

# The Effects of Cultivating Metta Bhavana with a Heartfelt Smile on Applying It to Reduce Suffering in Daily Life

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## Abstract

This descriptive research aimed to study the effects of cultivating mettā bhāvanā in the form of a “heartfelt smile” (smile from the heart) which can be applied to nurturing the quality of the mind in daily life. The study’s population includes individuals experiencing stress, suffering, and/or those interested in loving-kindness meditation. A purposive sampling recruited 122 participants who joined the “Meditation with a Noble Heart: Smiling from the Heart” session at the Health Promotion Learning Center, Thai Health Promotion Foundation. Each session was one day long, with 4 rounds of this session in total. The meditation practices included “heartfelt smile”, walking meditation, lying down meditation, and spreading loving-kindness (metta bhavana). Of the 122 participants, 72 (59.0%) of them also had opportunities for Q&A and experience sharing. Data were collected through application forms and post-activity surveys, and analyzed using frequency, percentage, mode, and Chi-square tests to compare results across rounds. The study found that most participants were working adults aged 40-59 years, with 92.6% reporting stress or distress. The most common issue was exhaustion from work, with each person reporting an average of two sources of distress. Of the 72 respondents who completed the survey, most reported that meditation practice is highly beneficial. Key takeaways included practicing “heartfelt smile”, self-reflection, better understanding of themselves and others, increased mindfulness and concentration, and a sense of relaxation. Over 75.0% of participants rated these positive results at the highest level, with no significant differences between rounds ( $p>0.05$ ). The most appreciated activity, rated highest, was lying down meditation (38.9%). Loving-kindness meditation (metta bhavana) is a tool for reducing stress and addressing emotional suffering, a major issue in today’s society. Continued practice of “heartfelt smile” meditation can foster long-term emotional resilience and well-being.

**Keywords:** loving-kindness meditation (Mettā Bhāvanā); heartfelt smile; suffering (Dukkha)

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## Introduction

The “2024 Thai Health Report” on the “Silent Epidemic of Stress” in Thai society outlines the increasing detrimental effects of stress, which impact not only mental health but also physical well-being. Symptoms such as loss of appetite, overeating, indigestion, and insomnia often lead to chronic stress. As a result, chronic and persisting stress can induce behaviors like alcohol consumption, smoking, substance abuse, and even suicide. Stress also has significant social and economic implications, a reason behind the World Health Organization declaring stress a “Health Epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”<sup>(1)</sup>

The report also notes an increase in depression and suicide rates. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of individuals with depression in Thailand rose from 335,537 to 358,267, with suicide rates increasing to 7.4 per 100,000 people, particularly in the 15-34 age group. Stress levels, according to the Mental Health Department, rose from 1.7% in 2020 to 3.6% in 2021, while rates of depression increased from 2.1% to 10.1%.<sup>(2)</sup>

For the working population, stress factors include economic hardship, societal pressures, and family problems. In Bangkok, occupational stress factors like burnout, high-stress jobs (e.g., military, police, healthcare professionals), and workplace pressure are major concerns. The elderly face different factors, such as health issues, financial instability, and strained family relationships.<sup>(1,3)</sup>

Stress management can be divided into two approaches: external management, which focuses on problem-solving (problem-focused coping), and internal management, which addresses

stress relief (emotion-focused coping), especially when the source of stress cannot be resolved.<sup>(1)</sup>

In practical application, there are 4 primary approaches to emotional management: (1) Behavioral Techniques: this encompasses engaging in regular physical exercise, ensuring sufficient sleep, maintaining a nutritious diet, and effectively managing one’s time. (2) Cognitive Techniques: this includes cultivating positive thinking, embracing imperfection, systematically learning problem-solving strategies, and practicing mindfulness. (3) Relaxation Techniques: methods such as deep breathing, meditation, listening to soothing music, taking warm baths, and enjoying massages can be employed. And (4) Seeking Assistance: it is beneficial to converse with trusted individuals and to seek counsel from medical practitioners or mental health professionals.

Mindfulness and meditation are esteemed tools for managing internal stress. However, practitioners often seek guidance on how to effectively implement these practices, the necessary duration of training, and practical applications in daily life.

Loving-kindness meditation (Metta Bhavana), which is one of the forty meditative practices, a form of Samatha Bhāvanā (Tranquility Meditation), is endowed with 11 significant benefits, including:<sup>(4)</sup>

1. Attaining peaceful sleep
2. Awakenings with joy
3. Being free from nightmares
4. Being cherished by all beings
5. Gaining the affection of non-human entities
6. Receiving protection from celestial beings
7. Being safeguarded from fire, poison, or weaponry
8. Achieving mental stability with rapidity

9. Exhibiting a radiant countenance
10. Retaining mindfulness even at the moment of death
11. If enlightenment is not yet realized, one will attain the Brahma realm.

The effects of loving-kindness meditation (Metta Bhavana), as studied by Phra Samu Manus Aggapañño in the case of the community of Wat Kok Sawang, That Phanom District, Nakhon Phanom, revealed that practitioners clearly experience a sense of joy or bliss. Their bodies feel light and comfortable, and their minds become calm and focused, free from distractions. This mental state comprises thoughts, contemplation, joy, happiness, and unification of mind.<sup>(5)</sup>

Phra Ajahn Chotik Abhijato of the Gilanadhamma volunteer group has introduced a meditation practice based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipatthana), which he has studied, practiced, and researched.<sup>(6)</sup> He has developed a loving-kindness meditation in the form of heartfelt smile (smile from the heart) that integrates both tranquility meditation (Samathi) and insight meditation (Vipassana) in a format that is easy to practice, nurturing the qualities of practitioners to maintain mental well-being in facing stress, mental turmoil, and suffering. This approach includes the ability to establish a wholesome mind in every situation, particularly through the practice of lying meditation under the program titled “Meditation with a Noble Heart: Smiling from the Heart.”

The dissemination and training of this loving-kindness meditation, heartfelt smile, initially began as an online learning format in 2022 due to the COVID-19 situation, and later transitioned to in-person training sessions at the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives in Bangkok at the end of 2023.

In 2024, the training expanded to the Health Promotion Foundation Learning Center.

This study aimed to highlight the positive results of training in the practice of mettā bhāvanā through the “heartfelt smile” in cultivating mental well-being and applying it to life in contemporary society.

## Method

### Study Design: Descriptive Study.

**Sample:** Purposive sampling was used, selecting participants from those who followed the “Happy Growth” Facebook page and expressed interest in loving-kindness meditation. A total of 122 participants attended the 4 sessions, lasting one day each, of the meditation program “Meditation of the Noble Heart: heartfelt smile”.

**Interventions:** The loving-kindness meditation training called “Smile from the Heart”. The meditation was guided by Venerable Phra Chotik Abhijato, who developed the “heartfelt smile” method of mettā bhāvanā and had extensive experience in healing those who suffer and caring for terminally ill patients. The conducted activities were structured into 4 parts:

#### Part 1:

- Participants were invited to engage in dialogue to foster rapport and share views on stress and suffering management.

- The importance and positive usefulness of loving-kindness meditation were discussed.

- The program emphasized the development of five qualities: mindfulness, awareness, loving-kindness, compassion, and courage, through the practice of “smiling from the heart”.

#### Part 2:

- The five qualities were cultivated through

walking meditation, with participants practicing relaxed and mindful walking while smiling.

- When a bell rang, participants were instructed to stop and smile, acknowledging both external stimuli and internal thoughts with a wider smile to strengthen mindfulness, loving-kindness, and compassion.

### Part 3:

The third stage, following walking meditation, involved slowly transitioning from walking to lying down in a relaxed posture. The participants were guided step by step by the Venerable Master, starting with gentle, relaxed breathing.<sup>(7)</sup>

**Step 1:** Direct awareness to different parts of body, while gently smiling from the heart while acknowledging each area:

- Ankle, knee, waist, shoulder, neck, ear – right side
- Center of the head
- Ear, neck, shoulder, waist, knee, ankle – left side

**Step 2:** Take time to “thank” five parts of the body. Spend five minutes offering gratitude from the heart.

**Step 3:** Reflect on thoughts and feelings, both wholesome and unwholesome, that had arisen in the past. Offered special gratitude for these experiences.

**Step 4:** Reflect on roles and responsibilities toward family, organization, society, country, and the world, and the opportunities to extend kindness to loved ones and strangers alike. Offered special gratitude for these opportunities.

**Step 5:** Contemplate body and mental state. Examine whether there were any past events, actions, or people that, when recalled, bring suffering or disturbance (such as sadness, anger, or resentment). Stayed with those emotions, holding

them with the power of loving-kindness (metta bhavana), compassion, and courage from the heart. Smiled from the heart toward these troubling feelings while breathing calmly.<sup>(8)</sup>

Sat up and spread loving-kindness dedicating the merits and the energy of loving-kindness and compassion to oneself and others with the following phrases:<sup>(9)</sup>

- May I be strong, joyful, and happy (repeat 3 times)
- May my family be strong, joyful, and happy (repeat 3 times)
- May all beings be strong, joyful, and happy (repeat 3 times)

### Part 4:

- Participants engaged in a reflective group discussion, sharing their experiences from the meditation practice.

### Data Collection Tools:

- Two Google Forms were used to collect data. First, an application form was used to gather information about key information of participants such as name, age, and current pain points or challenges.

Finally, a post-activity survey conducted after the program, gathers feedback on the achievement of the training objectives and overall satisfaction with the activity (instructors, team, and venue). Ratings were measured on a scale from 1 (least) to 5 (most). Participants also identified the most impactful activity.

### Data Analysis:

- Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mode, were used to analyze the data
- Chi-square analysis was used to compare the differences in the demographic data of the participants in the activity.

## Results

Of the 122 participants who registered for the four sessions, participants spanned all age groups, with the majority being working adults between the ages of 50-59 (36.89%), followed by those aged 40-49 (29.51%), as shown in Table 1.

Life Distress: 92.6% of participants (113 individuals) reported experiencing distress in life. The most common issue was burnout from work (38.5%), followed by a lack of life purpose (33.6%), as detailed in Table 2.

The average number of distress issues per participant was 2, with the maximum being 7. No significant differences were found between the distress profiles of participants in different sessions ( $p>0.05$ ), as shown in Table 3.

Post-Session Evaluation: of the 88 participants who attended the activities in the 4 sessions, 72 completed the post-session evaluation (81.8%). More than 75% of respondents reported the highest level of positive result (“most”) in all areas, with 90.3% reporting feeling relaxed and 84.7% stating they were likely to apply the skills learned in their daily lives. These results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 1 Age distribution of participants**

Age	Number	Percentage
20-29 years	7	5.74
30-39 years	15	12.30
40-49 years	36	29.51
50-59 years	45	36.89
60+ years	19	15.57
Total	122	100.0

**Table 2 Sex distribution of participants and types of distress participants experienced**

Age	Number	Percentage
Male	25	20.49
Female	97	79.51
Total	122	100.00
Type of Distress	Number	Percentage
Lack of life purpose	41	33.6
Difficulty concentrating at work	36	29.5
Grieving a loss	16	13.1
Burnout from work	47	38.5
Relationship difficulties	26	21.3
Insomnia	31	25.4
Teamwork challenges	15	12.3
Depression or risk of depression	19	15.6
Others	21	17.21

**Table 3** Number of distress issues per participant

Session	Number of distress issues per participant							
	None	1 issue	2 issue	3 issue	4 issue	5 issue	6 issue	7 issue
1	1	17	14	7	1	5	0	1
2	0	16	8	3	2	1	1	0
3	0	7	6	3	1	0	0	0
4	0	10	8	9	0	1	0	0
Total	1	50	36	22	4	7	1	1
min = 0, max = 7, mean = 2.1, mode = 1, median = 2 p>0.05 (Chi-square)								

**Table 4** Perceived positive results (in high level) of participation

Positive results	Perceived results (in high level)	
	Number	Percentage
1. Learning self-care and reflection through “Smiling from the Heart”	58	80.6
2. Gaining personal insight and understanding of self, others, and life	54	75.0
3. Improving mindfulness and concentration	58	80.6
4. Feeling relaxed and positive	65	90.3
5. Likely to apply the practice in daily life	61	84.7

Session Feedback: majority of participants (94.44%) reported the highest satisfaction (score of 5) with the activities’ facilitators, with no significant differences across sessions ( $p>0.05$ ). The most appreciated activity was the “lying meditation for cultivating emotional resilience,” favored by 38.9% of participants, as shown in Table 5. The average satisfaction score was 95.56%.

## Discussion

This study highlights the increasing severity of stress-related issues, particularly among working adults, who often struggle to find time for rest and mental self-care, including practices like meditation. In this context, the involvement of monks in providing guidance and training in fundamental qualities for coping with the

**Table 5 Most appreciated activities’elements**

Most appreciated Activity element	Number (Participants)	Percentage
Introduction on “Smiling from the Heart” and cultivating compassion	12	16.7
Walking meditation for developing mindfulness, compassion, and courage	11	15.3
Lying meditation for emotional care	28	38.9
Group discussion and experience sharing	9	12.5
All activities	11	15.3
No response	1	1.4

challenges of modern life - whether from societal pressures, family responsibilities, or work demands - proves to be highly valuable.

For the study on the effects of mettā bhāvanā in Thailand, there has only been research in the form of qualitative studies conducted on a sample group practicing residential meditation at a monastery. The participants practiced mindfulness meditation (satipaṭṭhāna), which was extended to mettābhāvaāā, and the results were reported through interviews with insight meditation (vipassanā) practitioners, showing positive outcomes.<sup>(5)</sup>

The findings reflect the mental health challenges faced by working adults, who are in search of practical methods to maintain their emotional well-being in daily life. The “Smiling from the Heart” meditation practice, which focuses on cultivating loving-kindness (metta bhavana), emerges as an accessible and effective tool for enhancing mental health. Participants in the study reported that the practice helped them gain a

deeper understanding of life, cultivate mindfulness and concentration, experience relaxation, and foster positive energy. These benefits, in turn, empowered them to apply the practice in their daily lives, which is central to integrating Buddhist principles into living in the modern world.

The core of stress management lies in caring for one’s emotional health by accepting life’s realities, whether they bring joy or suffering, without resistance. However, the cultivation of mindfulness, awareness, compassion, and courage requires continuous practice to sustain mental resilience<sup>(5)</sup> over time.

While this study demonstrates that “Smiling from the Heart” meditation can serve as an effective foundation to emotional self-care, future research could delve deeper into how individual factors, such as age or specific types of distress, influence learning and engagement in the different meditation sessions. This could further enhance the design of activities that better meet the needs of participants. Should there be opportunities for

future research, refining data collection methods will be an area of focus.

In the future, the outcomes of the mettā bhāvanā course will be monitored, focusing on the continued practice of the students, in order to develop a tool for maintaining mental well-being, enabling individuals to face the suffering that arises in daily life on their own.<sup>(10)</sup>

#### Study Limitations:

- The data collection for participant applications and post-activity evaluations was conducted separately, making it impossible to link individual data between the two phases.

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## ผลของการเจริญเมตตาภาวนาคด้วยการยิ้มจากหัวใจที่มีต่อการนำไปปรับใช้ เพื่อลดความทุกข์ในชีวิตประจำวัน

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### บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยเชิงพรรณานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาผลของการเจริญเมตตาภาวนา รูปแบบยิ้มจากหัวใจ ที่สามารถประยุกต์ใช้เพื่อการดูแลคุณภาพใจในชีวิตประจำวันได้ ประชากรที่ศึกษาคือ ผู้ที่มีความเครียดหรือทุกข์ และ/หรือผู้ที่สนใจการเจริญเมตตาภาวนาทัวไป โดยสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจง เป็นผู้สมัครเข้าร่วมกิจกรรมภาวนาด้วยหัวใจอันประเสริฐยิ้มจากหัวใจ ที่ศูนย์เรียนรู้สุขภาวะ สสส. 122 คน และตอบแบบสำรวจ จำนวน 72 คน โดยกิจกรรมจัด 4 รอบ รอบละ 1 วัน การฝึกเมตตาภาวนา ประกอบด้วย การฝึกยิ้มจากหัวใจ การเดินภาวนา การนอนภาวนา และการแผ่เมตตา นอกจากนี้ ได้มีช่วงเวลาสำหรับการซักถามและแบ่งปันประสบการณ์ เก็บข้อมูลจากการกรอกใบสมัคร และการตอบแบบสำรวจหลังจบกิจกรรม วิเคราะห์ข้อมูล โดยใช้สถิติ ความถี่ ร้อยละ ฐานนิยม และวิเคราะห์ความแตกต่างระหว่างรอบกิจกรรมด้วย Chi-square ผลการศึกษา ตัวอย่างจำนวน 122 คน ส่วนใหญ่เป็นวัยทำงาน อายุช่วง 40-59 ปี มีความทุกข์ในการใช้ชีวิต ร้อยละ 92.6 ความทุกข์ส่วนใหญ่คือ หดพลังจากการทำงาน มีความทุกข์เฉลี่ย 2 เรื่องต่อคน ตัวอย่างที่เข้าร่วมกิจกรรมและตอบแบบสำรวจจำนวน 72 คน มีความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับประโยชน์ของการฝึกเมตตาภาวนายิ้มจากหัวใจนี้ คือ ได้ฝึกการยิ้มจากหัวใจ มีประสบการณ์ทบทวนตนเอง เข้าใจตนเองและผู้อื่น ได้ฝึกสติและสมาธิ ทำให้รู้สึกผ่อนคลาย และมีแนวโน้มนำไปปรับใช้ในชีวิตประจำวัน ซึ่งประโยชน์ทุกข้อมีคะแนนในระดับมากที่สุด เกินร้อยละ 75.0 และไม่มีความแตกต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติในแต่ละรอบกิจกรรม ( $p > 0.05$ ) กิจกรรมย่อยที่ประทับใจที่สุดที่มีคะแนนระดับมากที่สุด คือ ช่วงการฝึกนอนภาวนา (ร้อยละ 38.9) เครื่องมือการดูแลคุณภาพใจเป็นวิธีการลดความเครียด และความทุกข์ที่เป็นปัญหาสำคัญในปัจจุบัน การเจริญเมตตาภาวนา ยิ้มจากหัวใจนี้ หากมีการฝึกฝนและบ่มเพาะต่อเนื่อง ก็จะสามารถดูแลคุณภาพใจได้อย่างมั่นคง

**คำสำคัญ:** เมตตาภาวนา; ยิ้มจากหัวใจ; ความทุกข์