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The Use of Mindfulness to Promote Ethical Decision-Making and Behavior: Empirical Evidence from the Public Sector in Thailand

K. Sutamchai, K. Rowlands and C.J. Rees

Summary

The study has two main purposes. First, the study explores core ethical values and behaviors from the perspective of Thai public service organizational leaders. Second, the study investigates the extent to which public sector leaders in Thailand consider Buddhist-based mindfulness practice to be a potentially effective mechanism for reinforcing core ethical values and behaviors in the public sector in Thailand. Using interview data derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 senior public sector officials in Thailand, the analysis elicits four dimensions of core ethical values and behaviors which are perceived by Thai public service organizational leaders as central to ethical behavior in the public sector. The study also sheds light on the interviewees' positive perceptions towards mindfulness and the role its associated practices can play in promoting ethical decision-making and behavior in the public sector in Thailand.

Keywords: Thailand; public sector; ethics; spirituality; Buddhism; mindfulness; training

Introduction

Numerous ethical scandals involving public service organizational leaders have highlighted the need for more research on ethical leadership in the public sector (Hassan *et al.*, 2014; Moon & Jung, 2018; Thaler & Helmig, 2016; Yeboah-Assiamah *et al.*, 2016). Existent research on public leadership has, in the main, been conducted in developed countries in Western contexts (Vogel & Masal, 2015). Consequently, research on ethical leadership in the public sector in developing countries is relatively scarce even though malfeasance, especially corruption and bribery, is more prevalent in

developing and transitional countries (Svensson, 2005; Transparency International, 2018); further, this malfeasance significantly hinders the economic and social development of many developing countries (Charoensukmongkol, 2016a).

This article explores ethical leadership in the Thai public sector. As a developing country, corruption has been persistent, deep-rooted and widespread in Thailand's public sector (Chat-uthai & McLean, 2003; Mutebi, 2008; Potipiroon & Ford, 2017). In addition, there is some evidence that public service transparency and ethics performance in Thailand has worsened over the past decade; according to the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Thailand was ranked 80th in 2008 (Sivaraks, 2011), then 96th in 2017 (Transparency International, 2018). Compliance-based approaches, such as ethics codes, are considered to be primary mechanisms for regulating ethical conduct in the public sector around the world and specifically in Thailand (Downe *et al.*, 2016; Pelletier & Bligh, 2006). Yet, given the extent and pervasiveness of malfeasance in the Thai public sector, it appears that codes of ethics, anti-corruption schemes, laws and regulations are proving to be relatively ineffective in reducing such problems. As a result, there have been calls for research designed to identify alternative solutions which are suitable for the Thai public sector (Wilhelm & Gunawong, 2016). Such calls complement public administration literature which highlights that compliance-based approaches to ethics are generally ineffective (Stevulak & Brown, 2011; Webb, 2012) in contrast to value-based approaches to ethics which emphasize self-control, self-moral reminders, internal ethical values, and leadership by example (Belle & Cantarelli, 2017; Menzel, 2015; Webb, 2012). Yet, research on value-based approaches to ethics remains relatively scarce (Stevulak & Brown, 2011), particularly in contexts such as Thailand where spirituality plays a prominent role in society. This article explores aspects of spirituality

in the public sector of Thailand by examining the use of Buddhist-based mindfulness practices which focus on the awareness of the inner self, the inter-relatedness of everything and the balance of good for oneself with good for society (Rozuel & Kakabadse, 2010).

Currently, research on mindfulness in the West has tended to link mindfulness to heightened awareness and self-regulation. Hence, emergent research has started to examine the role of mindfulness on ethicality (Karelaia & Reb, 2015). Empirical studies have reported a positive relationship between mindfulness and moral reasoning (Pandey *et al.*, 2018; Shapiro *et al.*, 2012) even though there seems to be scant evidence of a direct relationship between mindfulness, as portrayed in Western contexts, and ethical workplace behaviors. In this regard, scholars have argued that mindfulness as practiced in Buddhist contexts may be more relevant to ethical behavior in the workplace, because the traditional Buddhist concept of mindfulness is taught for the purpose of moral development (Purser & Milillo, 2015; Qiu & Rooney, 2019; Stanley, 2013; Sun, 2014). Nevertheless, most academic research on mindfulness has addressed Western contexts (Lomas *et al.*, 2017); this has led to a dearth of empirical studies on Buddhist mindfulness practices and their relevance to ethical development in the workplace. Furthermore, there has been a paucity of mindfulness research in the field of public sector (Bartlett *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, the study explores core ethical values and behaviors from the perspective of Thai public service organizational leaders; and second, the study investigates the extent to which public sector leaders in Thailand consider Buddhist mindfulness practice to be a potentially effective mechanism for reinforcing core ethical values and behaviors in the public sector in

Thailand. The article is structured as follows. First, literature on the nature of mindfulness and its relationship to ethical behavior in Thailand is reviewed with a view to identifying themes and gaps in existing knowledge. The methodology used to gather primary data is then presented, followed by the findings and conclusions drawn from the study.

Literature Review

Ethical Leadership

Brown *et al.* (2005, p. 120) defined ethical leadership as “*the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making*”. Using Bandura’s social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), they emphasized that an ethical leader is a moral person who influences the ethical conduct of followers via role modelling (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Jordan *et al.*, 2013).

Although Brown *et al.* (2005)’s ethical leadership definition and associated framework is widely cited (Stouten *et al.*, 2013), some scholars have observed that this concept of ethical leadership is predominantly based on a Western perspective (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2013; Resick *et al.*, 2011). Accordingly, various attempts have been made to identify common core ethical leadership values using more cross-cultural approaches. For example, Resick *et al.* (2006) found that four components of ethical leadership in Western societies (that is, character/integrity, altruism, collective motivation, and encouragement) are universally supported, though the degree of endorsement for each dimension differed in different cultures. Similarly,

Eisenbeiß (2012) integrated Western and Eastern moral philosophy and ethical principles of the world's main religions to develop a cross-disciplinary and intercultural view of ethical leadership that yielded four essential orientations of ethical leadership, that is, humane, justice, responsibility and sustainability, and moderation. These types of cross-cultural approaches have obvious relevance to the public sector and help to inform research into ethical leadership in public service organizations. Nevertheless, two overlapping issues which remain relatively under-researched relate to how leaders can become ethical and how ethical leadership can be developed (Treviño & Brown, 2014). This study pursues these issues by focusing on ethical leadership development with reference to spirituality and specifically Buddhist-based mindfulness practices in the context of the public sector in Thailand.

Buddhist Mindfulness as a Spiritual Development Practice in Thailand

The interest in the study of spirituality in the workplace has grown significantly over the past decade; however, it is a relatively new area in the field of organizational theory (McKee *et al.*, 2008). Spirituality in the workplace is generally concerned with inner self, meaningful work, sense of community, transcendence, feelings of completeness, an inter-relatedness of everything and a striving towards wholeness (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Jurkiewicz & Giacalone, 2004; Milliman *et al.*, 2003; Rozuel & Kakabadse, 2010).

Although spirituality is distinct from religion, the two domains can also be related (Collins & Kakabadse, 2006; King, 2007). In the Thai context, the relationship between culture, spirituality and religion are intertwined (Blomfield, 2009; Yiengprugsawan *et al.*, 2010). For many centuries, Theravada Buddhism has been

retained as the national religion of Thailand (Disayavanish & Disayavanish, 2007). Therefore, Buddhism cannot be seen as a separate domain within Thai society, but rather as a foundation which underpins almost every aspect of most Thai people's lives, particularly their spirituality (Hughes *et al.*, 2008; Leelavanichkul *et al.*, 2018; Wongtes, 2000).

In Thailand, diverse meditation methods and formats are widely offered in many temples and meditation centers (Schedneck, 2017; van den Muyzenberg, 2014). Notably, a number of scholars have commented that the mindfulness traditionally practiced in the Buddhist Eastern context is different from the modern approach practiced in the West (Christopher *et al.*, 2009; Schedneck, 2017; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). While modern mindfulness mainly aims for the benefits of relaxation and improvement of the general health (Brown *et al.*, 2007; The Mindfulness Initiative, 2016), mindfulness in Buddhist contexts, such as Thailand, is centered upon spiritual development (Surinrut *et al.*, 2016).

Mindfulness Practices in Buddhism

Mindfulness in Thai is “*sati*”, which is the same as the original Pali word which appeared in the oldest Buddhist scriptures (Gethin, 2011). *Sati* literally means “memory” and “remembrance” (Bodhi, 2011; Huxter, 2015). However, in the actual Buddhist usage, *sati* does not refer to past memory *per se*, but rather to a mental state in which one recollects or remembers what “*one is engaged in, in the present moment*” (Peacock, 2014, p. 6). Additionally, the term *sati* is often coupled with the term ‘*sampajañña*’, or clear comprehension, which is “*the clear and penetrative*

understanding of those things or activities focused on by mindfulness” (Payutto, 2018, p. 1344).

From a Buddhist perspective, the ultimate goal of mindfulness practices is the attainment of *nibbana* or enlightenment (Bodhi, 2011; Marques, 2015; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006) associated with the elimination of all kinds of dissatisfaction or suffering caused by greed, hatred and delusion (Gunaratana, 2001). In Buddhism, *sati* or mindfulness is seen as key to achieving enlightenment (Shonin *et al.*, 2015). Buddhist mindfulness is also directly linked to morality and wisdom (Chisholm, 2015; Cook, 2010; Surinrut *et al.*, 2016). The cultivation of mindfulness is part of the three systemic trainings and each of them supports the others. According to Payutto (2018), the first systemic training is training in higher virtues; this involves abstention from all unwholesome actions of body and speech, that is, actions that harm others and disturb their peace and harmony (Hart, 1991). Moral conduct is a foundation for developing the quality of one’s mind and cultivating wisdom. However, moral conduct needs mindfulness (*sati*) and clear comprehension (*sampajañña*) to facilitate a greater sense of one’s ethical conduct (Analayo, 2006; Payutto, 2018), because although one may understand that it is wrong to commit unwholesome actions, temptations or emotions may overpower the mind resulting in immoral conduct (Hart, 1991).

Second, the training in higher mind is practiced in order to develop and enhance the quality and potential of the mind. This training involves various methods of tranquility meditation (*samatha*) to induce calm in the mind, which is seen as necessary to establish the grounds for wisdom to evolve (Payutto, 2018). Third, the training in higher wisdom refers to discerning and understanding the truth about the nature of phenomena, so that one knows how to relate to the world correctly and reduce the state

of suffering resulting from attachments (Payutto, 2018; Vu & Gill, 2018). The cultivation of wisdom is intended to lead to the understanding of important truth regarding impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anatta*) and suffering (*dukkha*) (Hart, 1991). Mindfulness practices train the mind to pay attention to what is happening inside oneself and the outside environment in order to develop deep insight about the truth (Gunaratana, 2001). For example, one can learn that impermanence is a central feature of existence by observing the moment by moment rise and fall of physical and mental phenomena (Jayasaro, 2014).

In summary, theoretical assumptions found within existing literature suggest that Buddhist ethics and principles and their associated mindfulness practices may contribute to the development of ethics and other positive qualities of the mind (Ditrich, 2016; Purser & Milillo, 2015; Stanley, 2013; Sun, 2014). Unfortunately, little is known about the influence of Buddhist mindfulness practices on ethical behavior, particularly among leaders. In respect of Thailand, the review of literature identified very few studies which investigated the effects of mindfulness meditation in Thai populations (Wongtongkam et al., 2014), particularly in relation to leaders' ethical behavior. At a general level, the findings from the existing mindfulness research in the Thai organizational contexts suggest that mindfulness practices may contribute to positive workplace outcomes, such as lower job burnout (Charoensukmongkol, 2013), improvement to peace of mind and organizational citizenship behavior (Ariyabuddhiphongs & Pratchawittayagorn, 2014), work performance and employee engagement (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012; Petchsawang & McLean, 2017) and lower resistance to change in merger and acquisition scenarios (Charoensukmongkol, 2016b, 2017). Yet, there is a notable paucity of research which has focused on mindfulness in

public sector organizations in Thailand particularly in relation to ethical behavior. Given this research gap, the current study explores core ethical values and behaviors from the perspective of Thai public service organizational leaders; and then investigates the extent to which public sector leaders in Thailand consider Buddhist mindfulness practice to be a potentially effective mechanism for reinforcing core ethical values and behaviors in the public sector in Thailand. The methodology designed to address these issues is presented below.

Methodology

Method

A qualitative research approach was selected due to the exploratory nature of the research, in which the authors sought to understand the ways in which executive leaders in various organizations of the Thai public sector, who are currently practicing mindfulness, interpret their experiences in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Holloway, 1997). Moreover, given that the authors needed to attain highly personalized data and explanations or examples based on real situations from the interviewees, in-depth interviews were considered appropriate for eliciting individual experiences, opinions and the perspectives through which a person views a particular phenomenon (Gray, 2014; Mack *et al.*, 2005).

Interviewees and Sampling Strategy

No public information was available which made it possible to identify senior public sector leaders in Thailand who are currently practicing mindfulness. Thus, the

study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques for the selection of the interviewees (Seale, 2012). Through the process of snowball sampling technique, twelve executive leaders in leading positions in the Thai public service organizations in Bangkok and surrounding provinces were identified. Table 1 contains demographic descriptions of the key informants though, due to the need to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, the specific job titles of the leaders within their organizations cannot be reported.

Research Procedure and Data Analysis

The data collection process started in November 2018 and ended in mid-February 2019. The in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately two hours, were conducted to ascertain the views of executive leaders in the Thai public service organizations about the following two main research questions: first, “*What core ethical values and practices do you think are important for the Thai public sector?*”; and second, “*Based on your experience, to what extent can Buddhist mindfulness practices reinforce core ethical values and behaviors?*” Following the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), interviewees were then asked to describe real situations in which they found mindfulness to be relevant to the practice of the ethical values and behaviors they had identified.

Content analysis was used to analyze the audiotape recording transcripts, which were coded and grouped into emerging themes relevant to each research question. The themes which emerged in the two research questions were then analyzed together again to find the perceived relevance of mindfulness practices and core ethical values and

behaviors. Quotes used in this article were translated from Thai to English. The main findings derived from the interviews are presented below.

Findings

Thai Public Service Organizational Leaders' Views on Core Ethical Values and Practices

Four main themes related to core ethical values and practices for the Thai public sector emerged from the analysis of the interview data: compassion and people-orientation; justice and fairness; virtue, integrity and honesty; and sustainability and responsibility. Each main theme also contained sub-themes, as explained below.

Compassion and People-Oriented

Compassion and people-orientation were frequently highlighted by the interviewees. Many of the interviewees acknowledged that leaders in a public service organization are not the ones who give salary or material rewards to their employees because these rewards emanate from the State. As a result, the data reveal that the interviewees identified compassion and care as falling within their remit. More specifically, four key characteristics relating to compassion and people-orientation emerged from the interviews.

First, in various ways, the majority of the interviewees raised the issue of humbleness and respect for others in the workplace. For example, interviewee L11 stated:

“I believe that when leaders are humble and down to earth, employees listen to them more because employees can feel that leaders are not using the power to force them to listen.”

In addition, several of the interviewees specifically referred to fellow-workers as companions and linked companionship directly to compassion. For example, interviewee L12 stated:

“As a leader, it is a principal to have compassion for employees. This may start from seeing them all as ‘companions’ in this world, rather than subordinates.... considering employees as companions can be the foundation of having compassion towards them”.

Second, the majority of the interviewees also highlighted the importance of empowerment as a means of motivating employees in the workplace. In the words of interviewee L8:

“I think my job is to find a way to bring the best from each of my employees just like a conductor who brings the best from each musical player to produce very beautiful music in an orchestrated way. Hence, this requires me to motivate them to have faith in themselves, empower them, give them opportunities to perform as well as to collaborate well with others.”

Third, when discussing compassion and people-orientation, the majority of the interviewees raised the subject of empathy which was variously defined by the interviewees using phrases such as *“to be able to put oneself into someone else’s shoes”*, to *“share the feelings of another”*, to *“understand that everyone is different”*, and *“not to negatively judge others’ actions”*.

Fourth, the importance of showing concern for employees' happiness and well-being emerged within the interview data. For example, two of the interviewees stated the following:

“Leaders should be highly concerned about their employees' happiness. For me, I would do whatever makes them happy as long as it does not break the rules and ethical standards” (L1).

“Leaders should show concern about employee well-being. They should have sensitivity and be able to notice if their employees act differently or something seems to go wrong with them (L7).

Justice and Fairness

The emphasis which has been placed on resolving issues relating to justice and fairness in the Thai public sector (Potipiroon & Faerman, 2016) was echoed by the interviewees in the current study who highlighted justice and fairness as further core ethical values and practices of public service organizational leaders. In the current study, the interview data revealed that the interviewees perceived justice and fairness as critical to ethical leadership. However, some interviewees were keen to emphasize that justice does not mean the distribution of resources based solely on absolute standards of performance. For example, one interviewee sought to explain fairness as follows:

“If I consider only the best performing employee, it would always be the same person who receives rewards. For me, I would give opportunities to those who may not be the best, but those who have made an improvement compared to performance in the past” (L7).

Virtue, Integrity and Honesty

Bribery and favoritism have been widely recognized as issues which need to be addressed across the Thai public sector (Dyussenov, 2017; Prateppornnarong & Young, 2019). In complementing this body of research, most of the interviewees involved in the current study stated that corruption is one of the most severe problems in the Thai public sector; they then emphasized that virtue, integrity and honesty are core ethical values. The majority of the interviewees directly expressed the view that leaders need to be honest, transparent, and trustworthy and that leaders' should adhere to virtues, integrity, rules and principles which underpin the existence of their organization. For example, two of the interviewees stated the following:

“Take the context of the central bank as an example. One of the most important works of the Thai central bank, or any central bank in the world, is to ensure the financial stability of the country... Therefore, it is vital that we adhere to virtues, integrity, rules and principles which underpin the existence of the central bank”
(L8).

“...if you unethically make your way to gain a high leadership position through lobbying or bribery, remember this; there is no free lunch. One day you will have to do as they ask you to do in return of the favor. Then, who is going to trust you? (L9).

Sustainability and Responsibility

The majority of the interviewees cited sustainability and responsibility as highly important values of ethical leadership in the public sector. For example, one interviewee stated:

“As public servants, we are working for the nation. We are meant to serve others, not one’s own interest. Although some people may say that they are not serving their self-interests, I notice that they still cannot see their work beyond the interest of their own department or organization, when it should be for the sake of the country as a whole” (L6).

Role Model

The importance of being a role model was addressed by all of the interviewees. Drawing on the interview findings, two key but related reasons emerged as to why leaders are important in promoting ethical values and practices in the Thai context. First, the interviewees highlighted that most directives, rules and policies regarding ethics are cascaded downwards; in the words of one respondent:

“I think most ethical problems in Thailand have a lot to do with organizational leaders. Policies and rules are usually made from the top” (L7).

Second, the interviewees expressed their concerns that no matter how clearly rules and regulations are written, they are likely to be ineffective if leaders themselves contravene these rules. For example, one interviewee stated:

“No matter how much rules, regulations, ethical guidelines, and monitoring systems are clearly set up, they can be ineffective and meaningless if leaders break those rules themselves. At the end of the day, what is made by a man can be destroyed by a man” (L2).

Mindfulness and *Dhamma* (M&D) Contribution to the Thai Public Organizational Leaders’ Ethical Values and Practices

Based on the interview question regarding the extent to which mindfulness practices have an influence on the leaders' ethical values and behaviors, all of the interviewees acknowledged that their mindfulness practices are informed by the study of *dhamma*, which is the teaching of the Buddha regarding the natural law, the way things are, and the nature of the mind and phenomena. The interviewees then determined that both their experiences in mindfulness practices and *dhamma* study have played a significant role in shaping their ethical values and behaviors. In this respect, four themes can be drawn from the interviews. Findings in this section have been structured to align with the four dimensions of core ethical values and practices identified in the previous section of the findings.

M&D for Compassion and People-Oriented

All of the interviewees stated that mindfulness practices have helped them to improve the regulation of their emotions. As a group, the interviewees claimed that, after practicing mindfulness for some time, they were able to detect the emergence of their own anger and, as result of this awareness, prevent themselves acting out this anger in negative ways. For example, interviewees stated the following:

“Mindfulness helps me regulate my temper better. As a result, my employees are more comfortable to come to talk to me. They are happy to give their opinions and suggestions. I also feel that when I ask them to do something they are more willing to do it” (L6).

“Practicing loving-kindness meditation together with mindfulness meditation is like mind-cleansing... If you really put your mind to the meaning while

practicing loving-kindness, not just remember the words, and you do this repeatedly, it can gradually change you to become a loving and kind person”
(L4).

M&D for Justice and Fairness

The majority of the interviewees stated that mindfulness practices have helped them to recognize their emotions, feelings and thoughts, such as anger, craving, sadness, and pleasant. As a result, their decisions tend to be more based on fact, principles, and objectivity, rather than emotions. Participant L1 and L6 further clarified this perspective:

“When a certain type of emotion arises in a particular moment, I am able to recognize it immediately and thereby, identify whether such emotion or thought stems from negative arousal or defilement, such as anger and craving. Therefore, I will not make a decision if I know that I still have that emotion”
(L1).

“Being a doctor not only gives lots of opportunities to do good deeds, but also bad deeds. For example, you explain less to some patients because you are moody, hurried or even hungry. Such unintended act can happen all the time. The lack of mindfulness causes you not being able to realize some small wrongdoings or unfairness towards your patients” (L6).

M&D for Virtue, Integrity and Honesty

The interview data identified three main elements of mindfulness practice and the study of *dhamma* which the respondents associated with ethical values and practices concerning virtue, integrity and honesty.

First, several interviewees mentioned the concept of sufficiency which, over recent decades, has attracted attention in Thailand due to the philosophy of ‘Self-sufficiency’ and ‘Sufficiency Economy’ led by King Rama IX. A number of the interviewees explained that sufficiency is related to the moderation of extreme needs. They acknowledged that such principle together with mindfulness practices can reduce some unethical behaviors that are driven by greed because mindfulness helps them to restrain cravings. For example, interviewee L9 explained that:

“Sufficiency lies in your own mind. It is whether you feel sufficient. As I continuously learn to let go of attachments through mindfulness practices, my mind has become more sufficient. I learn that death is the truth about life that everyone has to face, and there’s nothing I can take with me when I die” (L9).

Second, during the interview, most of the interviewees mentioned ‘*sati*’ (mindfulness) with the term ‘*sampajañña*’ (clear comprehension). Several of the respondents explained that ‘*sati*’ involves remembering to be in the present moment and ‘*sampajañña*’ is the realization of the right thing to do at that moment. For example, participant L8 stated:

“Mindfulness practice is significant because everything you do starts from your mind first. But the mind naturally works extremely fast. If you can have strong awareness of what’s happening in your mind, then you can control your behavior and make the right decision.”

Third, the majority of the interviewees stated that, during mindfulness meditation, they learnt that they cannot hold on to anything in this world forever, including their position or social status. Interviewee L8 succinctly elaborated upon this outlook as follows:

“If you let the truth about impermanence and non-self be the guiding principle of your life, you will see that it is pointless to become attached to your position or title. I am ready to stand up for the right things, even if it requires personal sacrifice ... while I am in this position, I never take it for granted.”

M&D for Sustainability and Responsibility

Several interviewees pointed out that the *dhamma* teaching on interconnectedness had led them to the view that everything in this world is connected and nothing can truly exist independently. Participant L12 provided an example of this perspective from his work which involves advanced technology management and sustainability:

“The understanding of the interconnectedness of every existence in this world makes me see that technology is one part of all existence. If we understand this, we would use it wisely to make the world, in which we live, a better place. For example, develop clean energy rather than weapons.”

Similarly, in relation to interconnectedness, another interviewee emphasized the potentially significant role mindfulness can play in raising awareness of the impact of one’s decisions on others:

“Mindfulness practices and dhamma teachings equip me to see the truth about the interconnectedness of things. Once you are aware of this, it would change the paradigm of your mindset, for example, you would internalize your cause of action before making decisions; you would consider the consequence of your action; you would be more responsible; you would see yourself being a part of the societal system; and you would concern about the sustainability of the society as a whole” (L8).

Discussion and Conclusion

In addressing recent calls for more research on ethical leadership in the public sector (Hassan *et al.*, 2014) in non-Western contexts (Eisenbeiß & Brodbeck, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2013; Resick *et al.*, 2011), this study has elicited four dimensions of core ethical values and behaviors which are perceived by Thai public service organizational leaders as central to ethical behavior in the public sector, that is, compassion and people-orientation; justice and fairness; virtue, integrity and honesty; and sustainability and responsibility. The findings generally are in line with the common dimensions of ethical leadership indicated in previous cross-cultural ethical leadership studies (Eisenbeiß, 2012; Resick *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, the view of these interviewees about ethical leadership in the Thai public sector also recognizes role modeling and the promotion of ethics in an organization via the actions of leaders (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

Unlike previous cross-cultural ethical leadership studies, however, this study demonstrates that ethical values and behaviors regarding temperance, humility, sufficiency and moderation are considerably emphasized in the Thai context. Although these elements were not categorized as discrete factors, the current findings reveal that

each element was acknowledged by the interviewees in the four ethical dimensions described above. This finding indicates that these public sector leaders regard temperance, humility, sufficiency and moderation as the underlying foundation of moral decisions in the workplace. Interestingly, these dimensions were not identified in Resick *et al.* (2006)'s four universal components of ethical leadership. While Eisenbeiß (2012)'s interdisciplinary and cross-cultural ethical leadership framework included moderation orientation, she raised concern that her qualitative results reflected an underestimation of the moderation orientation due to the overwhelmingly Western backgrounds of her interviewees. The findings of our study lead us to subscribe to her argument that moderation orientation may be emphasized relatively strongly by leaders from an Eastern cultural context, especially in view of the influence of religion in the Eastern world.

The second main purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which Buddhist-based mindfulness practice, as a means to spiritual development, can reinforce core ethical values and behaviors in the view of Thai public sector leaders. Drawing on the findings of the study, Table 2 is used to present a matrix of how Buddhist mindfulness and *dhamma* practices relate to each ethical dimension identified in this study. Three key points are drawn from the findings.

First, based on the interview data, all of the interviewees claimed that mindfulness meditation has helped them to develop elevated levels of self-awareness and self-regulation which has resulted in them engaging in more ethical decision-making and behaviors. It is emphasized that these findings are based on the perceptions of the interviewees rather than on independently verified outcome assessments of the interviewees' decision-making and behaviors. The matrix shown in Table 2 also

indicates that the interviewees perceived self-awareness and self-regulation to be the key elements underpinning ethical practices for all four ethical dimensions. This finding is in line with the assumption highlighted by Karelaiia and Reb (2015) and others (Pandey *et al.*, 2018; Shapiro, *et al.* 2012) of the existence of a positive correlation between mindfulness and moral reasoning. Our study reveals the interviewees not only embraced this assumption but were of the view that mindfulness training is developmental in nature and serves to strengthen this relationship (Analayo, 2006; Payutto, 2018).

Second, the finding regarding the interviewees' perception that wisdom can be developed through mindfulness meditation and *dhamma* study is in line with the standpoint that Buddhist mindfulness is a wisdom-based practice (Vu and Gill, 2018). Furthermore, the cultivation of wisdom through mindfulness was associated with spiritual nourishment within the workplace (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012; Petchsawang & McLean, 2017). It can be seen from the matrix presented in Table 2 that the interviewees viewed associated a heightened awareness of impermanence, non-self, and interconnectedness, with core ethical values and behaviors.

Third, mindfulness in Buddhism is designed to be cultivated simultaneously with training in higher virtues and wisdom. This systematic training is known as the Threefold Training. In this study, all of the interviewees acknowledged the importance of the Threefold Training and indicated that they were endeavoring to develop moral conduct, mindfulness, and wisdom simultaneously. Therefore, this systematic training was considered by the interviewees to be an essential mechanism which contributes to all four ethical dimensions. This finding supports the argument of Purser and Milillo

(2015) that the entire Threefold Training system can be seen as a formula for spiritual development and establishing “right” mindfulness.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that public service organizations in certain national contexts are likely to be highly sympathetic to the introduction of spiritual development programs, such as mindfulness training, to complement existing compliance-based approaches to ethical behavior in the workplace. For example, in contexts such as Thailand where Buddhism is widely practiced and accepted, the findings of this study indicate that such programs are likely to be received positively by public sector leaders who are seeking to promote ethical awareness and certain ethical values within the public sector. Significantly, this study sheds light on how Buddhist-based mindfulness may be used to reinforce ethical values and behaviors among public organizational leaders. In doing so, the study has provided rich examples of how mindfulness could potentially contribute to the promotion of ethical behavior relating to managerial practices in the public sector contexts. Nevertheless, the extent to which mindfulness programs would prove to be acceptable to employees in more secular contexts or contexts which are heavily influenced by non-Buddhist-based spiritual and religious philosophies needs to be examined carefully. For example, we note that ethical concerns have been raised about the use of mindfulness-based exercises in medical settings on the grounds that these exercises are: “...*likely to be in tension with many people’s core beliefs and values...*” (Ratnayake & Merry, 2018, p. 567). In this study, we sought the views of public sector leaders who already practice mindfulness to

explore their views about the extent to which Buddhist mindfulness practices can be used to reinforce ethical values and behavior. Notably, there is evidence that mindfulness practices are being adopted by non-Buddhists (Bowen *et al.*, 2015; Petchsawang & McLean, 2017); nevertheless, with regard to the appropriateness of mindfulness interventions in workplace settings, future research needs to establish areas of commonality between different cultural and religious contexts as well as the areas in which the assumptions and underlying philosophies of Buddhist-based mindfulness are likely to prove controversial.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations to be considered. First, as a small sample size qualitative study, public service organizational leaders in this study cannot be representative of all leaders in the Thai public sector. Moreover, given that this research was conducted in the Thai context, the findings cannot be generalized. Additionally, given that the method employed in this research is the in-depth interview, the data could not validate the correlation between Buddhist mindfulness practices and ethical leadership. Further research needs to be done to verify the outcomes of Buddhist mindfulness on ethical behavior through various methods, such as quantitative questionnaires and quasi-experimental research involving public service organizational leaders who practice mindfulness and those who do not.

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Table 1. Summary of Interviewees' Profiles

Leader	Current Position	Organization	Ministry
L1	Director (Colonel)	The 18th Military Circle	Ministry of Defence
L2	Director	Public University	Ministry of Education
L3	Head of a Research Committee	Public University	Ministry of Education
L4	Director	Public University	Ministry of Education
L5	Senior Expert Head of Advisor Group	Department of Mental Health	Ministry of Public Health
L6	Board of Executives	Academy and Hospital	Office of the Prime Minister
L7	Vice President	Digital Government Development Agency (Public Organization)	Office of the Prime Minister
L8	Board of Executives	Bank of Thailand (Central Bank)	Independent
L9	Board of Executives	Bank of Thailand (Central Bank)	Independent
L10	Board of Executives	National Office of Buddhism	Independent
L11	Vice President	Thai Airways International Public Company Limited (State Enterprise)	Ministry of Transport (State Enterprise)
L12	Vice President and Project Director	PTT Public Company Limited (State Enterprise)	Ministry of Energy (State Enterprise)

Table 2. The Relevance of Mindfulness and *Dhamma* Practices to Core Ethical Values and Behaviors of Thai Public Service Organizational Leaders

Mindfulness & Dhamma Contributions	Compassion and People-orientation	Justice and Fairness	Virtue, Integrity and Honesty	Sustainability and Responsibility
Self-awareness and Self-regulation	<p>Temperance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee empowerment - Positive relationship at work 	<p>Awareness of emotion and action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid biased and unfair decision or act - Avoid making decisions based on emotions 	<p>1) Mindfulness and Clear comprehension (<i>sati-sampajañña</i>):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness to do the right thing <p>2) Awareness of personal desire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Detecting and restraining cravings - Rejecting greed and extreme needs 	<p>1) Awareness of the consequence of actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-harmful acts to self and others - Responsibility to self and others <p>2) Awareness of higher life purpose and meaningful work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work for the benefit of others - Volunteering
Interconnectedness	Seeing all beings are equal as ‘companions’ in this world of birth, aging, sickness, and death			Realization of the interconnectedness of oneself, environment, and others
Impermanence	<p>Realization that problems arise and pass away:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Solving problems without stress - Less pressure on subordinates 		<p>Non-attachment to titles and materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Standing up for the right things, even if it requires personal sacrifice 	
Non-self	Egoless and humility			
Loving-kindness meditation	Compassion, empathy, forgiveness			
Focused-attention	Attentive listening			
The Threefold Training	<p>1) Training in higher morality (observe the Five precepts):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid misconduct - Non-harmful acts to self and others <p>2) Training in higher mentality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purify the mind - Refrain from unwholesome thoughts <p>3) Training in higher wisdom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding the truth of the way things are - Finding the right solutions 			