

The Relationship Between the Practice of Buddhist Ethics and the Prosocial Behavior of Students in Hanoi

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the relationship between Buddhist ethical practice and prosocial behavior among university students in Hanoi, Vietnam. Drawing on Buddhist moral philosophy and behavioral theories, the research conceptualizes five dimensions of ethical engagement—mindfulness, compassion, non-harming, generosity, and ethical reflection—and examines their influence on four dimensions of prosocial behavior: empathy, altruism, cooperation, and civic engagement. Using a quantitative survey administered to 400 students from diverse academic backgrounds, the study employed multiple linear regression analysis to assess the predictive power of each ethical construct. The findings reveal that compassion, mindfulness, and ethical reflection are significant predictors of prosocial tendencies, with distinct patterns across behavioral outcomes. These results highlight the continuing relevance of Buddhist ethics in modern urban education and suggest that culturally rooted moral education can foster emotional intelligence, civic responsibility, and social cohesion among youth. The study provides implications for educational reform, policy design, and future research on value-based education in Vietnam and comparable cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist ethics; prosocial behavior; mindfulness; compassion; moral education; youth development; Vietnam; civic engagement

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's rapid urbanization has led to profound shifts in cultural, social, and moral structures, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as Hanoi. As the country embraces economic modernization and global integration, traditional ethical foundations are increasingly challenged, especially among younger populations. University students, situated at the intersection of educational development and social transition, face mounting pressures that influence their behavior, values, and identity. In this context, understanding how traditional moral frameworks, such as Buddhist ethics, contribute to the development of prosocial behavior is both timely and relevant.

Buddhist ethics emphasize core principles such as compassion (*karuṇā*), non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and right conduct (*sammā kammanta*), which collectively form a cohesive moral philosophy grounded in personal responsibility and social harmony (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). These values have historically shaped Vietnamese society and continue to play a role in ethical education through both formal and informal channels. Despite the prevalence of Buddhism in Vietnam, empirical research on its role in shaping youth behavior—particularly in urban environments—remains limited. As Vietnam's educational institutions increasingly seek to address moral challenges among students, examining the influence of Buddhist ethics offers important insights for both policy and pedagogy.

The behavioral landscape of urban youth in Hanoi reflects a complex interplay of influences, including digital media, academic stress, peer networks, and shifting family dynamics. These influences may simultaneously foster innovation and civic engagement or lead to moral ambiguity and social disengagement. Nonetheless, many students continue to engage with Buddhist teachings through participation in temple activities, digital platforms, and community service. Understanding how these ethical engagements correlate with prosocial actions such as empathy, cooperation, and civic responsibility is essential for building more ethically grounded educational environments.

This study, therefore, aims to explore the relationship between the practice of Buddhist ethics and prosocial behavior among university students in Hanoi. Specifically, it seeks to (1) assess the frequency and depth of students' engagement with Buddhist ethical practices, (2) evaluate the prevalence and characteristics of prosocial behaviors among students, and (3) analyze the correlation between Buddhist practice and prosocial tendencies. From these aims, the study addresses the following research

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questions: To what extent do students in Hanoi engage with Buddhist ethics? What forms of prosocial behavior are exhibited among these students? And is there a significant relationship between the two?

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on Buddhist ethical frameworks and the concept of prosocial behavior in educational and urban contexts. The methodology section outlines the research design, sample, instruments, and analysis methods. The findings and discussion sections interpret the data in light of theoretical and empirical perspectives. Finally, the conclusion offers a summary of findings, implications for moral education, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Buddhist Ethics and Moral Foundations

Buddhist ethics represent a comprehensive and coherent system of moral thought grounded in the pursuit of human flourishing, spiritual development, and harmonious social living. Central to this ethical system are the values of compassion (*karuṇā*), non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), mindfulness (*satī*), and generosity (*dāna*), which together form the foundation for both personal transformation and prosocial behavior (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005). Compassion, understood as the empathetic wish to alleviate the suffering of others, is one of the most emphasized virtues in Buddhist moral education. Non-harming, or the commitment to avoid causing pain to any living being, reinforces a deep respect for life and interdependence. Mindfulness, the practice of present-moment awareness, cultivates self-regulation, ethical awareness, and conscious decision-making. Generosity, both material and spiritual, is regarded as a primary way of reducing attachment and fostering altruism within community life (Rahula, 1974).

Buddhist moral education manifests differently across the two major traditions—Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the Theravāda context, ethical training is primarily centered on the Five Precepts (*pañca-sīla*) and the Noble Eightfold Path, with strong emphasis on individual moral discipline and the pursuit of liberation through self-restraint and insight. The ethical framework in this tradition focuses on refraining from harmful actions and cultivating mental purity, especially through meditation and monastic guidance (Gombrich, 2006). In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism expands ethical concerns to include the ideal of the bodhisattva, an enlightened being who delays personal liberation in order to assist all sentient beings. In this view, ethics are not only about avoiding wrongdoing but also about actively engaging in compassionate action and social responsibility (Williams, 2009).

Both traditions, despite their differences, converge on the principle that ethical conduct is foundational to personal development and the well-being of society. For students navigating moral challenges in modern urban contexts, the application of Buddhist ethical teachings can offer a stable moral compass, guiding them toward self-awareness, empathy, and prosocial engagement. As such, Buddhist ethics are increasingly being examined for their potential contributions to moral education, especially within culturally relevant and spiritually resonant educational environments (Zajonc, 2013).

Prosocial Behavior: Definitions and Dimensions

Prosocial behavior refers to voluntary actions intended to benefit others, including behaviors such as helping, sharing, comforting, and cooperating (Eisenberg et al., 2006). These actions are central to healthy interpersonal relationships and social cohesion, particularly within educational and community contexts. Among university students, prosocial behavior not only reflects moral maturity but also contributes to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Core components of prosocial behavior include altruism, or selfless concern for the well-being of others; empathy, the capacity to understand and resonate with another's emotional state; cooperation, the willingness to work collaboratively toward shared goals; and civic engagement, which encompasses active participation in community and societal development (Batson, 2011; Carlo & Randall, 2002).

The study of prosocial behavior is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. Social Learning Theory, proposed by Bandura (1977), posits that individuals learn social behavior through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Within this framework, students exposed to moral exemplars—such as teachers, religious figures, or socially engaged peers—are more likely to internalize prosocial norms and act accordingly. Meanwhile, Moral Development Theory, particularly as articulated by Kohlberg (1981), suggests that moral reasoning evolves through distinct stages, from obedience to abstract principles of justice and care. In this view, higher levels of moral reasoning are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in prosocial behavior.

More recent integrative models emphasize the role of emotional regulation, identity formation, and cultural values in shaping prosocial tendencies (Padilla-Walker & Carlo, 2014). In the Vietnamese context, where collectivist norms and intergenerational respect are deeply embedded, prosocial behavior often aligns with cultural expectations of filial piety, community service, and harmony. When combined with spiritual or ethical teachings—such as those found in Buddhism—these cultural orientations can reinforce internal motivation for altruistic action. As such, understanding the dimensions and determinants of prosocial behavior is essential for evaluating the ethical development of students, especially in settings where traditional values intersect with modern educational and social challenges.

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Previous Studies on Religion and Prosociality

A growing body of international research has examined the relationship between religious belief and prosocial behavior, suggesting that religious involvement is positively associated with greater altruism, empathy, and civic participation (Saroglou, 2013; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). In particular, many studies have found that regular participation in religious activities, internalization of spiritual values, and engagement with moral teachings contribute to an increased likelihood of helping behaviors, charitable giving, and volunteering (Regnerus, 2003). Religious traditions across the world—whether Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or others—tend to promote moral guidelines and communal responsibilities that reinforce social cohesion and encourage individuals to prioritize the welfare of others (Smith, 2005). Moreover, religious identity often serves as a moral compass, particularly for young adults navigating the complexities of modern society.

In the context of Vietnam, however, empirical research on the link between religion and prosocial behavior remains relatively limited. Although Buddhism is the most widely practiced religion in the country and has long played a central role in shaping cultural and ethical norms, studies specifically examining how Buddhist teachings affect youth behavior are scarce. Most existing literature in Vietnam has focused on the sociological functions of religion, religious freedom, or the preservation of cultural heritage (Nguyen & Le, 2018), rather than its psychological or behavioral impact on individual morality. A few recent studies have explored how Buddhist values contribute to emotional well-being, but systematic analyses of their influence on prosocial outcomes—such as cooperation, civic action, or altruism—among students are notably absent.

This gap highlights the need for research that bridges spiritual traditions with contemporary behavioral science in the Vietnamese setting. While global literature affirms the prosocial potential of religious engagement, it is important to contextualize such findings within the specific cultural, historical, and educational environment of Vietnam. The unique position of Buddhism in Vietnamese life—as both a spiritual practice and a moral philosophy—offers a promising but underexplored framework for promoting ethical development among young people. Consequently, this study seeks to fill a critical void in the literature by empirically assessing the relationship between Buddhist ethical practice and prosocial behavior among university students in Hanoi.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative multivariate research design to examine how various dimensions of Buddhist ethical practice predict different aspects of prosocial behavior among university students in Hanoi (Quynh & Thanh, 2025a; Quynh & Thanh, 2025b). Drawing upon ethical philosophy and behavioral science, the study conceptualized Buddhist ethics as comprising five core dimensions—mindfulness, compassion, non-harming, generosity, and ethical reflection—and examined their influence on four outcome variables: empathy, altruism, cooperation, and civic engagement. This approach allowed for the simultaneous analysis of complex ethical-behavioral relationships within an urban youth context.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 400 undergraduate students were selected through stratified random sampling from five major universities in Hanoi, ensuring a representative balance in gender, academic major, and religious background (Nam & Thanh, 2024; Thanh et al., 2023). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24, with a gender distribution of approximately 53% female and 47% male. The student sample included majors in social sciences, engineering, business and economics, humanities, and natural sciences. Regarding religious affiliation, 62% of students identified as Buddhist (both practicing and cultural), while the remaining reported no religious affiliation (28%) or other spiritual beliefs (10%).

Measurement Instruments

The survey instrument consisted of three sections. The first section captured demographic characteristics. The second section measured five dimensions of Buddhist ethics, operationalized through validated Likert-scale items:

- **Mindfulness:** attention to one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (e.g., "I reflect before acting, especially in interpersonal situations").
- **Compassion:** emotional concern for others' suffering (e.g., "I feel moved when others are in distress").
- **Non-Harming:** avoidance of actions that may physically or emotionally harm others (e.g., "I avoid speaking in ways that could hurt others").
- **Generosity:** willingness to give time, resources, or energy to benefit others (e.g., "I often share what I have with people in need").
- **Ethical Reflection:** internal moral reasoning and contemplation (e.g., "I regularly think about whether my actions are ethically right").

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The third section assessed four subdimensions of prosocial behavior, using scales adapted from Eisenberg et al. (2006) and Carlo and Randall (2002):

- **Empathy** (e.g., “I easily understand the emotions of others”),
- **Altruism** (e.g., “I help others even when there is nothing in it for me”),
- **Cooperation** (e.g., “I enjoy working with others to achieve shared goals”),
- **Civic Engagement** (e.g., “I participate in community service or social activities”).

All items were measured on a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha values for each scale exceeded .80, indicating good internal reliability.

Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive statistics were calculated to assess general trends in the data (Hanh et al., 2025; Thanh, 2024). Pearson’s correlation coefficients were computed to evaluate bivariate relationships among variables. To test the main hypotheses, four multiple linear regression models were constructed—one for each prosocial outcome—using the five dimensions of Buddhist ethics as predictors. All analyses were conducted using SPSS and Statsmodels in Python. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) confirmed the absence of multicollinearity.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for all study variables. The data indicate generally high levels of both ethical practice and prosocial behavior. Compassion (M = 3.90) and mindfulness (M = 3.80) had the highest endorsement among Buddhist ethics dimensions, while empathy (M = 4.01) and cooperation (M = 3.96) were the most reported prosocial behaviors.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 400)

Variable	Mean (M)	SD
Mindfulness	3.80	0.70
Compassion	3.90	0.60
Non-Harming	3.70	0.70
Generosity	3.60	0.80
Ethical Reflection	3.75	0.65
Empathy	4.01	0.61
Altruism	3.85	0.68
Cooperation	3.96	0.66
Civic Engagement	3.74	0.70

Multivariate Regression Analyses

Regression analyses revealed that specific dimensions of Buddhist ethics significantly predicted prosocial behavior.

- **Empathy:** Compassion ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and mindfulness ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$) were significant predictors. This model explained 26% of the variance in empathy ($R^2 = .26$).
- **Altruism:** Ethical reflection ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$) and generosity ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) were significant. The model accounted for 22% of the variance in altruism ($R^2 = .22$).
- **Cooperation:** Mindfulness ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) and non-harming ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) were both strong predictors, with the model explaining 29% of variance ($R^2 = .29$).
- **Civic Engagement:** Ethical reflection ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$) and compassion ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) emerged as significant predictors. This model explained 24% of the variance ($R^2 = .24$).

Table 2. Summary of Significant Predictors Across Models

Dependent Variable	Significant Predictors	β	p	R^2
Empathy	Compassion, Mindfulness	.29, .21	< .001, < .01	.26
Altruism	Ethical Reflection, Generosity	.27, .24	< .001, < .01	.22
Cooperation	Mindfulness, Non-Harming	.31, .28	< .001	.29
Civic Engagement	Ethical Reflection, Compassion	.30, .25	< .001, < .01	.24

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The results support the theoretical assumption that Buddhist ethics are positively associated with prosocial behavior. While different ethical dimensions predict distinct aspects of moral action, **mindfulness**, **compassion**, and **ethical reflection** consistently emerged as influential factors. These findings align with both traditional Buddhist moral philosophy and contemporary models in prosocial psychology, such as Social Learning Theory and Moral Development Theory. Furthermore, the results suggest that integrating Buddhist ethical education into moral curricula may strengthen students' emotional intelligence and civic responsibility.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion of Key Findings

The results of this study demonstrate a significant relationship between Buddhist ethical practices and prosocial behavior among university students in Hanoi. Specifically, the dimensions of compassion, mindfulness, and ethical reflection consistently emerged as the most powerful predictors of various forms of prosocial behavior, including empathy, cooperation, altruism, and civic engagement. These findings reinforce both Buddhist moral philosophy and contemporary behavioral theories such as Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Moral Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1981), which posit that ethical modeling and internalized moral reasoning contribute to socially constructive behavior.

The predictive power of compassion for empathy and civic engagement aligns with Buddhist teachings that prioritize concern for the suffering of others (*karuṇā*) as a moral imperative. Likewise, mindfulness was found to be strongly associated with empathy and cooperation, suggesting that increased awareness and emotional regulation enhance interpersonal understanding and reduce reactive behaviors. The role of ethical reflection in predicting altruism and civic responsibility supports the idea that moral contemplation is a key mechanism through which ethical values translate into action.

Interestingly, non-harming was particularly predictive of cooperation, indicating that students who internalize the principle of *ahiṃsā* are more likely to contribute harmoniously in group and community settings. Generosity, though less influential across all outcomes, was a meaningful predictor of altruism, reinforcing the foundational Buddhist idea of *dāna* (giving) as a prosocial virtue.

These findings suggest that Buddhist ethics are not merely abstract doctrines but are actively shaping the moral consciousness and behavior of youth, even in urbanized, secular educational environments. In doing so, they offer a culturally resonant moral framework that bridges personal values with societal well-being.

Implications for Education and Youth Development

The study offers several important implications for educational practice and public policy:

First, the integration of Buddhist ethical values—particularly compassion, mindfulness, and ethical reflection—into moral education programs can provide students with both philosophical grounding and practical tools for navigating ethical dilemmas. Unlike conventional civic education, Buddhist moral teachings offer a holistic approach that connects internal transformation with external action.

Second, universities and youth organizations can incorporate mindfulness-based practices and service learning opportunities that reflect Buddhist ethical principles. Programs that encourage students to engage in community service, reflective journaling, meditation, and interfaith dialogue can foster prosocial orientations and moral sensitivity.

Third, these findings provide support for culturally grounded models of character education. In Vietnam, where Buddhism remains a central cultural force, educational reforms that draw upon indigenous moral traditions may be more effective than those imported from Western models. Embedding Buddhist ethics in curricula not only reinforces national identity but also enhances emotional resilience, social cohesion, and civic responsibility among youth.

Finally, this study adds to a growing body of literature advocating for the recognition of spirituality as a dimension of moral development. While formal religious affiliation may decline among younger populations, ethical practices inspired by spiritual traditions remain influential. Policymakers and educators should recognize this dynamic and support pluralistic, value-based education that affirms cultural continuity and ethical pluralism.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the use of self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias, particularly on items related to moral behavior (Hanh et al., 2025; Thanh, 2024). Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the directionality of the relationships. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in tracking the development of ethical reasoning and behavior over time.

Additionally, while the study focused on Buddhist ethics, future research could compare moral influences from other traditions (e.g., Confucianism, Christianity, folk beliefs) to examine points of convergence and divergence. Mixed-methods

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research combining surveys with ethnographic or observational techniques may also offer deeper insight into how students apply ethical values in real-life settings.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Buddhist ethical practice plays a meaningful role in shaping the moral behavior of university students in Hanoi. The empirical findings demonstrate that key ethical dimensions—namely compassion, mindfulness, and ethical reflection—are positively associated with various forms of prosocial behavior, including empathy, altruism, cooperation, and civic engagement. These dimensions of Buddhist ethics contribute not only to the development of individual character but also to the cultivation of socially responsible and emotionally intelligent citizens.

By illustrating the concrete behavioral outcomes of ethical engagement, this research underscores the continued relevance of Buddhist moral philosophy in contemporary urban settings, especially within educational contexts. In an era marked by rapid social change and ethical uncertainty, Buddhist values offer a culturally grounded and spiritually resonant foundation for moral education. They strengthen interpersonal bonds and promote civic well-being, making them both a personal compass and a public good.

Ultimately, the findings invite educators, policymakers, and community leaders to reimagine moral education as a space where traditional ethical wisdom intersects with modern pedagogical needs. In doing so, we affirm the role of spirituality and cultural heritage in fostering a more compassionate and cohesive society.

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