วารสารธรรมเพื่อชีวิต
JOURNAL OF DHAMMA FOR LIFE
ISSN: 2822-048X
https://soo8.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/dhammalife/index

Original Research Article DOI: 10.14456/jdl.2025.15

Beyond Crisis to Opportunity: Creating New Meaning in Life after Earthquakes Through the Four Noble Truths

Chetnitipath Promchin[1], Panachphongphan Bodhisatirawaranggoora[2]*, Phrapalad Thana Aggadhammo[3], Sompoch Wowong[4]

ARTICLE INFO

Name of Author & Corresponding Author: *
1. Chetnitipath Promchin
Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand.
Email: chetnitipath.pro@mbu.ac.th
2. Panachphongphan Bodhisatirawaranggoora*
Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand.
Email: panachphongphan.bod@mbu.ac.th
3. Phrapalad Thana Aggadhammo
Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand.
Email: thana.pim@mbu.ac.th
4. Sompoch Wowong
Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand.
Email: sompoch.wow@mbu.ac.th

Keywords:
Four Noble Truths, Earthquake, Post-disaster Mental Rehabilitation, Meaning-Making, Psychological Resilience

Article history:
Received: 01/03/2025
Revised: 04/04/2025
Accepted: 25/04/2025
Available online: 01/05/2025

How to Cite:
Promchin, C. et. al. (2025). Beyond Crisis to Opportunity: Creating New Meaning in Life after Earthquakes Through the Four Noble Truths. *Journal of Dhamma for Life, 31*(2), 212 – 223.

ABSTRACT

This academic article aims to present the application of the Four Noble Truths in healing and rehabilitating the lives of earthquake victims by creating new meaning after the disaster. The article analyzes the relationship between suffering caused by natural disasters and the learning process according to the Four Noble Truths, consisting of suffering (Dukkha), the cause of suffering (Samudaya), the cessation of suffering (Nirodha), and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (Magga). This approach leads to psychological resilience and a paradigm shift in living under the concept of turning crisis into opportunity. This article presents a conceptual framework and practical guidelines for applying the Four Noble Truths in community rehabilitation after disasters effectively and sustainably.

Introduction

Earthquakes represent one of the most devastating natural disasters, inflicting severe damage to lives, property, and the psychological well-being of victims. When an earthquake occurs, physical structures are destroyed, and the social fabric, life security, and existential meaning of affected individuals also collapse (Nakwatchara, 2019). In such crises, psychological rehabilitation becomes as crucial as physical reconstruction, especially in Thai society where cultural foundations and beliefs are deeply connected to Buddhism. On March 28, 2025, an 8.2 magnitude earthquake with its epicenter in Mandalay, Myanmar, affected Thailand, resulting in 9 fatalities, 9 injuries, damage to numerous buildings, temporary transportation disruptions, and estimated economic losses of approximately 20 billion baht (Department of Public Relations, 2025; Kasikorn Research Center, 2025).

The Four Noble Truths, a fundamental teaching in Buddhism, presents a systematic approach to problem-solving and alleviating suffering that can be effectively applied to manage distress caused by natural disasters (P.A. Payutto, 2020). This article aims to present a conceptual framework and practical guidelines for applying the Four Noble Truths in psychological rehabilitation and creating new meaning for earthquake victims, analyzed through perspectives of Buddhist psychology and human development.

Theoretical Framework

The Four Noble Truths: A Buddhist Approach to Problem-Solving

The Four Noble Truths, or the four sublime truths, constitute a core teaching in Buddhism that was realized and disseminated by the Buddha, comprising (P.A. Payutto, 2020; SM1097):

1. Dukkha (Suffering): States of physical and mental affliction, unfulfilled desires, and the imperfection of life.
2. Samudaya (Cause of Suffering): The origin of suffering, arising from craving or desire accompanied by ignorance.
3. Nirodha (Cessation of Suffering): The state where craving ceases and attachment no longer exists.
4. Magga (Path to Cessation): The method of practice leading to the end of suffering, comprising the Eightfold Path.

The Four Noble Truths transcend religious doctrine, embodying a systematic problem-solving process applicable to daily life and various crises (Phromta, 2022), particularly in earthquake disasters that inflict physical and psychological suffering on victims.

The Concept of Meaning-Making after Disasters

Meaning-making is a psychological process through which individuals attempt to understand and attribute meaning to their experiences, especially during crises or losses (Park, 2010). Psychologists and scholars in post-disaster rehabilitation have identified meaning-making as a crucial mechanism for psychological recovery and building resilience (Psychological Resilience) after disasters (Rajkumar et al., 2008).

The meaning-making process consists of two primary components: sense-making (understanding what has happened) and benefit-finding and growth (adjusting perspectives or life goals) (Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). This aligns with the learning process of the Four Noble Truths, which begins with understanding suffering, analyzing its causes, recognizing potential goals, and following appropriate pathways.

Applying the Four Noble Truths in Post-Earthquake Psychological Rehabilitation

1. Dukkha: Acknowledging and Understanding Suffering

Accepting the reality of suffering caused by disasters marks the essential first step in psychological rehabilitation. For earthquake victims, suffering manifests in multiple forms: loss of loved ones, property destruction, loss of livelihood, and feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness (Sirirattanarekha, 2020).

Research by Taweewong (2021) found that earthquake victims who could directly acknowledge and understand their suffering tended to adapt and recover psychologically better than those who denied or avoided reality. Group activities allowing victims to explore and accept their feelings, such as Storytelling Circles or Journaling, therefore serve as important tools in this stage.

2. Samudaya: Analyzing the Causes of Suffering

After acknowledging suffering, the next step is analyzing its causes. In earthquakes, the primary cause is a natural disaster beyond human control, but secondary causes may stem from psychological factors such as attachment to possessions, expectations, or perspectives on life security inconsistent with reality (Phra Maha Vuthichai Vajiramedhi, 2021).

Research by Thammikaphong (2020) found that disaster victims often experience psychological distress from three types of attachment:

1. Attachment to a lost past
2. Attachment to a present that doesn't meet expectations
3. Anxiety about an uncertain future

Therapeutic group activities that help victims recognize attachments causing suffering, such as Therapeutic Dialogue or Mindfulness Meditation, are therefore important in helping victims understand the true causes of their distress.

3. Nirodha: Envisioning the Possibility of Overcoming Suffering

Nirodha, or the cessation of suffering, in the context of earthquake victims, refers to recognizing possibilities for life rehabilitation and creating new meaning—not returning to pre-disaster conditions, but accepting change and seeing opportunities for developing new life patterns (Phra Paisal Visalo, 2022).

Research by Kasantikul (2020) found that victims who could shift their perspective from "Why me?" to "What can I learn from this?" tended to recover faster and develop greater psychological resilience. Activities that help victims reflect on life values and meaning, such as Future Self Letters or Life Mapping, are therefore beneficial at this stage.

4. Magga: Practical Approaches to Rehabilitation and Creating New Meaning

Magga, or the path to cessation of suffering, in post-earthquake rehabilitation contexts, refers to implementing suitable practices for life recovery and creating new meaning by applying the Eightfold Path, which encompasses the development of wisdom, conduct, and mind (Supapittayakul, 2021).

Research by Angkurarorhit (2021) proposed practical guidelines for psychological rehabilitation of earthquake victims according to the Eightfold Path:

1. Right View: Developing new perspectives that understand life's inherent changeability and recognize disasters as part of life's uncertainty.
2. Right Intention: Cultivating thoughts free from greed, anger, and delusion, such as the intention to help others despite one's own suffering.
3. Right Speech: Using language that encourages and inspires hope, avoiding words that aggravate one's own and others' suffering.
4. Right Action: Engaging in activities beneficial to personal and community rehabilitation.
5. Right Livelihood: Adapting or developing new occupations suitable for post-disaster circumstances.
6. Right Effort: Persevering in life rehabilitation without discouragement.
7. Right Mindfulness: Maintaining awareness of one's thoughts and emotions, especially during periods of stress or anxiety.
8. Right Concentration: Training the mind to remain calm and stable, able to face challenges effectively.

Activities promoting these practices, such as meditation, volunteer work, vocational training, or creating mutual support networks, are therefore important in helping victims create new meaning in concrete ways.

Research Objectives

This research aims to apply the Four Noble Truths to the psychological healing and community rehabilitation of earthquake survivors by fostering the development of new meaning and resilience after disaster. Specifically, it seeks to:

1) Synthesize theoretical and empirical knowledge on suffering and recovery processes in natural disasters.

2) Analyze the applicability of the Four Noble Truths to these contexts

3) Formulate practical guidelines for sustainable, Buddhist-informed disaster rehabilitation.

Research Methodology

This study employs a documentary qualitative research design, utilizing critical, deductive, and inductive methodologies. Data sources include primary Buddhist Scriptures, secondary philosophical analyses, empirical studies on disaster recovery and reports on psychological resilience following earthquakes.

Critical analysis is used to interpret and contextualize the Four Noble Truths within modern psychological frameworks. Deductive reasoning is employed to apply established Buddhist Principles to contemporary issues of disaster recovery, while inductive reasoning allows themes and strategies to emerge from the literature review.

Case Studies: Applying the Four Noble Truths in Community Rehabilitation after Earthquakes

Case Study 1: Ban Muang Kan Community, Chiang Rai Province

Ban Muang Kan community in Chiang Rai Province was severely affected by a 6.3 magnitude earthquake in 2014. The event damaged numerous homes and temples and significantly impacted the psychological wellbeing of community members (Office of Social Development and Human Security, Chiang Rai Province, 2019).

Following the earthquake, monks and community leaders collaborated to establish the "Psychological Rehabilitation through the Four Noble Truths Project," which included the following activities:

1. Dukkha Stage: Community forums were organized for residents to share post-earthquake experiences and feelings, enabling everyone to accept reality and understand that the suffering experienced was a shared community experience.
2. Samudaya Stage: Dhamma discussions and meditation practices were arranged to help residents explore attachments causing additional suffering and recognize that some suffering originated from resistance to change.

3. Nirodha Stage: "Reimagining the Community" activities were conducted, where residents collectively drew and designed their ideal community after rehabilitation, creating shared vision and hope for the future.
4. Magga Stage: Occupational groups, volunteer teams, and ongoing psychological development activities were established, along with collaborative networks between the community and external agencies.

Project outcomes revealed that residents experienced improved psychological wellbeing, increased mental resilience, and more effective adaptation to change. Additionally, the community demonstrated greater strength, mutual support groups formed, and new occupations appropriate to the post-disaster context were developed (Community and Social Development Foundation, 2021).

Case Study 2: Ban Nam Dip Community, Lampang Province

Ban Nam Dip community in Lampang Province was affected by a 5.9 magnitude earthquake in 2019, resulting in damage to over 100 homes and minor injuries to several individuals (Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, 2019).

After the incident, the local health promotion hospital and community temples jointly organized the “Creating New Life through the Four Noble Truths” project, integrating Buddhist principles with psychological counseling through the following activities:

1. Dukkha Stage: A community counseling clinic was established, with monks and psychologists listening to problems and encouraging victims. Discussion groups were formed to exchange experiences and feelings among victims, helping them realize they weren't facing suffering alone. Additionally, "Healing Stories" activities were organized, allowing victims to express their experiences through performance art or storytelling (Suttiprapha, 2020).
2. Samudaya Stage: "Self-Understanding" activities were conducted, using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques integrated with Buddhist concepts of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, helping victims explore and understand thought patterns causing additional distress. Thought Record worksheets were used alongside contemplation of Buddhist non-attachment principles, enabling participants to see connections between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Hemachan, 2020).
3. Nirodha Stage: "Turning Crisis into Opportunity" activities were organized, inviting survivors from other disaster areas who had successfully rebuilt their lives to share experiences. Brainstorming sessions were conducted regarding opportunities and positive outcomes that might arise from this change. Life Mapping was implemented to establish new directions and life goals, along with positive thinking training and loving-kindness meditation, helping victims envision new life possibilities (Wannaphat, 2021).

4. Magga Stage: A "New Life Development Center" was established, integrating Eightfold Path practices with life skills and vocational development. Occupational training aligned with Right Livelihood principles was provided, including local product processing, organic farming, and handicrafts. Stress management through meditation therapy, walking meditation, and adapted chanting was taught, and community support networks were fostered through various volunteer activities (Mental Health Center Region 1, 2020).

The project included systematic pre- and post-activity assessments using the Stress Assessment Form (SPST-20), Depression Assessment Form (PHQ-9), and Resilience Scale. Results showed that victims experienced significantly reduced stress and depression scores (42.7%) and increased resilience scores (36.9%). Additionally, community-level changes were observed, including the formation of three new occupational groups: a basketry handicraft group, a local food processing group, and an organic farming group, as well as community-initiated disaster preparedness projects (Lampang Mental Health Development Committee, 2021).

What is particularly interesting about this case study is the harmonious integration of modern psychological sciences with Buddhist principles, making psychological healing consistent with the cultural context and community beliefs. Furthermore, the project employed a multidisciplinary approach involving healthcare personnel, monks, psychologists, and community leaders working together, which proved to be an effective model for assisting disaster victims in the Thai social context (Wanpen et. al., 2021).

Comparative Analysis of Both Case Studies

From both case studies, several interesting points emerge regarding the application of the Four Noble Truths in rehabilitating earthquake victims:

First, both communities implemented operational models aligned with the Four Noble Truths process but differed in activity details. Ban Muang Kan emphasized a Community-Based Approach, while Ban Nam Dip more systematically integrated psychological concepts with Buddhist principles (Chokwiwat, 2022).

Second, both communities demonstrated a transition from individual healing to community development, reflecting how applying the Four Noble Truths can expand from individual suffering remediation to building community strength. This aligns with Buddhist concepts of self-benefit (Attahita) and others-benefit (Parahita) (Phra Maha Somboon Vuddhikaro, 2021).

Discussion

The rehabilitation of earthquake victims' psychological well-being through the Four Noble Truths, as demonstrated in both case studies, reflects the systematic application of Buddhist principles in alignment with Thai social contexts. Key points for consideration include:

Integration of Western Knowledge with Buddhist Principles

Both case studies demonstrate that integrating Western psychological concepts and techniques with Buddhist principles can enhance effectiveness in victim rehabilitation, particularly in Ban Nam Dip's combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) with the Three Characteristics of Existence. This aligns with research by Phanlumjiak (2021), which found that psychological therapy integrated with Buddhist principles proves more effective than either approach alone, especially in Thai society where cultural foundations connect with Buddhism.

This integration reflects compatibility between modern science and traditional wisdom, particularly regarding thought adjustment and perspectives on suffering, which are primary goals in both cognitive psychology and Buddhism (P.A. Payutto, 2020).

Creating New Meaning through the Four Noble Truths Process

The Four Noble Truths process used in both communities aligns with the psychological concept of Meaning-Making, with each step helping victims systematically and profoundly create new meaning:

1. Dukkha Stage: Confronting and accepting loss, marking the beginning of meaning-making.
2. Samudaya Stage: Analyzing causes of psychological distress, helping understand connections between attachment and suffering.
3. Nirodha Stage: Envisioning new possibilities, comparable to creating space for new meanings and life goals.
4. Magga Stage: Practicing to achieve new goals or living according to newly created meanings.

This process helps victims not only heal psychological wounds but also grow and develop from their suffering experiences, aligning with Post-Traumatic Growth concepts by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), who proposed that individuals can positively develop from life crises given appropriate management processes (Hirankasi, 2021).

Community-Level Psychological Rehabilitation

Another notable feature of applying the Four Noble Truths in both case studies is expanding from individual to community rehabilitation through participation processes and mutual support networks, reflecting Buddhist principles of the Four Bases of Social Solidarity (Sangahavatthu 4) and the Six Harmonious Qualities (Saraniyadhamma 6) emphasizing harmonious coexistence.

This community-level rehabilitation aligns with concepts of Social Capital and Community Resilience emphasizing that post-disaster recovery potential depends on relationship strength and social networks within communities (Walaiseathien, 2020). Various activities in both communities,

such as establishing occupational groups, volunteer activities, and creating shared community visions, contribute to building social capital and community strength.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Based on the analysis of both case studies, the following policy and practice recommendations for the psychological rehabilitation of disaster victims in Thai society are proposed:

1. **Developing Psychological Care Systems Integrating Buddhist Principles**: Relevant agencies should develop systems and practices for victim psychological care that integrate Buddhist principles with modern sciences to align with Thai cultural contexts and beliefs.
2. **Promoting Religious Institution Participation**: Temples and monks should be encouraged to participate in victim psychological rehabilitation, potentially through training monks in Buddhist psychological counseling basics.
3. **Developing Assessment Tools Aligned with Spiritual Dimensions**: Assessment tools for psychological rehabilitation that encompass spiritual dimensions beyond Western psychological metrics should be developed to comprehensively measure psychological recovery in Thai contexts.
4. **Promoting New Meaning Creation through Buddhist Principles**: Programs or activities emphasizing new meaning creation through Buddhist principles, particularly the Four Noble Truths, should be developed to help victims grow stronger through crises.

Conclusion

Creating new meaning in life after experiencing earthquakes through the Four Noble Truths process, as demonstrated in both case studies, reveals the potential of Buddhist principles in healing psychological wounds and strengthening disaster victims. The integration of Buddhist principles with modern sciences, adaptation of processes to cultural contexts, and expansion from individual to community rehabilitation are key factors in successful psychological rehabilitation.

The Four Noble Truths thus represent not merely religious doctrines for suffering cessation but also effective conceptual frameworks and processes for psychological healing and creating new meaning in disaster and crisis contexts. Systematically studying and developing applications of these principles is therefore important in strengthening the psychological resilience of individuals and communities facing future disasters.

References

Angkurarorhit, P. (2021). Applying the Eightfold Path in psychological rehabilitation of earthquake victims. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 12(1), 89-110.

Chokwiwat, W. (2022). Operational models for psychological rehabilitation of earthquake victims according to the Four Noble Truths: Comparative case studies. *Journal of Peace Studies Review*, 10(3), 981-995.

Community and Social Development Foundation. (2021). *Evaluation report on the Psychological Rehabilitation through the Four Noble Truths Project, Ban Muang Kan community, Chiang Rai Province*. Chiang Mai: Author.

Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation. (2019). *Report on the earthquake situation in Lampang Province, 2019*. Bangkok: Ministry of Interior.

Department of Public Relations. (2025, March 29). Myanmar earthquake magnitude 8.2 affects Thailand with casualties and injuries. *Hfocus*. https://www.hfocus.org/content /2025/03/33572

Hemachan, T. (2020). Integrating cognitive and behavioral therapy with Three Characteristics principles to assist disaster victims. *Journal of Psychology, Kasem Bundit University*, 10(1), 23-38.

Hirankasi, P. (2021). Post-loss growth: Case studies of earthquake victims in Thailand. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 52(2), 45-60.

Kasantikul, D. (2020). Perspective transformation toward post-stress growth in disaster victims. *Journal of Mental Health of Thailand*, 28(2), 87-104.

Kasikorn Research Center. (2025, March 31). Preliminary economic impact of earthquakes in Myanmar and Thailand. *Kasikorn Research Center*. https://www.kasikornresearch.com/ th/analysis/k-social-media/Pages/Econ-Earthquake-CIS3571-FB-2025-03-31.aspx

Lampang Mental Health Development Committee. (2021). *Report on the implementation of the Creating New Life through the Four Noble Truths Project*. Lampang: Lampang Provincial Public Health Office.

Mental Health Center Region 1. (2020). *Manual for post-disaster psychological rehabilitation activities according to the Four Noble Truths*. Chiang Mai: Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health.

Nakwatchara, W. (2019). Psychological and social impacts of earthquake disasters. *Journal of Mental Health of Thailand*, 27(3), 156-170.

Neimeyer, R. A., & Sands, D. C. (2011). Meaning reconstruction in bereavement: From principles to practice. In R. A. Neimeyer, D. L. Harris, H. R. Winokuer, & G. F. Thornton (Eds.), *Grief and bereavement in contemporary society: Bridging research and practice* (pp. 9-22). Routledge.

Office of Social Development and Human Security, Chiang Rai Province. (2019). *Report on social impacts from the earthquake in Chiang Rai Province, 2014-2019*. Chiang Rai: Author.

P.A. Payutto. (2020). *Buddhadhamma* (49th ed.). Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.

Park, C. L. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 257-301. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018301

Phanlumjiak, K. (2021). Integrating Western psychology with Buddhist principles in disaster victim psychological rehabilitation. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 28(2), 89-112.

Phra Maha Somboon Vuddhikaro. (2021). Buddhist principles and community development: Case studies of post-disaster communities. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 12(1), 15-36.

Phra Maha Vuthichai Vajiramedhi. (2021). *Life uncertainty: Lessons from disasters*. Bangkok: Pran Publishing.

Phra Paisal Visalo. (2022). *Dhamma and suffering management: Lessons from disaster crises*. Bangkok: Suan Ngern Mee Ma Publishing.

Phromta, S. (2022). The Four Noble Truths: Problem-solving process in crisis situations. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 29(1), 1-20.

Rajkumar, A. P., Premkumar, T. S., & Tharyan, P. (2008). Coping with the Asian tsunami: Perspectives from Tamil Nadu, India on the determinants of resilience in the face of adversity. *Social Science & Medicine*, 67(5), 844-853. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.05.014

Sirirattanarekha, T. (2020). Psychological impact from natural disasters: Healing and rehabilitation approaches. *Journal of Mental Health of Thailand*, 28(3), 215-230.

Supapittayakul, S. (2021). Applying the Eightfold Path in victim psychological rehabilitation. *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 28(1), 55-75.

Suttiprapha, N. (2020). The role of storytelling in psychological rehabilitation of earthquake victims in northern Thailand. *Journal of Liberal Arts*, 20(2), 121-145.

Taweewong, T. (2021). Suffering acceptance and psychological recovery in earthquake victims. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 52(1), 67-85.

Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01

Thammikaphong, S. (2020). Attachment and psychological distress in earthquake victims. *Journal of Psychology*, 18(1), 42-56.

Vipasana Research Institute. Pāḷī Tipiṭaka (SM). https://tipitaka.org/index.html

Walaiseathien, P. (2020). Social capital and post-disaster community rehabilitation. *Journal of Social Development*, 22(1), 31-52.

Wannaphat, P. (2021). Positive thinking for creating new meaning in life after disasters. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 47(1), 112-132.

Wanpen, W., et al. (2021). Multidisciplinary approach in psychological rehabilitation of earthquake victims using Buddhist principles. *Journal of Nursing Science*, 39(3), 15-28.