

## **In Search of Positive Psychology in Early Buddhism**

**(PI: Dr. GA Somaratne)**

### **Objectives:**

The positive psychology aims at building best qualities in life (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) while identifying and nurturing the strongest qualities enabling individuals to live out these qualities. Its subject matter consists of “positive subjective experience” as defined by such terms as well-being, satisfaction, joy, the sensual pleasures, happiness, optimism, hope, and faith; “positive personal traits” such as the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent, and wisdom; and “the civic virtues and the institutions,” namely, responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic that move individuals toward better citizenship (Gillham & Selgman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Even though the Buddha’s teaching does not detail its subject matter as the modern positive psychology does, the fact that it provides guidance and direction for people for achieving well-being and happiness here and now paves the way for considering it as a positive psychology. Moreover, the Buddha’s discussions on karma, the path and practice, and his analysis of mind and mental factors are all directed toward generating a positive mind that drives one do positive wholesome deeds mentally, verbally and physically, a type of deeds that breeds wholesome results. Furthermore, the fact that the Buddha achieved enlightenment after going through many trials and errors and then walked himself an active and activist life for the benefit of the many allows him to be considered as an exemplary positive and progressive thinker. This research therefore aims at:

- Uncovering the Buddha’s conception of positive psychology by examining the discourses of the Pāli Canon, while comparing and contrasting it with the modern western positive psychology.

In the process, the research expects:

- To locate and collect the early Buddhist terms, concepts and definitions that could be treated under positive psychology. [Examples: human personality, personality types, mind, mental roots, meditation, human will, human effort, self-initiative, moral responsibility, energy, exertions, mindfulness, intentional actions, right view, right thought, right effort, diligence, energy, motivation, meritorious actions, wholesome actions, impermanent, enlightenment].
- To identify and analyze the textual contexts that depict the Buddha energizing his disciples to think positively and progressively, encouraging them to change and be changed for attaining all humanly possible goals including the highest, the enlightenment.
- To identify and analyze the Buddha’s instructions on how to channel one’s strength, energy, exertion, and diligence to enhance one’s personality, spiritual wellbeing and material betterment, and skills of interacting with society.
- To explain that the doctrines of karma, impermanence, and suffering that are often pessimistically interpreted by the tradition and the modern scholarship are really aimed at stirring up positive attitudes in people to act for their own spiritual and moral well-being.
- To explain that the Buddha’s conception of positive psychology establishes itself in the middle for the Buddha with reference causal relation between action and result makes a critique on both the strict determinism and the strict indeterminism.
- To interpret the religiously loaded Buddhist positive concepts in modern psychological terms making them accessible to today’s world.

## **Significance:**

The proposed research area is new to Buddhist Studies field. It will create a new research sub-field in Buddhist Studies inviting Buddhist theorists to expand their application of Buddhist concepts and theories for enhancing the positive attitudes and skills required for psychological, social and professional life of the people living in the 21st century. So far the Buddhist theorists have paid attention to the problem solving in the areas of economics, politics, environmental issues, stress reduction, and conflict resolution. The proposed research contributes towards developing Buddhist theories and methods for generating positive attitudes in people for personal, social and professional development, finding ways to energize people, both children and adults, to work towards achieving their set targets in their personal, family, social, and professional life, and in turn increasing productivity and satisfaction, and taking new challenges in life and living, prioritizing their goals and managing their time wisely.

In addition, the research outcome which is the presentation of the Buddha's positive psychological concepts for the 21st century life will be a challenge to the established traditions, particularly to their hesitation for making changes to what is outdated. The positive psychology of the Buddha is contrary to the tradition's belief that the present life is determined by their past deeds or some external forces which beyond their control. It will reveal that the tradition's refusal to change and to introduce innovation greatly affects the material and spiritual wellbeing of the people, particularly those who have been exposed to the modern western thoughts and technological advancements and are living in cities having already lost ground with their traditional cultures. The people who are living in cities, though want to change the tradition or make adjustments to it, are still afraid of doing so, partly because of the prevalent religious myths, beliefs and practices. This fear for changing the tradition may create more stress and bring more failures to modern life. This research therefore expects to provide a strong philosophical and textual back up for those Buddhist organizations and their leaders, both monastic and lay, who are working towards introducing positive and constructive changes to their established traditions. The research results could be used to educate communities and peoples on the positive character of the Buddha's teaching while encouraging them to pursue for gaining material and spiritual wellbeing here and now.

Moreover, the traditional religion as it is practiced today while being benefitted by the market economy advocates the performance of extravagant rituals by preaching that the ritually performed actions bear expected results. As a result, the traditional religion today encourages people to strictly adhere to a set of rules, rituals, and customs that have been coming down from the past. Nonetheless, this research expects to point out that the Buddha on the contrary teaches that any intentional action, though not in a deterministic way, bears fruits, that with every moral action performed the doer can grow both spiritually and materially, and that the weightage of the action depends on the intention behind it. Moreover, it aims to explain that the Buddha is one who once liberated the Indian people who had been overburdened by divergent views and extravagant religious rituals. The prevalent Buddhist religion particularly in the Theravada countries of South and Southeast Asia frequently speaks of change as an important characteristic of our life experience as taught by the Buddha but hardly accepts the fact that "one can change" and "we should be changed." Contrary to the fact, the teaching of the Buddha states that it is due to this evanescent change that makes it possible for one to change without waiting for the natural change to take over.