



Understanding Buddhist Culture: A Content Analysis of the Dhammapada and Mapping to Universal Values

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Abstract

The Dhammapada contains the essence of Buddhism and understanding the hidden values within the text will enable us to understand Buddhist culture. A team of three students performed content analysis on the Dhammapada. Each of the 423 stanzas of the Dhammapada was coded against a set of 58 universal values. The aggregate scores from the students' analysis for the entire scripture were then compared to Buddhist experts' ratings of the values proposed by the Dhammapada. The coding process by students was fairly consistent and the value rating done by students' content analysis matched well with the experts' understanding of the values of the Dhammapada. Hence, the study illustrates how value-coding scriptures is a reliable and valid method to understand the essence of a sacred text.

Keywords:

Content analysis, values, Buddhism, Dhammapada.

Introduction:

There are numerous ways of understanding the culture of a set of people. One may study racial differences, geographic differences, historical events, legends, or political dynamics to know the culture and customs of a group of people. One of the best ways to appreciate the culture and worldview of a group of people is to understand their religion, which is best understood by reading the scriptures. This paper has three main objectives. First, to identify if the concept of values can provide a template for understanding cultures. Second, to see if the process

of content analysis provides meaningful interpretations of religious scriptures. Third, to understand the basics of Buddhism – a major world religion.

In order to address these research objectives, I did a content analysis of the Dhammapada and mapped each verse of the text to universal values. Later I compared the results of the content analysis to the views of Buddhist scholars. Based on this, I show that content analysis and mapping to universal values can be an effective technique for understanding the basics of any text or belief system.

In the next few sections, I start by describing the basics of beliefs and value systems and how they capture the essence of an individual or a group's core ideology. Next, I describe the process of content analysis and its usefulness in understanding the main thesis of a text. Next, I describe Buddhism and its key tenets leading to the main research question – Can we understand the culture of a group of people by analyzing their scripture? The further sections describe the method and findings.

Beliefs and Value Systems

A belief is an understanding that something is true, often describing a connection between two things or between a thing and its characteristics (Sproull, 1981). Rokeach (1968) classifies beliefs into three types depending on their nature: (i) Descriptive beliefs, which may describe something as true or false, correct or incorrect e.g. I believe that the sun rises in the east (ii) Evaluative beliefs, which assess something as good or bad e.g. I believe this ice cream is good (iii) Prescriptive beliefs, which advocate a certain course of action or a certain state of existence as desirable or undesirable e.g. I believe one should be religious. The third kind of beliefs viz. prescriptive or exhortatory beliefs are also known as values. Values are criteria for guiding behaviours and for developing opinions towards objects and situations for defending one's own and others' behaviours and opinions. Values are trans-situational, and they help us to judge behaviour and events and are hierarchically arranged by relative importance (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987).

Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) conceptualized values as cognitive interpretations of three fundamental needs: biological needs, interpersonal interactions, and social well-being. The defined values are an individual's understanding of a goal which reflects the individual's interests in a particular motivational domain. The goal could then be evaluated on a scale of importance on the extent to which it served as a guiding principle of life. The above definition has three variable parameters viz. the goal which could be terminal or instrumental, interests could be individualistic, collectivistic or both, and motivational domains. It is these motivational domains that Schwartz defines as the key to understanding the differences between individuals and groups of people. Schwartz identifies the ten motivational domains as power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security. All ten motivational domains represent the core values recognized around the world as validated in a cross-cultural study of five societies, which were substantially different viz. Australia, the United States of America, Hong Kong, Spain, and Finland (Schwartz and Bilsky, 1990).

A later study (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001) showed a high level of similarity in the hierarchical ranking of values across 13 nations. The values of benevolence, self-direction, and universalism were most important; power, tradition, and stimulation values were least important; and security, conformity, achievement, and hedonism were of average importance.

Schwartz (2005) explains the structure of the motivational domains as organized along two dimensions each with two contrasting values. One dimension consists of openness to change vs. conservation values. This dimension contrasts the values of self-direction and stimulation (which are based on expressing one's independence and favouring change) on the one hand and restricting one's self, submitting to authority, retaining traditions, and ensuring stability (security, conformity, and tradition) on the other hand. The second dimension contrasts 'self-enhancement' and 'self-transcendence' values. Self-enhancement is about pursuing one's own goals, success, and dominance (power and achievement). On the other hand, self-transcendence is about concern for others (universalism and benevolence). The value of hedonism has characteristics of both openness to change and self-enhancement.

A recent review of cross-cultural studies stresses the need to directly integrate the study of values and beliefs to better understand cultures (Goodwin, Williams, Snell Herzog, 2020). Since Schwartz's value system provides a universal set of principles, they can be effectively used to understand the nuances of a culture or a group of people.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method used to understand and categorize data for better interpretation (Harwood & Garry, 2003). Content analysis was first used more than 200 years ago to analyse patterns in news and media and has been applied to diverse fields since then. It has been used to analyze texts from newspapers and magazine articles, advertisements, political speeches, stories and hymns. In the field of organizational behaviour, the role of content analysis has been emphasized (Kabanoff, 1996) and has been used effectively in several studies (House et al., 1991; Tan & Wee, 2002) especially to analyze attitudes, opinions, and beliefs (Metzger, 2019).

In cross-cultural studies, one of the approaches to understanding a culture is by reading the religious, historical, and mythological literature of that culture. Content analysis has also been used in the study of religions specifically to understand the meaning of scriptures or sermons (Badzinski, Woods, & Nelson, 2021). In this paper, I attempt to see if I can apply content analysis to effectively glean the import of a religious text of a culture in terms of relative importance given to universal values.

Buddhism

Buddhism began with the enlightenment of the prince Siddhartha (subsequently known as the Buddha) around the 5th to 6th Century B.C.E. The early life of the Buddha was full of luxury like any other Indian prince. Around the age of 30, he encountered the realities of life in the form of old age, sickness, and death and he took it upon himself to discover the path towards the end of suffering for mankind. For a couple of years, he practised various austerities and finally, after his enlightenment, he chose a middle way between extreme materialism and

extreme austerity and called it the middle path. Buddha's first sermon at Benaras contains the essence of this teaching in the form of the four noble truths viz. life is suffering, attachment is the cause of suffering, it is possible to end suffering, and the noble eightfold path is the way to end all suffering. The noble eightfold path included, the following: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The power of the Buddha's message, coupled with missionary zeal of the monastic order and royal patronage saw the spread of Buddhism across Asia. Today Buddhism is one of the largest religions in the world with over 535 million followers comprising about nine percent of the world population of which an estimated 240,000 are in the United Kingdom (Harvey, 2021).

The entire Buddhist canon is comprised of the three Pitakas or baskets, viz. the Vinaya-pitaka, Sutta-pitaka, and Abhidhamma-pitaka. The Vinaya-Pitaka consists of texts that deal with the rules for the monks. The Sutta-Pitaka is a collection of discourses by the Buddha and his closest disciples. The Abhidhamma-pitaka consists of texts in which the principles of the Sutta Pitaka are arranged into a systematic framework to explain the philosophy and metaphysical principles of Buddhism.

The Sutta-pitaka is divided into five collections or Nikayas, viz. Digha Nikaya (long collection), Majjhima Nikaya (the middle-length collection), Samyutta Nikaya (the grouped collection), Anguttara Nikaya (the numerical collection), and Khuddaka Nikaya (the collection of small texts). The Dhammapada, which forms part of the Khuddaka Nikaya, is a Pali word that means "Words of Doctrine" or "Way of Truth." It is the most well-known text of Buddhism, consisting of simple aphoristic style teachings. As a text in the Khuddaka Nikaya ("Short Collection") of the Sutta Pitaka ("Basket of Discourse"), the Dhammapada contains 423 stanzas arranged in 26 chapters (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005).

In this study, the focus lies in the exploration of the salient values inherent in a culture through an analysis of its scripture. Hence an approach to the Dhammapada devoid of prior knowledge about Buddhism has been used, seeking to ascertain the utility of extracting salient values from the text as a means of gaining insights into the belief system of the people. The extent to which the salient values

extracted from our content analysis are congruent with the views of scholars on the salient beliefs of Buddhism, to that extent we will conclude that content analysis of scripture using universal values is a useful tool for analysis of culture.

Can we understand the culture of a group of people by analyzing their scripture?

The behaviour and culture of a group of people is a complex interplay of geographical, social, and historical forces. Even if scripture were to have an impact on society over the years, it would depend largely on what parts the people had chosen to focus on and what parts they had decided to ignore (Pryor, 1990). For example, the complex interplay of social and historical factors affecting organizational behaviour in India has been well studied. Sinha (1997) has shown how there have developed in India two sets of values – the traditionally idealized values and the operative values. The scriptures are the source of traditionally idealized values and while they may not be able to explain current behavior directly, they give us a glimpse of the most fundamental beliefs and life goals of people which are likely to be major drivers of their motivation and sources of inspiration. Krishnan (2003) explains that modernization has two aspects and that while changes take place to be in line with an increasing knowledge base, all societies move along paths shaped by their cultural heritages. Hence for us to be effective leaders of change, it is important to know what to change and what not to change. Since leadership involves making followers better human beings, leaders need to be able to distinguish between transformation that is along desirable lines (authentic transformation) and transformation that makes followers worse off (pseudo transformation). Traditional cultural values are inspirational end states and hence they provide us with a yardstick to distinguish authentic transformational leadership from pseudo-transformational leadership (Krishnan, 2003).

Methodology

The version of the Dhammapada used for this study was the translation from Pali by F. Max Muller which was part of Vol. X. of The Sacred Books of the East, published in 1881 by Oxford, The Clarendon Press. The translation was available

in soft copy format on the internet at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe10/index.htm>.

The text was first pasted onto an MS Excel sheet such that each row contained one verse. In certain instances, two verses were combined into one, and hence there was only one verse for two verse numbers. The classification scheme for the content analysis was the 57 values suggested by Schwartz with one exception. The value of ambition is defined by Schwartz as a combination of “hard-working” and “aspiring”. In the Indian traditions, both Hindu and Buddhist these are completely different values. The value of “hard-working” is desirable as indicated by verse numbers – 7, 21, 22, 23, 30, 112, 116, 144, 168, 226, 236, 238, 280, 282, 313, 366, and 375. On the other hand the value of “aspiration” is undesirable as indicated by verses numbers 73, and 216. Hence these two values cannot be clubbed together under a single heading and have been separated. The distinction between being “hardworking” and “aspiring” and hence the error of combining them in the value of “ambitious” has been illustrated in an empirical study (Mulla & Krishnan, 2011). Hence, in all, there were 58 values available for the classification of each verse.

Three persons (i.e., the author and two other persons) did the content analysis of the Dhammapada using the framework of the 58 values. One of the coders had a post-graduate degree in psychology, another had a post-graduate degree in management, and the third had a post-graduate diploma in education. None of the three coders had an expert knowledge of Buddhism. While going through each verse, the coders tried to identify which values were being positively suggested and which values were being negatively suggested or condemned by the text. A value that was positively suggested got a score of +1 while a value that was negatively suggested or condemned was given a score of -1. Two examples of the classification are shown below –

1. Chapter 17, Verse 231 says, “Beware of bodily anger, and control thy body! Leave the sins of the body, and with thy body practice virtue!” This sentence was marked as positively suggesting the value of “Self-discipline”.
2. Chapter 26, Verse 408 says, “Him I call indeed a Brāhmaṇa who utters true speech, instructive and free from harshness so that he offends no one.” This sentence was marked as positively suggesting the values of “Politeness” and “Honesty”.

Whenever a principle is explained and then its consequences are elaborated in other verses, the values illustrated in the original verse are repeated each time e.g. Chapter 4, verse 50 says "Not the perversities of others, not their sins of commission or omission, but his misdeeds and negligences should a sage take notice of." Here we consider the values of "inner harmony", "wisdom" and "forgiving". These same values are counted again in verse 51 – "Like a beautiful flower, full of colour, but without scent, are the fine but fruitless words of him who does not act accordingly." and verse 52 – "But, like a beautiful flower, full of colour and full of scent, are the fine and fruitful words of him who acts accordingly." The logic for doing this is that since the fundamental assumption of our content analysis is that frequency is a reflection of importance, we must capture all the values propagated in their full frequency. Thus we assume that if the authors of the original text, thought it fit to repeat a particular thought by simply modifying the sentence slightly they must have done so to emphasize that value.

Whenever two verses were combined in the translation, it has been assumed that in the original they were two incomplete thoughts e.g. 57, 58 and 87, 88, hence counting of values was done only once.

Out of 423 verses, 91 verses could not be classified into any of the values. This was either because they dealt with general terms such as "good" and "evil" (e.g. verses 15–18) or because they dealt with some metaphysical descriptions (e.g. verses 44 & 45) or because they dealt with outcomes of good or bad deeds (e.g. verses 55, 56, & 69).

Simultaneously while the coding was going on, I reached out to six experts in Buddhism. Two of the experts were senior researchers in Buddhist studies, one was a Buddhist monk, one was a Buddhist nun, and two were lay Buddhist practitioners. Each of the experts was provided with the list of 58 values and was told to rate each value on a scale of -1 to 7, where -1 meant that the value was opposed to the recommendations of the Dhammapada and 7 meant that the value was of supreme importance according to the Dhammapada.

Analysis

The coders each coded the 423 verses based on the 58 values. The scores for the 58 values across the 423 verses were then added together to yield consolidated scores across the text for each of the 58 values for both coders. The inter-rater reliability of the coded values across the three coders was checked and the Cronbach alpha was 0.89. I also tested the consistency of the coding across the three coders for each value. Twenty out of the 58 values had a reasonable consistency (Cronbach alpha > .40) and only those were used to calculate the average score for the value. The average scores for the twenty values rated by coders along with the Cronbach alphas are shown in Table 1.

The results of the experts' scores were compared and I checked the consistency across experts. Twenty-seven values of the 58 values had a reasonable consistency i.e., the range of scores was less than five points and only these 27 values were used in the further analysis. The average scores for the 27 values rated by experts are shown in Table 2.

I then standardized the scores for the content analysis and the expert ratings and performed a correlation analysis for all the values to check their extent of agreement. The correlation was positive and highly significant ($r = .79, p < .001$).

Results

If one were to go through the list of values of the Dhammapada identified by coders (in Table 1) and the list of values identified by experts (in Table 2), we find a lot of similarity in the ranking of the values. The standardized scores on the values by both coders and experts are also highly correlated as seen by the high value of the correlation coefficient.

The top five values of the Dhammapada as per the experts' ratings are – wisdom, freedom, self-discipline, moderation, and inner harmony. The top five values based on the coders' ratings are – wisdom, inner harmony, self-discipline, honesty, and a world at peace. Three of the five values in both lists are common. These three values are wisdom, self-discipline, and inner harmony.

The bottom five values that are most condemned by the Dhammapada as per experts' ratings are – pleasure, enjoying life, preserving my public image, self-indulgence, and ambition. The bottom five values based on the coders' ratings are – self-indulgent, pleasure, enjoying life, wealth, and authority. Here also, three of the five values in both lists are common. These three values are – pleasure, self-indulgence, and enjoying life.

Hence, there seems to be very high consistency between the rating of the coders and the experts in Buddhism.

Discussion

This study seeks to answer two questions. First, does the process of content analysis provide a valid interpretation of the Dhammapada? And second, can the concept of universal values provide a template for understanding the central message of religious scriptures?

I used two methods to identify the central message of the Dhammapada. First, three coders analyzed the content of each of the verses of the Dhammapada using the universal values framework and then I asked a panel of six Buddhist experts to provide their understanding of the Dhammapada.

I found that there is a very strong and significant correlation between the two methods. When all the 58 values rated by experts and content analysis were ranked, I found a high level of correlation between the two methods. When the top five values selected by experts were compared with the top five values selected through content analysis, we found that three out of the five values viz. wisdom, self-discipline, and inner harmony were common across the two sets. Similarly, on comparing the bottom five values selected by experts with the bottom five values selected through content analysis, I found that three out of the five values viz. pleasure, enjoying life, and self-indulgent were common across the two sets. This shows that the procedure of content analysis using universal values does provide a valid template for understanding the central message of the religious scriptures. This is especially accurate in identifying the more extreme values.

The values most condemned by the Dhammapada are pleasure, enjoying life, and self-indulgence. These three values make up the motivational domain of hedonism. Hence it is clear that the Dhammapada severely condemns hedonism. The text emphasizes three key values: wisdom, self-discipline, and inner harmony, falling under the motivational domains of universalism and conformity. These values provide a useful complement to counteracting the negatively rated domain of hedonism.

The message of the Buddha has been summarized in the form of *panna* (wisdom or discernment), *sila* (virtue or moral conduct), and *samadhi* (meditation and concentration). The value of *sila* is fully reflected in the content analysis as the values of low hedonism and high self-discipline. The importance of the value of *panna* is shown in the content analysis as wisdom. The value of *samadhi* is also reflected in high scores for inner harmony. Hence it is clear that the content analysis reveals results that are identical to the fundamental Buddhist beliefs.

Inconsistencies in the results of our content analysis and the views of Buddhist scholars

According to Buddhist scholars, it seems as if the most important value and the source of all the other values is wisdom (interpreted as discernment or an understanding of the law of nature). Even though wisdom has a high score in our analysis, when compared to the complementary values of high conformity and low hedonism, it seems like a distant second. Perhaps this could be because the Buddha feels that even though wisdom is necessary, the absence of wisdom does not justify immoral behaviour. Until a person develops wisdom, he or she must continue to live a moral life even if the person is ignorant of the real reason for being moral. Since the Dhammapada is a text for the lay people, it will likely lay more stress on morality. This is further validated by the fact that the most fundamental tenets of Buddhist doctrine include the five precepts, all of which propagate values of self-discipline and low hedonism and are identified by our content analysis. Other discourses to lay people like the Sigolovada sutta further validate this belief. In the Sigolovada sutta, where the Buddha gives specific instructions for the welfare of laypeople, he explains in detail how a layperson must behave with friends and with family members. In order to convince the

listener, in each of the admonitions, the Buddha gives very practical and worldly outcomes for each of the moralistic practices e.g. in Verse 3 (a) the Buddha says: "There are, young householder, these six evil consequences in indulging in intoxicants which cause infatuation and heedlessness: (i) loss of wealth, (ii) increase of quarrels, (iii) susceptibility to disease, (iv) earning an evil reputation, (v) shameless exposure of the body, (vi) weakening of intellect." (The full text of the sutta is available at <https://accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>). Hence it is clear that the Buddha feels that morality is a goal that lay persons should follow irrespective of whether they have developed the necessary wisdom or not. This is in sharp contrast to the Hindu view where the focus is not on outward actions but on the state of mind of the doer, and no action in itself is held to be good or bad.

Another inconsistency is the comparatively low score on *Samadhi* or meditation. In our content analysis meditation can be likened to inner harmony and spiritual life. The total score of these two values is still much lesser than the scores of the complementary values of high conformity and low hedonism. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, *samadhi* may be seen as an instrumental state, to be used to develop the ultimate goal that is, *panna*, and hence its importance may be lesser. Secondly, since the Dhammapada is mainly a text for the laypeople and not the monks, less space has been given to meditation. This is validated by the fact, that Buddha has given several detailed discourses on meditation for monks. Some of the most popular suttas in this regard are the Anapanasatti Sutta and the Mahasatipathana Sutta which go into minute details of meditation techniques and various states achievable through meditation.

Limitations

While some of the values may be accurate, some of their motivations may be misplaced in the context of Buddhism. For instance, the value of intelligence is the sense of a person who thinks through his or her actions and reflects on their consequences, whereas the motivational orientation of this value given by Schwartz is "achievement" which gives a different sense to the value.

Another limitation of our study is that the Dhammapada is not the be-all and end-all of Buddhism. The Buddha was enlightened at the age of 35 and continued to preach for 45 years until his death at the age of 80. During that period there were numerous discourses given to monks and lay people on various aspects of life. Specifically for lay persons the Sigolovada sutta is the most appropriate. In this Sutta, the Buddha instructs lay people to work diligently and faithfully fulfilling one's duties to superiors as well as subordinates, and properly appropriately treating subordinates.

Even if we were to accept the Dhammapada as a valid text, Max Muller's translation may not fully reflect Buddhist values and may be limited by a Western perspective. Perhaps it may be a good idea to look at a translation by some Buddhist scholars like Narada or Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Above all my limitations in understanding the essence of the text and my own perceptions of the teaching of Buddhism have coloured this study greatly. A more scientific basis for identifying values must be developed to make this study valid.

Conclusion

The system of universal values and motivational domains developed by Schwartz provides a powerful framework for analyzing any form of communication. When combined with the technique of content analysis, this approach can help us understand the deeper impact of almost any communication, including religious scriptures, mythology, legends, speeches by great leaders, or even novels. It is often suggested that the best way to understand a culture is to read its literary classics. However, many of us may not have the time to read and assimilate those lengthy works. Even if we could, understand these for ourselves, it would be difficult for us to articulate and compare their import objectively.

The approach put forward in this paper provides a way out of this dilemma. First of all, we must create a library of words akin to a thesaurus to describe each of the values given by Schwartz. I am sure while arriving at the universal values; Schwartz would have grouped a large number of related concepts and finally reduced them all to 57. We must retrieve all those earlier concepts and enter

them into a database. Having done that, software for content analysis must be developed which builds on the rules of grammar and uses the database and word library. This software must be self-learning and must allow the user to update new words and new forms as and when he or she comes across them.

Life is becoming increasingly fast-paced and more and more persons are losing their links with their past. At the same time, sectarian beliefs and vested interests are constantly reinterpreting scriptures in ways that suit their ends. Also, with increasing exposure to media and the internet, across the world cultures seem to be losing their nuances to match up with the Anglo-American stereotypes. At such a time, discerning the real values of a culture becomes increasingly difficult. Fortunately, content analysis seems to show a path, and once the supporting technology is available, we may be able to understand the true import of all texts free of sectarian and individual biases.

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Table 1: Scores for Dhammapada Values – Rated by Coders

Rank	Value	Total Score across 423 verses (Cronbach alphas)
1	Wisdom	106.33 (.46)
2	Inner Harmony	74.00 (.45)
3	Self-discipline	63.33 (.47)
4	Honest	23.00 (.62)
5	A world at peace	17.33 (.51)
6	Politeness	17.00 (.64)
7	Hardworking	14.33 (.68)
8	Forgiving	14.00 (.47)
9	Humble	12.33 (.62)
10	Healthy	6.00 (.43)
11	Honoring one's parents and elders	5.57 (.62)
12	Loyal	4.33 (.40)
13	True friendship	4.00 (.65)

14	Preserving my public image	1.00 (.54)
15	Family security	-1.33 (.50)
16	Authority	-2.00 (.43)
17	Wealth	-9.00 (.56)
18	Enjoying life	-59.00 (.64)
19	Pleasure	-64.33 (.62)
20	Self-indulgent	-65.67 (.68)

Scores for Dhammapada Values – Rated by Experts

Rank	Value	Total Score for Dhammapada (Consistency – Range)
1	Wisdom	7.00 (0)
2	Freedom	6.83 (1)
3	Self-discipline	6.33 (2)
4	Moderate	6.33 (2)
5	Inner harmony	6.17 (2)
6	Independent	6.17 (3)
7	A world at peace	6.00 (2)
8	Honest	6.00 (2)
9	Healthy	5.67 (3)
10	A spiritual life	5.67 (4)
11	Forgiving	5.67 (4)
12	Honoring of parents and elders	5.50 (2)
13	Hardworking	5.50 (3)
14	True friendship	5.17 (4)
15	Meaning in life	5.00 (3)
16	Capable	5.00 (3)
17	Loyal	4.67 (4)
18	Intelligent	4.67 (4)
19	Self respect	3.83 (4)
20	Sense of belonging	1.50 (4)
21	Wealth	0.50 (4)
22	A varied life	0.50 (4)
23	Ambitious	0.33 (3)
24	Self-indulgent	0.00 (3)
25	Preserving my public image	-0.50 (1)
26	Enjoying life	-0.83 (1)
27	Pleasure	-1.00 (0)