

## Therapeutic Value of Drama and Religious Context

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### Abstract

*Therapeutic value of drama and religious context to develop the morals of the human beings is not a topic that is often discussed in the community atmosphere and the application of such methods are also limited. According to my teaching experience as a performing arts lecturer in the University, I have realized the value of Buddhist morals for university students as well as for other people in their daily activities. The morals help to build up socio-emotional development of human being and it creates a peaceful environment. This study focuses on few morals which are much close to daily life in accordance with the Buddhist teaching such as right view (prajna), right conduct (sila) and right concentration (Samadhi). Drama therapy can be considered as one of the best methods to teach as well as to learn these morals. The main purpose of this study is to identify the role of a play such as Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prince of Denmark as an accredited tool to learn and teach Buddhist morals. The research problem is how to apply the techniques of dramatic therapy such as group activities, sharing experience, Improvisational approach, live performances, role-play and problem solving methods to develop morals among the people. The qualitative research method is also used in the study. The university youth community was selected as the sample of research. The result of this study shows that the drama therapy is the best way to develop morals of the people and its impact on the mental relaxation and the entertainment process contributes to build up an environment of goodwill in the social setting.*

**Keywords:** Drama therapy, Buddhist morals, Teaching and learning process, Improvisation, Role of Hamlet

### Introduction

The definition of drama therapy is "the intentional use of drama and /or theatre processes to achieve goals"(National Association for Drama Therapy 2012). The therapeutic goals could be identified as expressing participant's feelings and thoughts, improving problem solving skills, developing self-esteem and achieving catharses (liberation) which are outward oriented qualities. In addition, religious context develops these goals through meditation practices as inward oriented qualities. However, both outward and inward qualities should be enhanced to build a moralist human being to the society. According to Joel Gluck's

opinion in "Mindfulness and Drama Therapy: Insight Improvisation and the Transformation of Anger" the qualities of meditation and drama therapy need for balancing, healthy development and learning in human's day-to day life (Gluck 2014).

To achieve this purpose the research demonstrates the applicability of drama therapeutic techniques as a tool of teaching and learning Buddhist morals among the university youth. The Sri Lankan higher education system has been programmed in accordance with the subject disciplines. The majority of students except some students in religious studies are unable to reach or gain knowledge about the value of human morals in their day to day life from those disciplines. Therefore, they have to face signs of trauma and violence. Consequently, some students are at the risk of not being able to achieve social harmony, intellectual and emotional reaction as well as mindful and sensitive adaptation in their role as responsible adults in the society.

Therefore, the educators of universities should create a practical model for understanding the peaceful environment in the university as well as in the society. To achieve this, we have to develop morals in the academic team between teacher and student, interaction with peers and non-academic community. The basic Buddhist teaching of morals; right view (*prajna*), right conduct (*sila*) and right practice (*Samadhi*) contribute to develop those positive reactions and can be applied by a person to be mindful (Gluck 2014).

The Buddhist welfare context links with good deeds, happiness and well-being (Premasiri, 1987, p. 65). Furthermore, the works of art serve as a medical tool to release tension, depression and anxiety and to heal and develop spirituality in human psychology. Aristotle's work of poetics defines this process as *catharsis* (purgation) and it is emerged through aesthetic pleasure (Schaper 1968). Because of the purgation, the mind removes risky elements and gets purified. Eva Schaper explains this process as being similar to that of religious context (Schaper 1968).

However, those logical judgments confirm the similar effectiveness of the works of art and the religious context to cleanse the mind. Therefore, the works of art and the religious context can be used to develop moral autonomy for a peaceful and nonviolent environment. In the process of using drama therapy in education, it is defined that a play requires a learning strategy in human life because of its role-play process (Landy 2007). Furthermore, the drama education contributes to exchange socio-emotional awareness through live performance and

to develop the relationship between the teacher and the student in a relaxing and trusting atmosphere. Furthermore the main purpose of educational drama is to promote the students' learning through reading text, rehearsal of roles and so forth (Landy 2007). Thus the Play *Hamlet* is selected to be referred as a preliminary source in arts education to build up the argument in this paper.

The play *Hamlet of Shakespeare* is a remarkable story which discusses the psychological conflict in a revengeful human mind. Because of the revengeful mind of Hamlet, he has to face pointless tragedies in his life and the others also have to face the death unexpectedly. This play reveals that if those characters had followed a moral life they would have shown their powerful motivation to resolve the problem through rationality and moral judgment. The Buddha's teaching about morals provides solutions for problems faced by this kind of people in the actual world. Buddha stated that anyone can live wisely or unwisely according to his or her moral values (Premasiri 1987). He argued that we should live with an understanding of the moral values individually and with others through practical aspects in our life and it will lead to our happiness and peacefulness. To promote this phenomenon in the higher education institutions, the study selected the right view, conduct and practice as fundamental moral principles and these morals act as a link between drama and moral premise.

### **Link Between Drama Therapy and Buddhist Moral Principles**

The religious education system in Sri Lanka as well as in the modern world has to face many challenges and also Sri Lankan higher education context demonstrates lack of critical thinking about religious morals. Consequently, the socio-emotional conflicts, psychological destruction, intellectual and vindictive harassments are dramatically increasing day by day not only in academic communities but also in the entire society.

According to the formal education system in schools and universities, most of the students are not able to attend the religious studies, particularly the students who are following performing arts as their special stream. However, for studying Buddhist morals, the drama therapy can be used as a significant learning strategy in this field. Drama represents the self-expression and the receptive side of the mind of the audience as well as that of the performer.

This atmosphere can be used for being-mind rather than for performance mind<sup>1</sup> and it is enhanced to improve the relaxation and awareness (Gluck 2014). It helps to avoid cognitive disagreement between audience and performer and they tend to respect each other (Gervais, 2006, p. 9). The being-mind is able to release the stress, anxiety etc. through the dialogues and gestures of practices as well as by reading a text as a therapeutic technique.

However, the study selects few examples from the play *Hamlet* to highlight the link between Buddhist morals and drama therapy and the capability of using this relation to develop human virtue in the society. The majority of socio-emotional arguments of the play can be correlated to the Buddhist teaching of *Dhammapada*, *Singalowada sutta*, *Parabhawa sutta*, *Kalama sutta*, *Paththakamma sutta*, *Aggikandopama sutta*, *Chullkammawibhanga sutta* and so forth. The study observes few characters and dialogues from the play *Hamlet* to prove the capability and applicability of drama therapy as a tool of teaching and learning morals in the education system. It can be applied to reduce harassment, anger, jealousy, vindictiveness, complexity of human mind and to make suitable decisions in their daily lives and to live as a wholesome human being.

The distinction of the philosophy of education expresses the nature of learning and educator's responsibility to improve morals of their students<sup>2</sup> (Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia. 2005 Vol.3.). Further, this concept describes that the human beings should be trained to improve their skills to balance emotions through education either in the formal or informal education setting. To generate these kinds of human beings, the education system should develop their metaphysical level of morals by introducing new teaching methods and learning strategies. According to observations, the aesthetic and religious education streams can be implemented to develop emotional experiences and to find out the correct solutions for the problems in the human life.

Teaching and learning drama is the best way to understand the conflicts in our lives since the drama builds up the basis of conflict and tragedies come to a successful destination as that of our lives. We have to face the psychological, social and cultural conflicts as the

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<sup>1</sup> Performance mind is "represented on stage and required to perform; the perceived demand to entertain, be clever, and to please the audience". Being mind is "a relaxation and awareness, in which one is present to the body, sensations, feelings, emotions, one's surroundings other people, and so forth"(Gluck 2014 ).

<sup>2</sup> In the title of education philosophy of Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia Volume 3, explains "the educator should attempt to improve instill moral virtues and political values and Plato, Rousseau and John Dewey were major figures in the history of education philosophy".

characters in drama. In this regard we have to find better solutions for those conflicts and should get experience in problem solving by improving moral practices. Therefore the education should be developed so as to teach how to resolve the conflicts in human's day-to-day life.

### **Therapeutic Value of Drama and Religious Practices**

The above factors prove that the human being should be trained to control their emotions such as grief, anger and despair as well as love, kindness, compassion and so forth when associating others. These emotions can be moderated by the religious studies and active imagination interest in creative works of art through its therapeutic values. According to the Buddhist meditation which is a therapeutic practice, our body (*kayanupassana*) and mind (*chittanupassana*) can be balanced. This function of the purification of mind is similar to Aristotle's theory of cathartic effect (Schaper, 1968, p. 133). Drama has a therapeutic value similar to that of religious activities which develops personality and morals of human beings. Both the religious and aesthetic disciplines demonstrate the ability of healing spirituality. Some examples in the ancient Europe clearly emphasize the significant association between religion and drama to improve human morals especially through tragedies.

However, European academic society followed the technique of drama to serve a new orientation to the society. In the fifth century B. C. Greek dramas were manifested to offer respect for the God of Dionysus. There was a religious festival for God Dionysus where the genres of tragedy and comedy were performed over few days. They trained the school of the chorus for singing Dithyramb and it was in their curriculum. The actors and the singers in the Drama were represented as religious leaders. The theatre was the commonplace for distributing knowledge emotionally, artistically and aesthetically. It is confirmed by Seneca's statement; "The morals of tragedy observed the things and happiness of life" (Coggin 1956).

In the seventeenth century Europe, the theatre was a significant element in their education system. The European community realized the positive improvement of the body, skills, senses, inner feelings and thoughts through practicing drama or engaging drama. The best example is that there were sixteen drama schools in France. The renaissance academics used drama in their education in order to justify human values. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there were very famous dramatists like Guillaume Guèrente who presented a commentary of Aristotle's

plays. Moreover some academics like George Buchanan translated Greek comedies and tragedies such as Euripides' *Medea and Alcestis* (Coggin 1956).

However, in the eighteenth century, drama was used at the social institution in Europe. In addition they referred Shakespeare's works of art for education. In 1734, majority of women were encouraged for Shakespeare's work. Shakespeare and his contemporaries show the positive effect of the entertainment of drama such as Pythagoras, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Those evidences proved that drama could be mechanized to express inner feelings and release tension, anger and so forth as well as to improve catharsis. In this regard, this is the therapeutic purpose of drama. But the word "drama therapy" could not be found in the fields of art and literature at that time. According to historical evidences, the term "drama therapy" was created by Peter Slade (1912-2004) in the 1950s in England (Landy 2004).

Apart from drama, the artists have also used the art as a mean of Christian doctrine in the medieval period. In the Baroque period art was used in religious services and the drama has contributed to develop morality. Moreover, every genre of art can prove its practical values. For example, stage plays is a genre of art which has particular tools to develop physical and psychological effects such as strengthening the memory, regulating the tone and effectiveness of the voice, pronunciation, mime, gesture and etc. Bacon says that the genres of tragedy and comedy can be used as therapeutic tools and they represent the mistakes of our life<sup>3</sup> (Coggin, 1956, p. 68).

According to Coggin, if we have some mistakes in our life, the drama as a learning tool orientates us to correct our psychological mistakes. This method was used by Shakespeare in his sentimental tragedy. He creates a short drama in his play *Hamlet* to explain psychological matter of Hamlet as well as that of his mother and uncle. *Hamlet* justifies the physical and mental reactions from his mother and uncle while performing the short drama. It is apparent from Shakespeare's great work *Hamlet* that an effective drama can mediate to discuss human's inner feelings. This meaningful therapeutic purpose of drama conveyed by Shakespeare is not only useful to ancient society but also to the modern community.

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Philip Sidney said "tragedy opens the greatest wounds, and shows forth the ulcers that are covers with tissue... makes kings fear to be tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors... with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teaches the uncertainty of this world and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are built"

In the application of drama therapy, the drama mediates to show human's feature as the image of a society and its emotions are related to contemporary characters of human beings. This is the intellectual appeal in a drama as well as in other arts which integrate between intellectual and emotional atmosphere. Also, it is refreshed or renewed by a role of drama. Landy explained Moreno's (1946) four types of roles in drama; *psychosomatic or physiological roles, psychodramatic or fantasy roles, social roles* and *cultural roles* (Landy 2014). If we carefully observe the role of *Hamlet*, it can be identified as a social role. The nature of a social role is that it builds a relationship with the family and other members of the society. *Hamlet* doesn't have a satisfied relationship with her family members and his friends as well as with his lover. As a result, he expresses his anger, unconsciousness, complexity and unstable state of mind for his collaborators. We can see how Shakespeare promotes a strategy for releasing this type of feelings from *Hamlet*. He created a main role similar to Hamlet in the short drama and *Hamlet* understands the reality by releasing tension and anger by directing and watching the drama.

In contrast, the Buddha's intellectual dialogues can be applied to solve Hamlet's tragic story and his dilemma. In the basic principles of Buddhist teaching, the strategies include understanding each other, following problem-solving methods, improving communication skills, decision-making ability and behavioral patterns in social life. In order to achieve human's intellectual and socio-emotional development, drama therapy techniques and basic Buddhist principles demonstrate remarkable teaching methods that can be used in the student-centered classroom.

For mechanism of student-centered classroom drama therapy techniques could be used to develop skills, effective student's specialization, self-improvement and professionalism. Those qualities of the teacher will improve the spiritual, social and ethical morals of his /her students. The best example is that after the French revolution in France, the church organized the teacher education system (Lynch & Dudley Plunkett 1973). Furthermore, developed multicultural features in the society can also be transmitted with spiritual, social and ethical morals of any group of the society. The education setting of Western drama provides useful examples to improve this study. Therefore the study strives to bridge and has proved the multicultural mechanism between Western play and oriental religious atmosphere to make right view, conduct and practice good behavioral pattern of people.

## **Application of Drama Therapy and Buddhist Morals in the Classroom: Case Study**

Drama therapy could be expressed in few ways "play, embodiment, projection, role, story, metaphor, empathy, distancing, witnessing, performance, and improvisation" (North American Drama Therapy Association) to make meaningful people to the society. A drama therapist can use performance or text for creative process and achieve catharsis. As a drama therapy practitioner, I have used a text of the play *Hamlet* to be discussed in this paper.

On the first day in my class, I made two groups out of twenty students as the first strategy to apply therapeutic technique in the class. First, we arranged practice hours for reading text in a regular manner, such as twice a week and so forth. When I met them time-to-time we discussed new facts about the text and I could notice that they were sharing dramatize experience between each other. Thus, it is evident that individual works contribute to develop personal capacity but group works build up their preparation of various items or ideas according to the knowledge and skills of each member in the team. Finally, they produced a great work of art as a result of the teamwork and they show the outcome of their adaptation of knowledge, skills, mutual understanding and relationship in the teamwork. Team work represents a strong bond for building up believable contacts, expressing inner feelings and shearing experience with team members in the drama therapy field.

This is the basic theoretical background and the nature of co-operative activity of a drama as well. The team should construct their intellectual capacity by safeguarding democracy. The democratic way always helps to generate well-balanced emotions in a young group because they have freedom to create peaceful environment in the class and to improvise their creative ideas which is the most valuable technique in the drama therapy field. Therefore, I often arrange classes as teams and consequently they tend to appreciate, admire and respect each other because of their developed and meaningful right view, conduct and practices.

The second strategy is to build up relationship between teacher and student as well as among peers to integrate mindfulness in the classroom. Building a good relationship with others is a remarkable method to share experience and listen to each other with compassion in a peaceful environment. The best example is reading the text loudly to create mutual relationship between the reader and listeners. On the basis of drama therapy, the therapist and the client should exchange their believable relationship at the beginning through eye

contact. When reading the text together, everybody shares their mutual acceptance in the class. They express their reaction through gestures, mime cues and so forth.

This context is explained by Harley Granville-Barker in his book “The Use of The Drama” in 1944. He asked a question about the qualities in Shakespeare’s plays to keep alive today. The brief understanding of Harley’s answer is that Shakespeare is the most remarkable observer and therefore he could have clearly observed the interpersonal interaction of human emotions (Barker, 1947, p. 70). It is understood that he could have realized the treatment of Hamlet’s occult feelings about other characters. The example shows Hamlet’s significant attention to his lovely girlfriend Ophelia. Although Hamlet has an abnormal behavior, Ophelia doesn’t neglect him. She attempts to understand his abnormal behavior and she prays to the god to recover him and she trusts his love. Love is a remarkable sentiment between husband and wife, children and parents etc. which creates a harmonious society. This concept can be clearly seen in the following conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia.

Hamlet says to Ophelia: “*I did love you once*” and Ophelia says: *Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so* (Hamlet, Act 111. Scene. I). Perhaps, Hamlet shows his passion towards Ophelia but she always treats Hamlet with patience and compassion. It reminds us the middle path of Buddhism; *Sammaditthi* (correct vision) (*samyuttanikaya* 1V, 1981, p. 654-655). It is the foundation of the ethical life of human<sup>4</sup> It appears to be a committed relationship with her family as well as with her beloved boyfriend. When the students were reading the text, I quoted the above mentioned dialogues and explained through dramatical movements. Then they actively participated and enjoyed an aesthetic pleasure.

As the third strategy for understanding morality and mindfulness, I conduct my teaching based on activities to provide instructions on morals for cognitive process of creativity, multiple intelligence and emotional intelligence in my drama classroom. For human capital they should show their critical thinking, application skills, analytical thinking, creative skills and so on for their dissemination of knowledge to the society.

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<sup>4</sup> in Buddhism, and when formulating the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, which may be considered as the Buddhist foundation for the ethical life, right view ( *Sammaditthi*) came to be placed as the first of the eight factors (Premasiri 2019).

### **Role Play and Sheared *Chittanupassana* (mind)**

For developing *chittanupassana* (mind) we close our eyes and attempt to concentrate on a focus area, human or any object in the actual world and shear the thinking and insight feelings, sensation and healing with those focus images. These kinds of techniques are used to develop a role in a play by client. This is a good practice for drama therapy to build up a role in our mind. For the purpose of achieving those goals, we examined the script carefully and highlighted the turning points which were related to morals of the roles. Then we accessed the lesson and developed the dramatic activities by comparing Hamlet's good deeds and understood his complexity as a feature of a social role. For instance, in the incident where Hamlet is waiting for his father's spirit in the night, he expresses his impatient mind.

*Would the night were come! Till then sit still, my soul: foul deeds will rise, Though all the earth overwhelm them, to men's eyes* (Hamlet, Act.1. Scene 3).

Since Hamlet always behaves in anger, his soul is never perfect. He makes wrong decisions and misjudgments. Shakespeare built up the main theme of destructions caused by revengefulness around him. However, the behavior and thoughts of young Hamlet represent his misjudgment of his mother (Gertrude) and his uncle (Cludius, King of Denmark) therefore he does everything as he prefers with a trembling mind. It is conveyed through the actions and his conventional dialogues in the play. Shakespeare has used a strategy to arouse the self-expression of Hamlet by using the insane behavior and built up a conflict of drama as a dramatic quality<sup>5</sup>. I explained Hamlet's mind gradually and paid attention to this kind of characters who face tragedies in everyday life of any society.

Secondly, we critically analyzed those imbalanced behaviors and the reaction of the Buddha's teaching for those kinds of people through Dhamma text or other documentation. The advices in Dhammpada to people like Hamlet can be shown as a tool of morals. The verse emphasizes that if we can forget the others' mistakes we will be able to live peacefully.

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<sup>5</sup> Hamlet says to Ophelia about this misbehavior as follows: *I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. what should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all: believe none of us.*" (Hamlet Act III. Scene 1).

It means we should protect the humanistic value and moral responsibility by inner purification. The example of Dhammapada :

*Akkocchi mam avadhi mam, ajini mam ahasi me, ye tam mam upanayanti, veram tesupasammata (Dhammpada Yamaka Vagga: verse.4,).*

*“Living in human society people often quarrel with one another. When such conflicts occur, people often keep thinking about the wrongs done to them by others when that happens, there, anger tends to grow. But in those who forgive and forget the wrongs done to them anger quickly vanishes they are then at peace”*(Dhammapada, 1994, p.9).

The end of the verse explains the outcome of good deeds and control of our inner feelings. But Hamlet can't forget his father's murder and he thinks to take revenge from his uncle (Cludius). According to the requirement of the ghost (his father, former king of Denmark) he thought that he should take revenge from his father's enemy. This incident is similar to another example in Dhammapada which shows the disaster in revengeful mind. If anybody wants to take revenge from others he will never hate the conqueror. This advice is highly valued to the young generation in the university because they are young academics and some of them are always not mature and responsible. Consequently they represent intellectual gap between some groups in the university.

In addition, if a man criticizes someone he/she should be patient and then he can build up friendship each other. Instead of revengefulness he can rejoice his whole life. Hamlet didn't think about patience regarding his mother or uncle. He was not a wise man and he didn't practice about the right view and right conduct in his life. The students observed this point through the verse of Dhammpada which represents the outcomes of the good deeds of human beings not only in this world but also in the next birth. (Dhammapada, 1994,p. 33).

After referring those examples we started the role play and examined the patterns of behavior from *Hamlet* and other roles. Every student expressed their thoughts and sensation through improvisation. They recognized the significant features about the good deeds mentioned in a verse of Dhammpada and the dramatic strategies which are used by Shakespeare to build up the conflict of Hamlet's mind as well. Shakespeare created the main character through this phenomenon because he wanted to build up the dramatic conflict and psychological inquiries around *Hamlet* in detail. We meet different characters in the play *Hamlet* and they suffer from different mental complications. Ophelia falls in love with Hamlet but finally, she appears to be a mad character due to Hamlet's irrational love and

strange behavior. I observed my students according to their ability of understanding those dramatic qualities, expressing therapeutic quality with aesthetic pleasure and the critical issues in their day today life.

The result of therapeutic and moral practices proved further discussion created around *Hamlet's* behavior of his non- virtuous actions, balanced emotion, flexible reaction and sensitive appreciation. Normally, the sensitive appreciation could be improved through acting, listening, memorizing dialogues, acceptance of deeds and so forth. On the other hand, some details can be proved through Buddha's teaching similar to these people.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, therapeutic techniques as well as religious morals contribute to please inner feelings and thoughts. In addition, the human's moral can be developed by practicing right view, right conduct and right concentration through the relaxation, pleasing well-being by drama therapeutic techniques. It is confirmed that the drama and the religious context contribute to heal spirituality and demonstrate psychological implication and the meaningfulness of the practices as well. Those constructive aspects mediate to build up a happy, peaceful, and non-violent environment within the drama therapy and religious context.

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