

From the findings of the first objective, it was determined that new volunteers encounter various challenges such as managing their egos, meeting physical demands, facing communication obstacles, and regulating their emotions. Consequently, the Buddhahammetta Foundation should establish a more structured orientation program that directly addresses these issues, clarifies expectations, and equips volunteers with practical

tools for overcoming difficulties. This program ought to specifically cover challenges related to ego and healthy methods for managing them, offer realistic strategies for time management, and provide communication guidelines, particularly for digital interactions.

From the findings of the second objective, it was revealed that several Buddhist peaceful methods effectively foster loving-kindness, including modeling by leaders, community support, and the integration of mindfulness. Therefore, the foundation should deliberately enhance these aspects by creating additional opportunities for new volunteers to observe and engage with seasoned practitioners, forming formal mentorship pairings between new and experienced volunteers, and incorporating brief mindfulness exercises at the beginning and end of volunteer shifts to reinforce the connection between practice and service.

From the findings of the third objective, it was identified that a five-phase process effectively cultivates loving-kindness in new volunteers. Thus, the foundation should formalize this process by establishing clear developmental guidelines that acknowledge various stages of progression, creating supporting materials for each phase, and training volunteer supervisors to comprehend and facilitate the process. This implementation should proceed gradually, starting with a pilot program before being rolled out to all volunteer groups.

2. The suggestions for future research

The future research should involve the following issues:

2.1 Longitudinal studies following new volunteers over extended durations to gain deeper insights into the developmental path of loving-kindness practice, pinpointing elements that either promote or obstruct progress through the five phases outlined in this research.

2.2 Comparative studies exploring the ways in which the evolution of loving-kindness through service may differ among various Buddhist traditions and cultural backgrounds, uncovering both universal principles and culturally specific variations to develop more adaptable approaches.

2.3 Research examining how loving-kindness fostered through volunteer service translates into other areas of life such as family dynamics, workplace settings, and broader community involvement, identifying factors that enhance or hinder this transition.

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