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Development of Social Psychology through the Dhammapada

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ABSTRACT

The Dhammapada, one of the most revered texts in the Buddhist tradition, offers profound insights into the nature of human mind, social relationships, and collective well-being. This article examines the development of social psychology through the lens of the Dhammapada by exploring how its teachings address fundamental social psychological concepts such as social cognition, attitude formation, intergroup relations, prosocial behavior, and emotional regulation. The study argues that the Dhammapada provides an early framework for understanding social behavior that predates and complements modern social psychological theories. By analyzing selected verses with their Pāli references, this article demonstrates that the Dhammapada's teachings on mind, self, and social interaction offer valuable perspectives for contemporary social psychology. The findings suggest that integrating Buddhist psychological insights with modern social psychology can enrich both theoretical understanding and practical applications in promoting individual and social well-being.

Introduction

Social psychology, as a scientific discipline, emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the goal of understanding how individuals think, feel, and behave in social contexts (Allport, 1954). The field has since developed numerous theories explaining phenomena such as social perception, attitude change, group dynamics, prejudice, and prosocial behavior. However, the fundamental questions that social psychology addresses—questions about human nature, social relationships, and the causes of suffering and happiness in social life—have been contemplated for millennia in various philosophical and religious traditions.

The Dhammapada, a collection of 423 verses organized into 26 chapters (vagga) within the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, stands as one of the most significant early Buddhist texts. Traditionally dated to

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the third century BCE, the Dhammapada is revered as the "Handbook of Buddhists" and contains the essential teachings of the Buddha on ethical conduct, mental training, and wisdom. The text's verses address the nature of mind, the causes of suffering, the cultivation of wholesome qualities, and the path to liberation—topics that bear remarkable relevance to contemporary social psychology.

The opening verses of the Dhammapada establish the foundational principle that mind precedes all mental states and that thought shapes human experience: "Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā" (Dhammapada 1-2). This assertion that mental processes determine the quality of human experience resonates with modern social cognition research, which emphasizes the role of cognitive processes in shaping social perception and behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 2021).

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the intersections between Buddhist psychology and modern psychological science. Vithakshi (2024) investigated the nature of mind with special reference to the Citta Vagga of the Dhammapada, noting that the mind's functioning determines whether individuals pursue wholesome or unwholesome attainments in social life. Subedi (2025) examined the significance of mastering the mind in the Dhammapada Pāli, arguing that mind control enhances individual well-being and contributes to the construction of a harmonious society. Janinda (2019) conducted a Buddhist socio-psychological study of happiness as reflected in the Sukkavagga of the Dhammapada, exploring how Buddhist ideas may contribute to the fields of sociology and psychology.

Empirical research has also demonstrated the psychological impact of engaging with the Dhammapada. A study by Lê Khánh Hà (2025) found that exposure to selected verses from the Dhammapada activates cognitive processes including personal association, stereotype recognition, cognitive restructuring, and the development of self-awareness and metacognition. Similarly, research conducted at Dongguk University revealed that reading the Dhammapada helps students reflect on their desires, escape negative feelings of social comparison, and establish themselves as masters of their own minds.

This article aims to contribute to this emerging body of scholarship by systematically examining how the Dhammapada addresses key themes in social psychology. The article is organized into five sections, each focusing on a specific social psychological concept and its corresponding Dhammapada teachings with Pāli references. Through this analysis, the article demonstrates that the Dhammapada offers a comprehensive framework for understanding social behavior that complements and enriches modern social psychological theory.

Social Cognition: The Mind as the Forerunner of Social Experience

Social cognition refers to the processes by which individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to social information. The Dhammapada's opening verses establish a foundational principle that aligns remarkably with this concept. The text declares:

"Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā; manasā ce paduṭṭhena, bhāsati vā karoti vā; tato naṃ dukkhamanveti, cakkaṃva vahato padaṃ."

"Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts, suffering follows him like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox." (Dhammapada 1)

"Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā; manasā ce pasannena, bhāsati vā karoti vā; tato naṃ sukhamanveti, chāyāva anapāyinī."

"Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow."(Dhammapada 2)

These verses establish the centrality of mental processes in shaping human experience—a premise that underlies contemporary social cognition research. The Dhammapada suggests that social reality is constructed through mental processes, anticipating the social constructionist perspectives that emerged in twentieth-century psychology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The text further emphasizes the importance of mental training:

"Phandanaṃ capalaṃ cittaṃ, dūrakkhaṃ dunnivārayaṃ; ujuṃ karoti medhāvī, usukārova tejanaṃ."

"The flickering, fickle mind, difficult to guard, difficult to control—the wise person straightens it as a fletcher straightens an arrow."(Dhammapada 33)

This verse highlights the malleability of cognitive processes and the possibility of training the mind—a concept that parallels modern cognitive behavioral approaches to modifying maladaptive thought patterns (Beck, 2011). The Dhammapada's emphasis on mindfulness and mental cultivation provides an early framework for understanding how cognitive processes shape social perception and behavior.

The Self and Social Identity: Understanding the Nature of Self

The concept of self is central to social psychology, encompassing self-concept, self-esteem, and social identity. The Dhammapada offers a distinctive perspective on the nature of self through the doctrine of anattā (non-self). The text challenges attachment to self-concept:

"Attā hi attano nātho, ko hi nātho paro siyā; attanā hi sudantena, nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ."

"The self is the master of the self; for who else could be the master? With the self well-controlled, one finds a master that is hard to find." (Dhammapada 160)

"Attanāva kataṃ pāpaṃ, attanā saṃkilissati; attanā akataṃ pāpaṃ, attanāva visujjhati; suddhi asuddhi paccattaṃ, nāñño aññaṃ visodhaye."

"By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another." (Dhammapada 165)

These verses emphasize personal responsibility while simultaneously pointing toward the absence of a permanent, unchanging self. This paradoxical teaching—that the self is both the agent of action and ultimately empty of inherent existence—has profound implications for social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The Dhammapada warns against identification with social roles and status:

"Na jatāhi na gottena, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo; yamhi saccañca dhammo ca, so sucī so ca brāhmaṇo."

"Not by matted hair, nor by family, nor by birth does one become a brahmin; but one in whom there is truth and righteousness—that one is pure, that one is a brahmin." (Dhammapada 393)

This verse challenges social identity based on birth or social category, advocating instead for identity based on ethical and mental qualities. The Dhammapada's critique of conventional social distinctions anticipates contemporary social psychological research on prejudice, stereotyping, and the social construction of identity (Fiske, 1998). Research has shown that engagement with the Dhammapada can help individuals move beyond negative social comparisons and establish more balanced relationships with others.

Intergroup Relations and Conflict Resolution

Intergroup relations and conflict resolution are major areas of social psychological inquiry. The Dhammapada provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and resolving social conflict. The text famously declares:

"Na hi verena verāni, sammantīdha kudācanaṃ; averena ca sammanti, esa dhammo sanantano."

"Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; by non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law." (Dhammapada 5)

This verse presents a fundamental principle of conflict resolution that resonates with modern theories of intergroup contact and reconciliation (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The Dhammapada teaches that responding to hostility with hostility perpetuates conflict, while responding with non-hatred—understood as loving-kindness (mettā)—can transform relationships. As one scholar observed, "hatred does not stop because of more hatred. Instead, hatred only stops when it is displaced by love".

The text further elaborates on the causes of social conflict:

"Kodhaṃ jahe vippajaheyya mānaṃ, saṃyojanaṃ sabbamatikkameyya; taṃ nāmarūpasmiṃ asajjamānaṃ, akiñcanaṃ nānupatanti dukkhā."

"Let one give up anger, let one abandon pride, let one overcome all fetters. Sufferings do not befall one who is not attached to name-and-form, who is unattached to anything." (Dhammapada 221)

The Dhammapada identifies anger and pride as primary causes of social discord. Anger (dosa) is recognized as one of the causes of social conflict, while loving-kindness (adosa) is the way to prevent it. Similarly, ignorance (moha) causes social conflict, while wisdom (amoha) prevents it. This analysis of the psychological roots of social problems anticipates modern social psychological research on the causes of intergroup conflict (Dovidio et al., 2010).

The Dhammapada also offers practical guidance for social harmony:

"Sabbā disā anuparigamma cetasā, neva labbhaṃ piyataro attanā kvaci; evaṃ piyo puthu attā paresaṃ, yo attano piyo na so paraṃ hiṃse."

"Having traversed all quarters with the mind, one finds no one dearer than oneself. Likewise, others hold themselves dear; therefore, one who loves oneself should not harm others." (Dhammapada 157)

This verse provides a psychological basis for the ethic of non-harm, grounded in the recognition that all beings share the same desire for happiness and well-being—a principle that aligns with social psychological research on empathy and perspective-taking (Batson, 2011).

Prosocial Behavior and Compassion

Prosocial behavior—actions intended to benefit others—is a central concern of social psychology. The Dhammapada extensively addresses the cultivation of compassion, loving-kindness, and altruistic action. The text teaches:

"Sukhaṃ yāva jarā sīlaṃ, sukhaṃ saddhā patiṭṭhitā; sukhaṃ paññāya paṭilābho, pāpānaṃ akaraṇaṃ sukhaṃ."

"Virtue is pleasant until old age; faith is pleasant when established; the acquisition of wisdom is pleasant; the non-doing of evil is pleasant." (Dhammapada 333)

The Dhammapada emphasizes that ethical conduct and compassion are not merely social obligations but sources of personal happiness. This understanding of the mutual benefit of prosocial behavior aligns with social psychological research on the relationship between prosocial behavior and well-being (Post, 2005).

The text provides guidance on how to interact with others:

"Yathā pi bhamaro pupphaṃ, vaṇṇagandhaṃ aheṭhayaṃ; paṭiṇāti paleti ca, evaṃ gāme muni care."

"Just as a bee gathers nectar from a flower without harming its color or fragrance, so should the sage wander in the village." (Dhammapada 49)

This metaphor illustrates the principle of non-harming interaction—engaging with others in ways that do not exploit or damage them. The verse has been applied in sustainability education, where it demonstrates how emotions like empathy, compassion, and gratitude can shift learning from technical problem-solving toward deeper relational awareness.

The Dhammapada also addresses the relationship between self-care and care for others:

"Attānameva paṭhamaṃ, patirūpe nivesaye; athaññamanusāseyya, na kilisseyya paṇḍito."

"One should first establish oneself in what is proper; then one may teach others. The wise person should not be defiled." (Dhammapada 158)

This verse emphasizes that genuine prosocial behavior emerges from self-cultivation. The Dhammapada teaches that one cannot effectively help others without first developing one's own ethical and mental qualities—a principle that resonates with social psychological research on the conditions that promote authentic altruism (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989).

Emotional Regulation and Social Well-being

Emotional regulation—the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences—is crucial for social functioning. The Dhammapada offers extensive guidance on regulating negative emotions and cultivating positive mental states. The text teaches:

"Akodhanaṃ ye damayanti, kodhaṃ ye na vijānanti; te vedaguno janā, kodhaṃ te na vijānanti."

"Those who subdue anger, who are free from anger—those are the knowers of the Vedas; they do not know anger." (Dhammapada 221)

The Dhammapada provides practical strategies for managing anger:

"Kodhaṃ jahe, vippajaheyya mānaṃ, saṃyojanaṃ sabbamatikkameyya; taṃ nāmarūpasmiṃ asajjamānaṃ, akiñcanaṃ nānupatanti dukkhā."

"Let one give up anger, let one abandon pride, let one overcome all fetters. Sufferings do not befall one who is not attached to name-and-form, who is unattached to anything." (Dhammapada 221)

The text further teaches the transformation of negative emotions:

"Akodhena jine kodhaṃ, asādhuṃ sādhunā jine; jine kadariyaṃ dānena, saccenālikavādinaṃ."

"Conquer anger by non-anger; conquer evil by good; conquer stinginess by generosity; conquer the liar by truth." (Dhammapada 223)

This verse presents a systematic approach to emotional transformation—replacing negative emotions with their positive counterparts. This approach anticipates modern cognitive-behavioral techniques for emotion regulation, which emphasize replacing maladaptive thoughts and emotions with adaptive alternatives (Gross, 2015).

The Dhammapada also emphasizes the social benefits of emotional regulation:

"Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā; sacittapariyodapanaṃ, etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ."

"The non-doing of all evil, the undertaking of what is good, the purification of one's mind—this is the teaching of the Buddhas." (Dhammapada 183)

This verse presents emotional and ethical purification as the foundation of both individual and social well-being. Research has confirmed that the Dhammapada's teachings on mind control can lead to tangible improvements in various aspects of life and contribute to the construction of a harmonious society.

Conclusion

This article has examined the development of social psychology through the lens of the Dhammapada, demonstrating that this ancient Buddhist text offers profound insights into fundamental social psychological phenomena. The analysis of selected verses with Pāli references has revealed that the Dhammapada addresses social cognition, self and identity, intergroup relations, prosocial behavior, and emotional regulation in ways that anticipate and complement modern social psychological theory.

The Dhammapada's foundational teaching that mind precedes all mental states provides an early framework for understanding how cognitive processes shape social experience—a perspective that aligns with contemporary social cognition research. Its teachings on the nature of self challenge conventional notions of social identity while emphasizing personal responsibility—insights that enrich social identity theory. The text's guidance on conflict resolution through non-hatred and compassion offers practical principles for addressing intergroup conflict that resonate with modern approaches to reconciliation.

The Dhammapada's emphasis on prosocial behavior and emotional regulation provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individual mental cultivation contributes to social well-being. As Subedi (2025) observed, the cultivation of a controlled mind not only enhances individual well-being but also contributes to the construction of a harmonious society. The empirical research reviewed in this article confirms that engagement with the Dhammapada can activate cognitive processes conducive to psychological healing and social development.

In conclusion, the Dhammapada represents what Haidt described as one of the greatest psychological works ever written. Its integration of psychological insight with ethical and spiritual guidance offers a holistic approach to understanding and improving human social behavior. Future research should continue to explore the intersections between Buddhist psychology and modern social psychology, investigating how ancient wisdom can inform contemporary theory and practice in promoting individual and social well-being.

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