Review and Conceptualization of Spiritual Health in a Working-Age Population in Thailand

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Abstract

In this study, the authors investigated the concepts and components of spiritual health in a Thai working-age population using documentary research and phenomenological research as methodologies. They were based on a qualitative sociological approach, while the tools used were primarily content analysis and in-depth interviews. The 20 informants were purposively selected for their long-term experiences and embodiment of spiritual health, whether as experts or lay practitioners. Documentary sources were searched, scrutinized, and analyzed for keywords and structures of meaning to assess the findings. The results demonstrated a conceptual framework for spiritual health in a Thai working-age population, assessed as definitions, indicators, and supporting factors. By definition, spiritual health means seeing and understanding the truth as it is (insight) and feeling connected to something greater (connectedness). The indicators of spiritual health are behavioral and mental; supporting factors include inner actions (practices of mind) and outer actions (practices in action). The conceptual frameworks summarized from in-depth interviews and documents show a fair agreement with each other in terms of essence and meanings. The findings become good contributions to the development of a workable measuring tool, designing sets of experiential activity in psycho-healing, and the development of policy-making regarding spiritual health promotion in various social sectors.

Keywords: spiritual health, spirituality, conceptual framework, working-age population

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การทบทวนและการสร้างกรอบมโนทัศน์ของสุขภาวะทางปัญญาในประชากรไทยวัยทำงาน

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้ เป็นการศึกษาแนวคิดและองค์ประกอบของสุขภาวะทางปัญญาในคนวัยทำงานของสังคมไทย โดยใช้การวิจัยเอกสาร และใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยแบบปรากฏการณ์วิทยา ซึ่งเป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพทางสังคมศาสตร์ มีเครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการวิจัยหลักคือ การวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก โดยสัมภาษณ์กับผู้ให้ข้อมูลที่มีประสบการณ์ด้านสุขภาวะทางปัญญา ทั้งผู้เชี่ยวชาญ และคนวัยทำงาน จำนวน 20 คน จากการคัดเลือกแบบเจาะจง และในการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาจากเอกสารที่เกี่ยวข้อง ข้อมูลที่ได้ถูกนำมาวิเคราะห์หาคำสำคัญ หาแนวโน้มของความหมาย แล้วนำมาจัดเข้ากลุ่มของความหมายต่างๆ ผลการวิจัยพบว่า กรอบมโนทัศน์ที่เกี่ยวกับสุขภาวะทางปัญญาของคนวัยทำงานในสังคมไทย สามารถแบ่งออกได้เป็น 3 ประเด็นหลัก ได้แก่ นิยามความหมาย ตัวบ่งชี้ และปัจจัยเกื้อหนุน โดยสุขภาวะทางปัญญานั้น หมายถึง การเห็นและเข้าใจความจริงตามที่เป็น (Insight) และการสัมพันธ์เชื่อมโยงกับสิ่งที่ยิ่งใหญ่กว่า (Connectedness) ตัวบ่งชี้ ประกอบด้วย ตัวบ่งชี้เชิงพฤติกรรมและตัวบ่งชี้เชิงจิตใจ ส่วนปัจจัยเกื้อหนุน ได้แก่ ปัจจัยภายนอก (ที่เป็นการฝึกปฏิบัติ / ลงมือกระทำ) และปัจจัยภายใน (ที่เป็นการฝึกปฏิบัติของจิตใจ) นอกจากนั้นยังพบว่า กรอบมโนทัศน์ต่างๆ ที่ได้จากการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกในบุคคล และที่ได้จากการวิจัยเอกสาร ต่างให้แนวโน้มของเนื้อหาไปในทางเดียวกัน ผลการวิจัยทั้งหมดนี้สามารถจะนำไปใช้ในการสร้างเครื่องมือวัดสุขภาวะทางปัญญา การออกแบบชุดกิจกรรมเชิงประสบการณ์เพื่อช่วยเหลือเยียวยาคนในสังคม รวมถึงการประยุกต์ใช้ในการขับเคลื่อนเชิงนโยบายของหน่วยงานที่ทำงานภาคสังคมได้ต่อไป

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Introduction

The world is rapidly changing. Intense and severe crises are being reported in multiple locations across the globe. The word 'disruption' now reflects seemingly mundane issues and is used in all aspect of living, including the economic, social, and environmental spheres, not to mention changes in ecosystems and global pandemics all around the world. Thai society is no exception, and those who are most aware of the many problems and their severity have no choice but to alleviate and correct these issues so that well-being and happiness can flourish in people's lives.

The World Health Organization considers that well-being consists of a perfection of physical health, mental health, social health, and spiritual health (Dhar et al., 2011), in which all four dimensions are linked in a holistic manner. The spiritual aspect is crucial here but is often overlooked. Wasi (2004) has raised awareness of a spiritual revolution in which the addition of a spiritual aspect to life allows individuals to develop and allows human development to reach perfection. It is necessary to enable people to reach the potential to help restore society and return it to a positive balance to allow the whole world and nature to be healed.

The spiritual dimension is of paramount importance in many facets of life, including the lives of working people, which are linked to overall well-being. Although spirituality is rooted in all levels, from the individual to the organizational, the social, and the global levels, most people are normally unaware of the nature of spiritual well-being when they talk about happiness in life; most of them focus on physical and mental happiness first. This is because spirituality is usually perceived as a deep, unreachable, and intangible thing that is difficult to grasp, and most people have no clue to what it is about. Some people tend to consider spirituality to be a religious question that has nothing to do with modern people. It is also considered as a body of knowledge within the fields of philosophy and religion. Many literatures show that up to now most studies of spirituality providing clear concepts and widely applicable tools have been limited to those of Western cultures and belief systems. (Chongvisal, 2021) Therefore, it is too early to claim that all explanations and concepts now available in the field are relevant and true for Thai people and Thai society, and the best-fitting

concepts of spirituality for the Thai context remain to be identified through study and investigation.

Researchers consider that phenomenological research is appropriate and necessary for developing a suitable conceptual framework for the study of spiritual health in Thai working-age people. Phenomenological research is an approach to studying phenomena and human experience, aiming to understand the meaning of phenomena or events in the life that a person has experienced. Also, in-depth interview is used as a tool to collect data. Researchers consider that the conceptual framework thus obtained will be specifically applicable to and beneficial for Thai people, who are living within the real and common circumstances where the research data are collected. This may lead to the design and creation of quantitative measuring tools for use in a larger group of samples such that concrete knowledge and means of development regarding spiritual health in Thai society can be crystallized and finally understood.

Objectives

(1) To investigate spiritual health in prominent academic documents of both the Thai and English languages.

(2) To develop a conceptual framework for spiritual health in working-age Thai populations.

Literature Review

There are several terms that are closely related to *spiritual health*, namely, spirituality, spiritual well-being, contemplative intelligence, wise mind, inner wisdom, and so on. The word spirituality itself is highly abstract and conduces to different interpretations. Its meaning contains both horizontal and vertical senses. Human beings experience spirituality as an inner dimension of life, and its growth lays the foundation of a good life, which is desired by everyone (Chuengsatiensub, 2006; Chuengsatiensub & Anupongpat, 2017). A number of scholars in Thailand have proposed means of understanding spiritual health or spirituality; for example, spiritual health has been defined as a particular dimension or state of mind that is heightened, attains the highest, and loses a sense of selfishness Spirituality is also described as a quality of inner wisdom, possessing goodness and free of narrow-mindedness and selfishness. (Wasi,

2009) In addition, spiritual health is expressed as an essence or as the truest quality of something or someone, which transcends the usual emotional or mental well-being and goes beyond fleeting happiness. It tells us about our true self, our existence, how people interact with others, and the quality of our consciousness, including the way that a person understands him- or herself to exist, express ourselves, and experience our feelings and emotions. (Praiyam et al., 2009) Spiritual health is generally understood to relate to experiences, even momentary ones, of serenity, fine and delicate bliss, fearlessness, freedom, and deep joy. (Plitpolkarnpim, 2009; Chongvisal, 2021)

Among international scholars, spirituality is taken to be part of a good life, made up of good relationships, meaning, and purpose life, and exhibiting a desire to reach an ultimate goal and lead life accordingly (Seidl, 1993). Spirituality is something that happens in an individual where one can connect with one's own perfect self, others, and the universe at large. The word that best captures the meaning of spirituality is perhaps interconnectedness (Mitroff & Denton, 1999).

Fisher (2010) investigated the concept of spiritual health by interviewing different individuals about what they considered the crucial indicators of spiritual well-being. Ultimately, this was found to relate to living a life harmoniously with oneself, others, nature, and God (something greater than the self). The keywords for the categories making up spiritual health are as follows: (1) spiritual health in the sense of connecting with self, consisting of identity, self-awareness, joy, peace, and meaning in life; (2) spiritual health in the sense of connection with others consists of love, forgiveness, trust, respect, and loving kindness; (3) spiritual health in the sense of connection with environment consists of connection, seeing greatness, unity, harmony, and awe in nature; and (4) spiritual health in the sense of connection with something greater than self consists of relationships, worship, unity, peace with God, and prayer. In this assessment, the respondents provide dual answers for each item, their own ideal conception in response to each question and their own direct experience. Responses were given in the form of a score from 1 to 5, and respondents who provide responses with great differences between the two aspects in the same question, are offered further consultation on the given issue. Furthermore, Chongvisal et al. (2010) reviewed the literature on spiritual health to develop the assessment of spiritual health and its

manual for health care and educational personnel. Initially, the researchers developed an 18-dimensional spiritual health assessment and scenario questions for a case study based on the results of literature review. The improved instrument was used to collect the empirical data from 855 participants; exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to analyze the data. Results revealed that spiritual health could be categorized into seven dimensions, namely moral courage, loving-kindness and compassion, goal and sufficiency, humanism, humility, forgiveness, and friendliness.

Research Methodology

The main methods used in this research were documentary research and phenomenological research. The procedures used were the following:

(1) Reviewing all related documents to identify definitions, key points, concepts, and the related research outcomes.

(2) Analyzing the contents reviewed to summarize and identify the meanings, domains, components, and indicators of spiritual health in general.

(3) Creating a set of questions, approved by experts to use in in-depth interview on spiritual health in Thai working-age population based on the analysis of the reviewed document.

(4) Purposively selecting the research participants through group discussions, additional participants included experts and lay practitioners in the area of spiritual health, reached by snowball sampling, each of whom was contacted directly by the researcher to obtain informed consent and other necessary information, together with appointment scheduling for the interviews.

(5) Carrying out the in-depth interviews with participants and collecting qualitative research data.

(6) Analyzing all collected data to obtain keywords, structures of meaning, and indicators, as well as all other significant points of concern.

(7) Synthesizing the conceptual framework for spiritual health in a Thai working-age population.

The questions used in the in-depth interviews covered the respondent's path of spiritual growth and transformation, perspective on spiritual health, indicators for

spiritual health, suggestions of ways to promote developing spiritual health, religious and supernatural beliefs, and other relevant avenues of inquiry. Examples of questions used for in-depth interviews were as follows: "Please tell me about your experiences of spiritual health", "What is your definition of spiritual health?", "What are the components of spiritual health?", "Please tell me about an important turning point in your life related to spiritual health." and "Did any new characteristic or behavior manifest when you found out that you had experienced a change in spiritual health?" The interviews were conducted online (2 participants) and on-site (18 participants), each interview lasted approximately 1-2 hours. Interview process: 1) Introduced the research team, interviewers, and funders. 2) Explained the purpose of the research. 3) Clarified the letter of intent to participate in the research. 4) Explained the background of the research and objectives of the interview. 5) Started the interview and terminated the interview. All answers obtained from the interview were kept anonymous and analyzed only to reveal the overall findings without specifying individual identity.

Data Analysis

After reviewing the literature related to spirituality and spiritual health, definitions; keywords; and indicators of spiritual health were obtained. After the interviews and verbatim transcription, content analysis was performed to acquire keywords, indicators of spiritual health, and content of spiritual health in Thai working-age population. Finally, the conceptual framework of spiritual health in Thai working-age population was yielded.

Results

Synopsis of an overview from the documents

The researchers analyzed the document contents, extracted relevant keywords, and grouped them according to the meanings related to different aspects of spiritual health. Three main categories were observed: behaviors (19 keywords e.g., emphatic listening, emphatic relationship, work-life balance) state of mind (31 keywords e.g., compassionate, mindfulness, self-acceptance), and worldview (3 keywords included connectedness with God or nature, spiritual awakening, and transcendence).

Conceptual framework regarding the spiritual health

The data were collected through in-depth one-on-one interviews of 20 participants. The participants were 11 males, nine females; eight people aged 41–50 years old, seven aged 51–60 years old, five aged 61 years old or older; and 15 Buddhists, four Christians, and one of unspecified religion. The conversations were transcribed verbatim, and the essence of the findings was introduced as three main themes; the definitions, the indicators, and the supporting factors. The results were elaborated respectively as follows.

What is spirituality? This question is at the root of this study. Following the interview sessions, it was clear that spirituality is something existing in every human being as a potential. This latency seems quite deep and profound, but it is not at all unusual to obtain access to it.

The profound potential that lies beneath superficial depths seems to go beyond our ordinary abilities and our mere perception through our five senses. It also goes beyond ordinary mental abilities as well, such as the perception of emotions and even exceeds the ability to think, analyze, reason, or memorize. In short, spirituality cannot be felt or thought about superficially; instead, it is something deeper and more refined.

Spirituality is related to the higher or subtle levels of perception in human beings and relates to individual values, life purpose, highest attainments, and the inherent *pure spirit*. The ability to have such experiences, in other words, is confirmation that human beings can achieve something greater than anything mundane or material-oriented pleasure. As the authors delved deeper into this essence, two different attributes were revealed:

- Spirituality is seeing the truth as it is (Insight).
- Spirituality is being connected to something greater (Connectedness).

Seeing the truth as it is (Insight). In this sense, spirituality relates to the knowledge of *eternal* truth, implying a wisdom that also lies beyond worldly understandings. *Prajna,* the Sanskrit word for wisdom, means right understanding about life at all levels, ranging from the physical level, such as like having a healthy body, up to the noblest level, freeing oneself from sufferings.

Thus, being spiritual involves first requires acquiring right information and knowledge to develop the state of mind and body in the form of ordinary perceptions, moving on to awareness and understandings in higher levels, seeing truth that connects to life and realizing inner states that exist and cease as they naturally do, such that the attachment to fixation or suffering dissolves. This ultimate truth of life is finally understood as one comes to realize that *just being with the present moment is the path to solving suffering*.

Thus, spirituality can be briefly understood as intuition, enlightenment, or right understanding, which is prejudice-free with crystal clear viewing. This is knowledge of noble level of truth, and in Buddhist culture and in the Thai language, this is called *panya*, or wisdom. So, in Thailand the words for spirituality and wisdom (or *panya*) can be used interchangeably.

Being connected to something greater (Connectedness). Spirituality in this sense emphasizes having direct experience, especially among those with profound senses of expansiveness, integration, and connection. This can start from remaining intimately with oneself, others, groups of people, communities, society, greater nature, and the world as the whole. This connectedness can be recognized in the form of an ordinary everyday life as it is lived, such as in the form:

Rice exists because there are farmers, soil, the sun, harvesters,

blacksmiths who forge sickles, millers, cooks, etc. All are connected.

I then see we are interdependent. You are therefore I am! (EX#2 Mr. Metta)

It can also occur in the form of an extraordinary transpersonal event, such as in the following:

I let myself afloat in the vast ocean, meditated, and focused on my

breath. I went with the flow, all was integrated into one, no thought,

no attempt, it all went on together like synchronicity. (EX#3 Mr. Insee)

Spirituality understood as greater connectedness involves a state of mind that is dynamic and becomes or unfolds one's experience simultaneously. Those who have experiences like this can become released from being self-centered. We may come to realize our own small size compared to the totality of nature. This allows us to behold more people's hearts and be more generous, respectful, and considerate to one

another. This kind of perception enables us to recognize that we are never ever cut off from the surrounding world. Being together is perfectly natural and normal. As we connect with ourselves, we learn of our own thoughts and feelings. When we connect with others, we learn the thoughts of others, or empathy. Finally, when we connect with the totality of nature, we recognized our existence within the web of reality of the universe. In other words, human beings can perceive and understand things at different stages of consciousness, and this can accommodate more truth as it grows and evolves.

Both aspects, that is, seeing the truth as it is and being connected to something greater work together to develop the meaning of spirituality as holism and completeness. That is, seeing and comprehending the truth depends on the expanding consciousness of the person, and vice versa.

After the first problem is solved, the next one follows. **How can we know who is spiritual and who is not?** What is it like to attain spirituality to a sufficient degree to affect one's own well-being? What brings this about? In the interviews, two sub-themes were extracted regarding indicators of spiritual health. These are behavioral (or external) indicators and mental (or inner) indicators

Behavioral indicators of spiritual health. Good relationship appeared to be the most commonly mentioned keyword in this category. It describes ways that we interact with others, including listening, opening our hearts, extending friendship and goodwill, managing conflict, accepting others as they are without judgment, sharing time (such as with family), loving, and forgiving. This relates to 'those who are willing to listen even while disagreeing and those who cooperate, help, and are able to communicate in difficult situations. Importantly, we need the skill of deep listening that we need to have.' Relationships can be improved when people listen to each other's hearts and develop awareness of emotions arising in the moment. This also involves letting go of the self, detaching from being self-centered, and instead using empathy to connect with the very person in front.

The next indicator relates to **benefiting others**. This keyword was also notable and important, implying that people who feel more connected to others and the world all around them see the interrelatedness of all things, including themselves. Here any being's happiness and sufferings affect other beings and one's own happiness and

suffering as well. To benefit others, therefore, is to convey one's worldview and meaning making accordingly. This includes the attitudes regarding great love, support, responsibility, dedication, volunteering, and ethics and morality.

Good relationships and benefiting others were the most commonly referred to keywords in this category. Other keywords that were mentioned, in order, were **life balance**, **achievement of one's highest potential**, **and mindfulness practice in daily life**.

As recognized, spiritual health refers to holistic well-being, which is reflected in every dimension of life, whether physical, mental, social, or environmental. Therefore, it allows the person to take better care of his or her self, prevent involvement with harmful substances or behaviors, becoming able to slow down, rushing less, and navigating toward simplicity. In this way, the inner world becomes more at ease and stable, while social life also better develops positive relationships, joyful and fulfilling work, and the contentment of a purposeful coexistence. In relation to behavioral indicators, most participants tended to focus more on the social aspect of having desirable and beneficial relationships than on any other.

Mental indicators. Another category of indicators of spiritual health is those that refer to the qualities or skills that arise within the mind of a person with good spiritual health. This kind of quality usually attracts people's interest and is regarded as a divine pleasure or type of bliss that may not be attainable by normal people. However, after examining the portions of interviews related to this topic, it was found that the quality of mind designated as spirituality is certainly not a quick fix for suffering or a supplemental fleeting joy, either. In fact, it is a state of inner security that can be gradually cultivated to make the individual more stable and better able to embrace his or her own suffering. Further, this regards the ability of the mind that to see and accommodate those very problems with a new pair of eyes such that what once was the disturbance falls apart.

The most notable interview result no doubt related to **inner stability** (security, balance, and peace).

For me, it is the strong heart! The heart of human being can be both magnificent and vulnerable at the same time. The heart that is able to

remain strong does not collapse even facing the biggest typhoon! It remains still. ... I feel inside getting back to steadiness and balance in a short while. (EM#3 Mr. Mekha)

This very quality appears to present the best representation of what we are seeking in a spiritually healthy person. Inner stability, containing security, balance, and peace, is sometimes supported by related terms, such as resilience, immunity to suffering, and so on.

The next most mentioned keywords for this category are **mindfulness**, **relaxation** (lightness and freedom), **letting go of ego**, and **having a strong sense of one's life purpose**. Mindfulness is the fundamental attitude that sets the stage for achieving spiritual health. It also relates to guidance of the mind to perceive reality and becoming self-aware, self-accepted, and self-released from fixations of all kinds, including those that are mental, emotional, or behavioral. This can be substituted for by simpler terms, such as being conscious, or being awake. Relaxation and letting go of ego are interrelated because once the mind is aware of what it clings to and begins to let go of its attachments, the first thing it senses is relaxation. This very condition was noted by many the participants, particularly when they reported how they overcame their main obstacles in life. To let go of the self, to release what you are holding on to, or to divert your attention away from your egoistic self, in other words, to be humble and gently allowing your old habits to pass away, remaining within the rebirth of your own spirit. Another keyword relates to the strong sense of life's purpose. This is crucial in terms of the source of power as it propels life forward. It is also associated with feeling full, satisfied, self-accepting, confident in life, appreciated at work, and passionately doing things to one's fullest potential.

Other qualities and skills of mind indicate spiritual health. These are **simplicity**, **joy**, **compassion** (empathy, acceptance, and altruism), and **self-control**. Viewing life with simplicity enables a person to become ordinary, slow, and free from competition in the context of the material world. It is related to the feeling of delicacy; when contemplated, it leads to beauty and aesthetics, which somehow bring us joy. Meanwhile, empathy, as non-judgmental and accepting of how others can bring about heart opening and the growth of consciousness, ultimately gives way to generosity and

altruism. All of these imply an evolution of consciousness that grows and reaches to integrating with the great tapestry of the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of the universe, which is inseparably interwoven with all other beings. Gratitude, reverence, and heart-felt appreciation are also crucial qualities of the mind of those whose spirits are undivided. Self-control is a skill that helps restore inner stability and maintains the relationship in a good shape. It is a part of social and emotional intelligence.

Overall, the qualities and skills of mind indicated above can be rearranged for easier understanding as follows: qualities and skills of mind that regard self-awareness, such as mindfulness, inner stability, relaxation, simplicity, self-control, and so on, and those of connection with others, such as compassion, gratitude, conscience, and so on. These two aspects can complement each other to enable a person to navigate to reach his or her highest potential as a human being.

The indicators of spiritual health can be divided into two categories: behavioral indicators and mental indicators. They may be noticed by direct interaction and observation of one another, particularly where those who observe once had the same kind of experiences; this will allow such observations to be valid, developing deeper understanding.

The final main theme obtained from the interviews was developed in this question. **How can we cultivate the spiritual health in a person?** This does not directly imply spirituality but is profoundly connected to it, as it is the key to the attainment of spirituality. Almost every participant emphasizing its importance spoke seriously about the cultivation of spiritual health and spiritual development, rather than merely recognized or assessed spirituality.

In interviews, the process of cultivating spirituality or identifying the supporting factors of spiritual health initially included both inner and outer works. Therefore, this theme can be sub-divided into two accordingly, **practices of mind** and **practices of action.** The overall meanings tended to focus on the self, beginning from one's own inner and outer works rather than manipulating or relying on others.

The most notable supporting factors among the inner works are **self-contemplation**, **meditation**, and **maintaining noble silence**. These three keywords are connected and together form the basic condition for developing any insights

henceforth for oneself. Silent minds induce mindfulness, which allows one to view and understand things correctly and clearly.

> The point is that you must be silent! Chattering mind can never give way to spirituality. What you need to do is to stay with silence, contemplate, and then you will be close to God. (EX#1 Miss Mali)

The next of these are **having an open heart** (being open and empathizing with others), **being equanimous** (and non-judgmental), and **wishing to help others**. These three practices involve connecting with others in a supportive and constructive way. They are also associated with the cultivation of reverence and gratitude toward all beings and things.

> The way is that you need to be less of selfishness, and more of empathy, altruism, loving kindness, and compassion. (EP#2 Mr. Suwich)

They are the basic condition for a person who wishes to broaden his or her consciousness toward others and all things.

Apart from the items mentioned above, participants also spoke of **having faith in Dharma teaching**, and **seeking truth in life** among inner works, as well. The former helps soften one's mind, making it open for goodness without much judgment, while the latter induces curiosity, creativity, and the courage to think and learn about new things.

As is clear, proper inner works lay good foundation for all things, as the mind is the real base of operations for all external actions. Therefore, inner works are preparation from within that is needed alongside the outer actions, so that the development toward spiritual health can be eventually achieved.

For outer works or practices in action, the most notable are **Dharma practice** (including chanting, praying, and text reading, along with other formal religious practices), and **mindfulness practice** (including solo time and retreats, along with other practices similar to Dharma practices but less formal that can be performed at different times and places as convenient).

Dharma practices and mindfulness practices are the best known and fundamental activities for those who are stepping into the world of spirituality, but the

list is not limited to these. Many other different activities and experiences exist that can actually be performed to obtain similar outcomes. Among these are **being out in nature** and **confronting sufferings and reality**. Those who share these experiences indicate that self-immersion into nature is similar to connecting oneself with greater spirits or God, in the Christian context. They help release our small and limited version of the self and open it up to our greater surroundings in the present moment and then going with its flow. Likewise, confronting sufferings and reality also helps us let go of self, surrender to things uncontrollable, and then open to the same situation that one is encountering with new eyes.

> The path is not always a religious one. Importantly, one has to face suffering without escaping from it. Welcome disappointments, being beaten and defeated, enduring something you dislike, all of these can come as different experiences. .... By these, you shall transcend your own self-centeredness. (EM#3 Mr. Mekha)

As noted above, a human life is a sacred object. It is undeniably the spiritual experience itself if we are fully open to it, able to truly exist with it, and contemplate it well. However, the contemporary world that we live in is full of logic and reasoning that prevent us from having those experiences because we think we already know it all. Thoughts do convince us of this, but the thing may be entirely different in the eyes of spirituality.

There are other practices in action as well that help us cultivate spiritual health. Notably, they tend to be relational ones, including **having community of good friends** (and good masters), **having trusting relationships**, **volunteering**, and **building up equitable society** (a supportive and safe one). They also include having a moral perspective, earing merits and doing charity, keeping religious precepts, and doing good works for people.

In summary, supporting factors for spiritual health can largely be divided into two categories: the inner works (practices of mind) and the outer works (practices in action). Researchers will likely continue develop what has been found here and systematically design sets of activities and short courses to train those who are in need

of spirituality, along with enhancing spiritual and holistic well-being for Thai society as a whole.

Discussion

In Thai working-age society, spiritual health can be defined as seeing the truth as it is (insight) at both the secular and noble levels, and being connected to something greater (connectedness), including people, nature, and the world. Indicators of spiritual health can be divided into two categories: behavioral indicators that imply one's actions, such as pursuing life balance and mindfulness practice in daily life and becoming concerned with others such as good relationships and benefiting others, and mental indicators, which include qualities within oneself, such as inner stability and mindfulness, and those concerning others, such as compassion and gratitude (as shown in Table 1). Finally, the supporting factors for spiritual health can also be divided into two categories, namely, the inner works that imply inner practices such as self-contemplation and having faith in the Dharma teaching and those concerned with others, such as open heart and wishing to helping others and outer works namely, one's outer practices, such as Dharma practice and being out in nature, and those concerning with others, such as developing a community of good friends and volunteering (as shown in Table 2).

Table 1 Summary of keywords for the indicators of spiritual health

Behavior indicators		Mental indicators	
Self	Others, society, and the world	Self	Others, society, and the world
• Life balance • Achievement of one's highest potential • Mindfulness practice in daily life	• Good relationship • Benefiting others	• Inner stability • Mindfulness • Relaxation • Letting go of ego • Strong sense of life purpose • Simplicity • Joy • Self-control	• Compassion • Gratitude • Conscience • Strong sense of life purpose

Table 2 Summary of keywords for the supporting factors of spiritual health

Inner works		Outer works	
Self	Others, society and the world	Self	Others, society and the world
• Self-contemplation • Meditation • Maintaining noble silence • Having faith in Dharma teaching • Seeking truth in life	• Open heart • Being equanimous • Wishing to helping others • Gratitude	• Dharma practice • Mindfulness practice • Being out in nature • Confronting sufferings and reality • Doing benefaction	• Having community of good friends • Having trusting relationships • Volunteering • Building up equitable society

For all interview sessions and previous document review, researchers found consistency of the overall content regarding the conceptual framework of the spiritual health of the Thai working-age population as discussed below.

The nature of spiritual health was elaborated in documentary research, and the work done in the phenomenological research shares two common features with it. From documentary summation, it was found that the fundamental worldview of spirituality consists of enlightenment knowing the truth of life, along with the great connection, such as oneness with God or the Highest. From the interview sessions, two similar points were found regarding the definition, i.e., seeing the truth as it is (insight), and being connected with something greater (connectedness). Beyond these two crucial points, the third aspect that could possibly be added was that spirituality is about maximizing potential and human values (humanism-oriented worldview), as this was emphasized through a number of keywords, such as respect and honor for human equality, living life purposefully, acknowledging self-esteem, and so on. Similar remarks were recorded in the interviews, such as, for example, liberating people for their highest possibility, to gain freedom, and to respect and value oneself, as well as others.

Similarly, meanings regarding indicators and the supporting factors of spirituality were also agreeable in the way that they can be seen in two aspects: an outer showing behavioral indicators or practices in action and an inner one like mental indicators or practices of mind, and so on. In other words, the way people look at and comprehend

spirituality is not contradictory, but jargon and the words used to describe spirituality are different depending on culture and the social context.

As noted, the essential meanings extracted from documentary study of spirituality, which has largely been performed in Western cultures and those from the interviews of this project, which were conducted in a Thai context shows a similarity without significant contradiction. At any rate, the spirituality written in English is noticeably told in the context of Christianity, while in Thailand it is shared and conversed based on the Buddhist belief system. Moreover, for the documentation that the messages conveyed through it appear to be, to certain extent, generalized and conceptualized, so, the descriptions of spirituality are, for example, told in a structuralist style including concrete explanation about different stages of consciousness. Meanwhile, the contents drawn from the interviews here are mainly from direct experience and stem from personal subjective views of the phenomena.

Conclusion

Spirituality or *spiritual health* is certainly an intangible basic element embedded in every human being. Despite its abstract nature, spirituality can be perceived through feeling deep inside and not by mere thinking. After the analysis of all available data, researchers draw a conclusion on the nature of spiritual health as follows:

- Spirituality is subjective. It holds true depending on individual experiences.
- Spirituality is fluid, has no constancy, and can change from time to time.
- Spirituality does not depend on intellect. It can appear as direct experiences.
- Spirituality is holistic. It interweaves with all dimensions of life, including the social and environment.

Because of this, when we seek to learn about others' state of spiritual health, we usually adopt means involving direct interaction, such as conversation, deliberately building trust and intimacy, reflection on one's thoughts and feelings, and observations of facial expression, voice tone, or action, rather than remote access. This ensures that we can see and truly comprehend whatever thing or state arises from the deeps and comes to make sense for the person, which informs the observer of the quality of his or her own spiritual health.

Practical implications

The results of this study suggest the following implications:

1. The agencies in charge of overseeing human development in Thai society such as Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth) should advocate the frameworks related to spiritual health obtained from this study e.g., the definitions and indicators of spiritual health, or should adopt these frameworks to drive the policies responding adequately with current issues. For example, the definitions of spiritual health should be given by National Health Act's or ThaiHealth and their networks. Besides, the obtained frameworks should be included in the objectives of projects aiming to promote health of Thai society.

2. The frameworks related to spiritual health of Thai working-age population obtained from this study could be used in designing a set of experiential activities to foster spiritual health. That is to encourage an individual to value spiritual health, learn about or develop spiritual health in oneself, and change one's attitudes. In addition, learning about spiritual health in various settings should be promoted. Also, spiritual health promotion for work-age population and new generation in Thai society should be conducted. Accordingly, the concerned agencies should initiate and stimulate spiritual health activities.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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