

A Comparison of the Western Concept of Emotional Intelligence with Buddhist Principles

- Watunyoo Suwannaset
- Paranee Svastdi-Xuto
- Krisana Kimlengchiu
- Rapin Chuchuen

Abstract: *This article introduces readers to various views of what is known in Western Society as Emotional Intelligence. It then goes on to compare the concept of Emotional Intelligence with Buddhist teachings and philosophies. These similarities are then explored in greater depth. The article finally concludes by highlighting how alike this Western concept is with Buddhism.*

While emotional intelligence is regarded as a primary tool for human resource development in today's society and in a global economy, there has been some beliefs that emotional intelligence from the western point of view does, in fact, share some similarities with Buddhist principles. Some said that the concept might have been firstly developed in Asia but adapted to suit western culture. Dechkhong (2003), for example, claimed that Dr Daniel Goleman who introduced emotional intelligence to Americans was trained in meditation in Myanmar and adapted this teaching into awareness in his interpretation and pronouncements regarding emotional intelligence. Joungtrakul (2007) relatively claimed that Thai wisdom recently has been exported out of the country to be studied in many other parts of the World. It is important in this study not to take any side but at least to examine whether the concepts of emotional intelligence in western society are somehow trained and taught at the same way in differing cultures and societies. To compare the similarities between the Thai understanding of emotional intelligence with the western view, this article, raises some Buddhist teachings relating to the western view of emotional intelligence. Firstly the article presents how the western concept of emotional intelligence has been developed, and then by presenting examples of Buddhist teachings similar to the emotional intelligence components trained in western society. The reader can then draw their own conclusion as to whether one came first and was then adapted by the other or whether they are two different concepts which have similarities.

Keywords : Emotional Intelligence, Buddhist principles

1) The notion of western emotional intelligence

The Western concept Emotional Intelligence which has been acknowledged as an insightful social competency required in today's global society has become a matter of public interest within various fields – education, psychology and human development (Weinberger 2002; Chan, 2002; Karim, 2009). Whilst emotional intelligence has been expressively studied and promoted in western society, this similar knowhow is believed to have existed and taught in Buddhist principles practiced by Buddhist followers in many countries for many years (Ellis, 1991). The premise of emotional intelligence in western view is presented as follows:

When psychologists started writing and thinking about people's basic intelligence, they mainly focused on cognitive aspects such as memory and problem-solving (Cherniss, 2001). Later on scholars from various fields have begun recognizing the importance of people's non-cognitive aspects. For example, Thorndike (1920) viewing intelligence as a range of people's different capabilities distinguished other intelligences from cognitive abilities and claimed that the ways we interact with others should be regarded as 'social intelligence'. At least 3 separate areas of human competences including 1) cognition, 2) affecting, and 3) willingness were often found reviewed (Hilgard, 1980 as cited in Parkison and Colman, 1995). In fact, the value of non-intellective intelligence has been widely studied. This includes Wechsler (1958) defining general intelligence as "The capacity of the individual to act purposefully" (p.7) and says success and adaptation is dependent on non-cognitive aspects of intelligence. In 1983, Howard Gardner began to write about "multiple intelligence (Alder, 2000). Cherniss (2001) proposed that "intrapersonal" and "interpersonal" intelligences were as important as the type of intelligence typically measured by intelligence (IQ) and related tests. In addition, Sternberg's identification of practical intelligence elucidates that personal goals are accomplished by adapting to, changing or even selecting a new environment (Sternberg, 1997). Parkison and Colman (1995) began to assert that 'emotional competence' is one of the most important non-cognitive competences. Salovey and Mayer (as cited in Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2004) based on the concept of multiple intelligence, coined the term 'Emotional Intelligence'. However, emotional intelligence becomes a major topic of interest in scientific circles as well as in the lay public since the publication of a bestseller by the same name by Goleman in 1995 (Bar-On, 2006, P.1).

Emotional intelligence is a different way of being smart. It includes knowing what your feelings are and using your feelings to make good decisions in life. It's being able to manage distressing moods well and control impulses; It's being motivated and remaining hopeful and optimistic when you have setbacks in working toward goals. It's empathy; knowing what people around you are feeling. And it's social skills—getting along well with other people, managing emotions in relationships, being able to persuade or lead others. (Goleman, 1995 as cited in O'Neil, 1996, p 6)

The term has been found prescribed slightly by scholars in the field of psychology. For instance, while Weisinger (1998) illustrated that emotional intelligence is the intelligent use of emotion to help guide an individual's behavior and thinking towards enhanced results, Martinez (1997 as cited in Tischler et al., 2002, p.124) defines it in terms of "an array of emotional and social knowledge and abilities that influence our overall ability to effectively cope with environmental demands and pressures". Emotional intelligence has also been described by Mayer and Salovey (1997 as cited in Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2004) as "the ability to perceive and express emotions, to understand and use them, and to manage emotions so as to foster personal growth" (p. 506). These show that EI was actually detailed based on the specific competencies it encompasses. Bar-On (2000), for example, defined and outlined five different domains comprising 1) intrapersonal skills, 2) interpersonal skills, 3) adaptability, 4) stress management, and 5) general mood. Goleman (as cited in Bar-On, 2006), moreover, described 5 critical skills of EI, including 1) knowing your emotions, 2) managing your own emotions, 3) motivating yourself, 4) recognizing emotions in others, and 5) handling relationships.

To compare the similarities of the Buddhist views of emotional intelligence and the western concept of emotional intelligence, some relating viewpoints concerning cultures are presented below:

According to Joungrakul (2007), the different cultures and lifestyles of both western and Thai people regarding their thinking and perspectives on life, in that most Thai's practice Buddhist principles, which particularly involve compromises and understanding the need for living in ways that Thai people have learned to give, forgive, forget when treated badly because they follow what is known as the middle path. Thai people also value the importance of 'Kreng Jai' where they always repay kindness, avoid confrontation and direct criticism of others, to avoid them losing face. This makes for very different cultural concepts between Thai and Western people. In Western society, on the other hand, they have a culture where you must always win or lose, and things are always either black or white, right or wrong and where there is little compromising. This may be because of the environment in which they live, often being faced with geographical conditions where survival is paramount. (E.g. long hard winters, where they have to fight for survival may lead to them reproducing this characteristic to their lives in general). Lotchananoon and Ruyaporn (2000), however, explained the problems of the Thai lifestyles being continued in today's global environment that since Thai people view westerners success and so use their theories, processes and principles to achieve similar success, but because these are alien to beliefs Thais have always followed, chaos develops in their lives. Many Thais have realized that tracking every Western philosophy is often difficult. Lotchananoon and Ruyaporn (2000) argue that emotional intelligence has actually been a part of the Thai culture and lifestyle for at least 3 reasons. Firstly Thais have always understood each other and helped each other, recognizing the importance of harmonious living. Secondly, emotional intelligence is actually expressed in Buddhist philosophy and principles which have always been of paramount importance to Thais for many centuries. In other words, the Lord Buddha has always taught people how to follow the 'middle' way (Ma-chi-ma-pa-ti-pa-ta), not going to extremes or not doing enough, using kindness to suppress anger and releasing anger by showing love, help and caring instead. Third, Thai people practice the sufficiency economy proposed by the King Rama 9, allowing Thai people to be aware that enough is enough without being too materialistic in their expectations for living. Chulacharit (2005) supports the Thai version and wisdom regarding Emotional Intelligence that it has been taught and practiced inside the Thai heart for a long time. Thais have been taught to try not to do bad things and to focus on doing only good things to help our hearts be purified and clear with a peaceful mind.

2) Buddhist teaching principles identifying with the western concept of emotional intelligence

When discussing how the Thai culture has embraced Emotional Intelligence and taught Thai people to practice it in their everyday living, Payotto (as cited in Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Public Health, Thailand, 2001) claims that such displays of goodness and kindness (behaviors) have become so familiar to Thai people that they do such things naturally and it has become embedded into their personalities (minds). Developing people's minds by teaching about kindness, sharing, generosity, helping and caring overcomes human temptation (in Thai known as 'ki-late'). Any emotion felt is realized simply and naturally by Thai people.

To have a close investigation, the following points present some similar components of emotional intelligence expounded by Goleman, who made emotional intelligence become well-known in western society, with Buddhist teachings.

Knowing your emotions:

While the western concept of emotional intelligence suggests people recognize and understand emotions in oneself, emotional awareness or ‘Sa-ti’ in Buddhist teaching advises Thais to concentrate on what they are doing, living their life consciously and eliminate interference. Consequently, emotions arising can possibly be recognized and dealt with (Dechkhong 2000; 2002). Moreover, Buddhist philosophy such as ‘Sa-ti-tat-tan-see’, not only guides people to understand, be aware of life changes and not to be overwhelmed by them, but also involves understanding emotions, both what causes them and how to respond to them. Buddhist awareness advises Thai practitioners to recognize the facts of life concerned with cause and effect – this being an unavoidable natural principle. Sansiri (2006), for instance, described that by realizing the fact that everyone must die, or sickness can be treated, as a natural phenomenon, it helps us to avoid or control our overwhelming feelings to some degree.

Managing your emotions:

While western theories of Emotional Intelligence aim to train people to watch their emotions and to react accordingly, Thai Buddhist version of emotional intelligence trains people to watch their thoughts. Chulacharit (2005) explains three ways of managing thoughts, from a Thai perspective comprising 1) awareness of thinking, 2) preparedness to stop bad thoughts, and 3) management of daily thinking to always consist of good thoughts. Moreover, some Buddhist teachings remind us of the benefits of being conscious, being kind and always helping, sharing and caring about others. This allows Thai Buddhists to slow down their unproductive emotions and overcome their temptations (in Thai known as ‘ki-late’). Since various thoughts and emotions could arise at any time, letting distasteful thoughts in could result in unclear emotions. Being aware of negative thoughts developing, emotions and actions causing suffering to both themselves and others can somehow be controlled. It could almost say that the intelligence of emotion which is produced from Thai moral intelligence assists one to stop thinking badly about others. It encourages people to think, speak and do only good things and as a result their minds are clear and purified. Emotionally Intelligent people, in the Thai perspective, therefore are those who are ashamed when they do or think bad things and focus on doing good things to make up for it and don’t cause suffering for themselves or others, not even having negative thoughts. This is related to some profound statements made by the Lord Buddha. A good example which most Buddhist Thais undertake to manage their own emotions is strictly practicing ‘Sil-5’, which is the five precepts proposed by the Lord Buddha. It is regarded as an excellent code of morals encouraging Thais to discipline themselves and care for others by avoiding killing, stealing, committing adultery, lying, and not taking intoxicating liquor (Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc., n.d.). It can be seen that a person who lacks the discipline in their minds would not be able to consider what is proper or improper, what should be said or left unsaid, what should be seen or not seen. As a result, he is prone to choose or engage himself in the wrong acts which lead to destruction. In the same vein, being aware of not doing these ‘A-ku-sol’ – wrong behaviors which may upset, hurt or disturb self and other people’, their minds can be morally managed, calmed, and purified.

Motivating yourself :

While ‘the Basis of Power and Potency’ or ‘It-thi-bath-see’ – being satisfied with things, paying attention to what and how you are doing things as well as always striving to make

it the best, illustrates the value of being patient and working hard toward achievements, Thais have also been taught about 'Tri-lak', and 'Mor-ra-na-nu-sa-ti' reminding people regarding facts concerning changes in life and death (Dechkhong, 2000, 2005; Sansiri, 2006). Being trained about Tri-Lak (a-ni-cha, took-tha, a-nat-ta), Thai Buddhist practitioners are suggested to live their life consciously, realize uncertainty occurring in life, be motivated to establishing life goals and do not delay achieving them. Moreover, there are Buddhist principles relating to being patient about achievements, including 'A-ri-ya-sat-see' (Chan-ta, Wi-ri-ya, Chi-ta, Wi-mang-sa). These teachings explain that ambitions including being satisfied with things, paying attention to what and how you are doing things to always strive to make it the best. Also awareness needs one to be patient regarding goal setting. Moreover, when talking about being patient, 'Khan-ti' in Buddhist means patience or maintaining one's normal state of mind. Whether or not he is shaken by temptation or an unpleasant stimulus, he remains steadfast. Being patient or 'Khan-ti' in Buddhism highlights the value of being patient and maintaining one's normal state of mind. Phrabhavanaviriyakhun (2007) supported this explaining that no matter what duty one undertakes, his success relies not only upon his level of wisdom, but also his patience to apply his wisdom to its intended purposes. (A manual of peace 303 as cited in Phrabhavanaviriyakhun, 2007)

Recognizing emotion in others:

The fourth component of emotional competence acquires high emotionally intelligent people to have ability to diagnose other peoples feeling. This matches with one of the Buddhist principles taught in Thailand called 'Phom-we-han-see'. The premise promoting loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, advises people to be kind, repay the kindness of others and wish others to recover quickly from suffering is one of the important Buddhist principles for recognition of others emotions. The quality and intelligence of emotions displayed or felt, from a Thai perspective, is therefore, a result of what people think and often imagine where it is necessary to beware of our own thoughts and interpretation of what people may or may not mean. To recognize other people's feelings, Thai Buddhist followers are advised to observe and interpret body language, so that they can consider whether assistance could be offered to people in need (Dechkhong, 2002). Being taught to develop the sense of caring for other people and having good intentions towards others, Thais always easily spot the needs of others and help them when an opportunity arises.

Handling relationships:

Some examples of Buddhist principles promoting the concept of handling relationships in western emotional intelligence include 'Phom-wi-han-see' which, as mentioned previously, can also represent empathizing and showing well-intentioned kindness and wanting others to recover quickly from suffering as well as genuinely wanting to repay the kindness of others (Dechkhong, 2000; 2002). In addition, 'Sang-ka-ha-wat-tu-see', or helping each other, in Buddhism, reassures Thai Buddhist practitioners to 1) share grief and suffering, 2) talk to others in a kind way, using nice words, and make them feel satisfied and comfortable, 3) teach and be responsible for the actions of family members, and 4) perform their best as mother, father, son to ensure the benefit of all (Payotto as cited in Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Public Health, Thailand, 2001). Another related example could be seen from the way most Thai speak to each other. Since they try to avoid upsetting others by saying directly what they may be thinking and thus leave what they say open to

interpretation. In Western society, in contrast, people are more inclined to speak their minds and not say things which are open to interpretation. Furthermore, according to Payotto as cited in Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health, Public Health, Thailand, (2001), since Thais are always taught to practice doing acts of goodness and kindness in their everyday living, so that they can do such things naturally, and it becomes embedded into their personalities (minds). Being trained to recognize the importance of harmonious living and being kind people who always smile, understand and offer help to others, upsetting other people's feelings can be circumvented (Lotchananoon and Ruyaporn, 2000). To maintain good relationships with others, even though, Thais were treated badly, Buddhist teachings still convinced them to give, forgive, and forget (Boonyarit et al., 2012).

To sum up, the concept of Emotional Intelligence was recently valued by groups of psychologists envisaging influence in unleashing people's non-cognitive intelligence. The five domains of emotional intelligence – monitoring our own emotions, managing and expressing moods appropriately, putting forward their set goals, perceiving other people's feelings, and strengthening relationships with others were also found taught and learned as parts of Buddhist principles which have been passed on from generation to generation in Thai society and through Thai ways of life. The similar concept and principles have promoted 1) the facts of life and the best way to live with nature more than overcoming our own suffering or striving for happiness, and 2) the awareness to control thoughts by focusing on doing good things and avoiding generating bad thoughts. This is to ensure that actions resulting from their thoughts are good not only for themselves but also for others. A number of Buddhist principles taught in Thai presenting the similar concept of western emotional intelligence are 'Ma-chi-ma-pa-ti-pa-ta', 'Sa-ti' and 'Sa-ti-tat-tan-see', 'SIL-HA', 'It-thi-bath-see', 'Tri-lak', 'Mor-ra-na-nu-sa-ti', 'A-ri-ya-sat-see', 'Khan-ti', 'Phom-we-han-see', and 'Sang-ka-ha-wat-tu-see'. This article also highlights that the Thai concept of Emotional Intelligence involves not only self-protection but also proactively doing good things, particularly for others. The Thai version of emotional intelligence, as a result, focuses on helping practitioners to understand the facts of life, developing pure minds, producing good quality thoughts, being aware of and dealing with disturbing thoughts effectively.

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