



Conceptualizing Kilesa through Metaphor: A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of an English Dhamma Book

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Abstract

This study investigates the conceptual metaphors and metaphorical expressions used to explain kilesa within an English Dhamma book, *Forest Leaves: A Selection of Talks on Buddhist Practice* by Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo. Because kilesa refers to mental defilements and is inherently abstract, metaphor plays a critical role in making this concept understandable for both teaching and practical application. However, limited research has systematically examined how kilesa is conceptualized through metaphor within English Dhamma discourse. For this study, a total of 161 metaphorical expressions related to kilesa were collected from the text. The Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) was applied to verify metaphorical usage, and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory established by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) served as the analytical framework. The findings reveal that kilesa is conceptualized through seven major metaphor categories: PERSON, OPPRESSOR, ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION, DECEPTIVE SYSTEM, ANIMAL, HARMFUL SUBSTANCE OR ORGANISM, and MISBEHAVING CHILD. Among these categories, the PERSON metaphor emerged as the most frequent pattern. These metaphors map the abstract nature of kilesa onto more concrete and familiar domains, allowing complex mental and spiritual processes to be articulated in highly accessible terms. The results suggest that conceptual metaphor functions not merely as a linguistic feature within Dhamma discourse, but also as a vital cognitive tool that helps practitioners comprehend and respond to defilements in practical ways.

Keywords: *Conceptual Metaphor; Metaphorical Expressions; Kilesa; English Dhamma Book*

1. Introduction

In Buddhism, the term kilesa refers to mental defilements that can cause suffering, agitation, or disturbance within the human mind (Amaro, 2010). These defilements obstruct individuals from achieving genuine enlightenment, a state that requires one to liberate oneself from such afflictions. Kilesa is an inherently abstract concept existing internally within the human experience. Nevertheless, Buddhist practitioners are generally able to recognize and understand this concept through teachings, explanations, and everyday religious discourse. This comprehension is possible because abstract mental states are frequently explained using language that connects them to more concrete and familiar experiences. In other words, people tend to understand intangible inner phenomena by relating them to observable or experiential domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

One primary method humans use to make sense of abstract concepts is by interpreting them through these tangible experiences. This cognitive process involves mapping meaning from a concrete domain onto an abstract one to support comprehension, a phenomenon referred to as a conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Conceptual metaphor allows individuals to conceptualize intangible ideas by linking them directly to everyday physical or experiential realities.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) were among the first scholars to systematically study this framework. They argue that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not only in language but also in thought and action. According to their view, the ordinary conceptual system through which humans think and act is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Therefore, metaphor is not merely a stylistic feature of expression but a profound reflection of how people structure their understanding and interpret their experiences. Ultimately, humans are



able to grasp abstract meanings precisely by relating them to concrete domains that are already familiar through sensory perception and lived experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Buddhist Perspective on Kilesa*

In Buddhism, the Pali term *kilesa* refers to mental defilements or unwholesome states of mind that disrupt wisdom and peace, leading to an inability to perceive reality as it truly is (Nyarnainda, 2023). The presence of *kilesa* in the mind can be compared to a radiant white cloth that has been marred and tainted by dye, thereby dimming its original purity (Sujato, 2023).

Kilesa can take many forms, but these are fundamentally rooted in three primary defilements commonly known as the three poisons. These include 1) *lobha* (greed, craving, and attachment); 2) *dosa* (hatred, anger, and ill will); and 3) *moha* (delusion, ignorance, and a distorted understanding of reality). From these core defilements arise other *kilesas*, such as *micchaditthi* (wrong view), *issa* (envy), *vicikiccha* (doubt), and *uddhacca* (restlessness) (Suwannawong, 2016).

When the mind is clouded by defilements, individuals experience profound effects on both their feelings and actions. Psychologically, *kilesas* bring about inner unrest by producing negative emotional states, such as anger and envy, which hinder the mind from achieving calmness and clarity (Nyarnainda, 2023). Ethically, they serve as the driving forces behind harmful and unwholesome speech and actions, potentially undermining personal integrity and disrupting social harmony (Kheminda & Piyabhani, 2024). Spiritually, *kilesas* are deemed the chains that bind human beings to the cycle of birth and death, commonly known as *samsara*. Ultimately, they obstruct beings from reaching the final liberation of *nibbana* (Pushpakumara, 2011).

Therefore, for practitioners who follow Buddhist teachings, overcoming *kilesa* within their hearts is both a responsibility and a path leading out of *samsara*, the endless cycle of birth and death. In Buddhism, eliminating *kilesa* means gradually removing the defilements that disturb the mind. This process can be accomplished through three main practices. The first is the cultivation of *sila* (ethical conduct), which helps prevent individuals from committing wrongful actions. The second is *samadhi* (meditation), which pacifies the mind and enables practitioners to recognize poisonous emotions such as anger, envy, and greed. The last is *panna* (wisdom), which helps beings realize the truth about life and see all phenomena as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and without a fixed self (Paññavaddho, 2018; Nyarnainda, 2023).

Based on these characteristics, *kilesa* appears to be inherently abstract. Nevertheless, Buddhists are able to comprehend this concept through a cognitive process known as conceptual mapping, wherein they associate or "map" its meanings onto more concrete and tangible experiences. In other words, people employ conceptual metaphors to make sense of *kilesa* by matching an intangible psychological or moral phenomenon with something that can be understood through familiar physical or emotional imagery (Kaewjungate, 2012).

2.2 *Conceptual Metaphor*

Metaphors play an essential role in shaping human cognition and communication. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphors function as mental frameworks that enable individuals to comprehend one domain of experience through the lens of another. Their theory posits that a vast portion of human thinking is metaphorical, allowing people to grasp abstract notions by linking them to more concrete and embodied experiences (Larbprasertporn & Luksaneeyanawin, 2021). These metaphors act as an effective cognitive mechanism that influences perception, language, and behavior, ultimately shaping how individuals interpret the world around them (Eakkapochana, 2022). Conceptual metaphors operate through structured correspondences between a source domain, which is tangible and familiar, and a target domain, which is abstract or complex (Tawichai, 2006). Such mappings help individuals conceptualize intricate ideas in highly accessible terms, as seen in metaphors like "time is money" or "emotions are forces" (Charteris-Black, 2004).

A substantial body of literature has investigated metaphor across a variety of thematic fields, such as religious discourse, digital communication, and personal relationships. For example, religious language frequently employs metaphorical expressions to articulate difficult-to-understand ideas, such as faith or virtue (Larbprasertporn & Luksaneeyanawin, 2021). Likewise, within emotional and social domains, metaphors are



pervasive because they help individuals frame intangible experiences, like love, aging, or moral character, in more concrete and relatable terms (Techacharoenrungrueang & Bunsorn, 2022; Sathientharadol & Buranawanna, 2022). These studies demonstrate that metaphor functions as a critical cognitive and communicative resource across various disciplines.

Regarding studies specifically focused on kilesa, most prior research has primarily emphasized philosophical and religious perspectives. These studies typically examine Buddhist teachings on kilesa across various traditions and explore the doctrinal principles that lead to liberation from these defilements, as demonstrated in the work of Amaro (2010). Nevertheless, the use of conceptual metaphor in explaining kilesa, particularly within English-language Dhamma texts, has received relatively limited scholarly attention. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on metaphor and Buddhist concepts by examining the specific metaphorical expressions used to explain kilesa within an English Dhamma book.

2.3 Objective

To investigate the conceptual metaphors and metaphorical expressions associated with kilesa within an English Dhamma book.

2.4 Research questions

1. How is kilesa conceptualized in the English Dhamma book?
2. What are the metaphorical expressions of kilesa found in the English Dhamma book?

3. Materials and Methods

This research employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine metaphorical expressions. To address the proposed research questions, metaphorical expressions related to kilesa were collected from the English Dhamma book, *Forest Leaves: A Selection of Talks on Buddhist Practice*. This text was authored by Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo, a monk ordained and trained under the guidance of Ajahn Maha Bua, one of the most prominent teachers within the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. Ajahn Martin Piyadhammo is widely recognized for his rigorous meditation practice, particularly in remote forest environments. Published in 2019, *Forest Leaves: A Selection of Talks on Buddhist Practice* compiles key aspects of his teachings delivered between 2006 and 2016. Its content presents the essence of Dhamma, particularly approaches toward Nibbāna through meditation practice, utilizing language that is both accessible and profound.

For this study, metaphorical expressions found within the book were systematically identified and extracted. To verify that the collected expressions were genuinely metaphorical, the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU), proposed by Steen (2010), was adopted. This procedure involves comparing the basic meaning of an expression with its contextual meaning. If the contextual meaning differs from the basic meaning but can still be understood through comparison with it, the expression is classified as metaphorical. For example, in the sentence "Life is a lamp in a dark room, showing the way but burning for a time," the lexical unit lamp typically refers to a physical object that produces light using electricity, oil, or gas. In this context, however, lamp represents the impermanent nature of life and is therefore used metaphorically. In the present study, only metaphorical expressions specifically associated with kilesa were included in the final dataset, resulting in a total of 161 identified expressions.

For the analysis of the identified data, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) was employed as the primary analytical framework. This framework supports the identification of underlying conceptual metaphors and enables a systematic examination of how meaning is mapped from source domains to the target domain within the linguistic system.

4. Results

From the analysis of the 161 metaphorical expressions related to kilesa collected from the English Dhamma book, the results reveal that the intangible nature of kilesa is conceptualized through seven primary

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conceptual metaphors: 1) KILESA IS A PERSON, 2) KILESA IS AN OPPRESSOR, 3) KILESA IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION, 4) KILESA IS A DECEPTIVE SYSTEM, 5) KILESA IS AN ANIMAL, 6) KILESA IS A HARMFUL SUBSTANCE OR ORGANISM, and 7) KILESA IS A MISBEHAVING CHILD. The percentage distribution of each conceptual metaphor is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Percentage of each category of conceptual metaphor found

| Rank | Conceptual Category | Count | Percentage |
|------|--|-------|------------|
| 1 | [KILESA IS PERSON] | 99 | 61.49% |
| 2 | [KILESA IS OPPRESSOR] | 25 | 15.53% |
| 3 | [KILESA IS ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION] | 15 | 9.32% |
| 4 | [KILESA IS DECEPTIVE SYSTEM] | 9 | 5.59% |
| 5 | [KILESA IS ANIMAL] | 6 | 3.73% |
| 6 | [KILESA IS HARMFUL SUBSTANCE / ORGANISM] | 5 | 3.11% |
| 7 | [KILESA IS MISBEHAVING CHILD] | 2 | 1.24% |

A descriptive analysis of each conceptual metaphor, presented in descending order of frequency, is provided below.

4.1 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS PERSON]

The conceptual metaphor KILESA IS A PERSON was employed with the highest frequency (61.49%), indicating that the intangible nature of kilesa is primarily conceptualized as a person-like entity possessing intention, knowledge, and communicative ability. The linguistic expressions attributed to these human qualities include verbs such as wanting, observing, whispering, and telling. Examples of these metaphorical expressions are as follows:

- *The kilesas don't like to observe the breath or repeat the word buddho – they want to play, play with all the things around us, with objects in the mind, with sounds at the ear, with objects before the eye.*
- *The kilesas tell us what we should or shouldn't do but, in fact, we can do whatever we want.*
- *The kilesas whisper that we could be doing so many other things; they are very persuasive and we believe whatever they say.*

In this mapping, the target domain is kilesa, while the source domain is a human being. Through this conceptualization, the abstract processes of kilesa are understood in terms of interpersonal interaction. This allows practitioners to conceptualize inner mental conflict as a direct confrontation with an intentional "other."

4.2 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS OPPRESSOR]

The conceptual metaphor KILESA IS AN OPPRESSOR was found to be the second most frequent pattern (15.53%). This reflects the conceptualization of kilesa as a dominating and controlling force that overpowers or imprisons the practitioner. Through this metaphor, kilesa is perceived as an entity that controls and obstructs spiritual progress. The linguistic expressions signifying this conceptual metaphor include words related to domination and captivity, such as rule, imprison, pull, and fight. Examples of these metaphorical expressions are demonstrated below:

- *Kilesas are keeping us in prison.*
- *Reading these stories, we might think that these bhikkhus of the Thai Forest Tradition were all mad, but they used these methods to overcome avijjā and the obnoxious kilesas that have ruled the heart (citta) for billions of lifetimes.*
- *If we fight them using buddho and drop into samādhi, we will realise what it is like not to have the kilesas constantly nagging at us, pulling at our clothes, wanting this, wanting that, liking this and not liking that.*

These examples illustrate the mapping between the target domain, kilesa, and the source domain of an oppressor or dominating authority. Such conceptualization allows practitioners to interpret their inner



spiritual struggle as active resistance against a controlling power. This emphasizes the strong effort and vigilance required to attain liberation from the chains of kilesa that bind them.

4.3 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION]

The conceptual metaphor KILESA IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION accounted for 9.32% of the metaphorical expressions found in the Dhamma book. Within this metaphor, kilesa is conceptualized as an impersonal surrounding force or atmospheric condition that influences or mars human perception and mental clarity. Through this metaphor, kilesa is depicted as a condition comparable to darkness, fog, or a severe weather event. The linguistic expressions reflecting this conceptual metaphor include words such as fog, wind, and darkness, as demonstrated below:

- *Without hardwood, you're just soft, swaying in the wind of the kilesas.*
- *Normally, the kilesas are like fog obscuring our ability to see clearly, but once they are gone we can see things as they are.*
- *Wherever we shine the torch, we see, and the kilesas can only work in the dark.*

As seen in these examples, mapping occurs between the target domain, kilesa, and the source domain of an environmental or atmospheric condition. Kilesa is conceptualized as a state that obscures awareness and distorts perception, much like how darkness or fog limits physical visibility. Furthermore, this conceptual metaphor highlights the role of wisdom as an illuminating force capable of dispelling mental dullness and reducing the influence of kilesa on the mind.

4.4 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS DECEPTIVE SYSTEM]

Another prominent conceptual metaphor found was KILESA IS A DECEPTIVE SYSTEM, which represented 5.59% of the collected expressions. Under this metaphor, kilesa is depicted as a systematic producer of illusion, distortion, and misdirection. It is portrayed as operating through mechanisms comparable to illusion-making or the performance of a trick. The linguistic expressions representing this metaphor include fool, paint pictures, performing a trick, and illusion. Examples include:

- *The kilesas paint them over so we cannot discover the truth*
- *The kilesas need to paint pictures full of desirable skin and beautiful forms; these are what they want, but the moment we show the kilesas the loathsomeness of the body – phut!*
- *The truth is that we have dukkha all the time, but it is painted over by the kilesas which divert our attention, just like a magician performing a trick.*

These expressions draw from source domains associated with illusion-making and information manipulation to explain how kilesa shapes belief. Through this conceptualization, mental defilements are understood as processes that actively distort perception and generate false interpretations of reality. In addition, this conceptual metaphor emphasizes the role of wisdom in dismantling these deceptive cognitive constructions.

4.5 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS ANIMAL]

The conceptual metaphor KILESA IS AN ANIMAL appeared in 3.73% of the identified metaphorical expressions. This metaphor utilizes the characteristics and behaviors of animals to vividly illustrate how kilesa operates within the mind. Rather than being portrayed as rational, kilesa is depicted as being driven by habit and instinct, similar to animal behavior. The linguistic expressions representing this conceptual metaphor include lexemes referring to specific types of animals, such as forest monkeys, birds, and termites, as exemplified below:

- *But the moment we withdraw from that state, the kilesas come back like a troop of forest monkeys, jumping from this tree to the next, after this banana or that banana.*
- *These kilesas are little birds behind our ears that promise us honey and sugar.*



- *Or are you all made of softwood that can easily be eaten by termites (kilesas), leaving only the outer bark?*

These expressions map the target domain, kilesa, onto the source domain of animals and creatures. The chosen animal lexemes explicitly portray the characteristics of the kilesa: the monkey reflects constant distraction, the birds suggest persistent whispering and temptation, and the termites emphasize hidden, gradual destruction from within. Through this mapping, kilesa is understood as an uncontrolled, instinctive force that continually disturbs mental stability. This conceptualization helps practitioners interpret mental defilements as invasive processes requiring continuous awareness.

4.6 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS HARMFUL SUBSTANCE / ORGANISM]

The conceptual metaphor KILESA IS A HARMFUL SUBSTANCE OR ORGANISM accounted for 3.11% of the identified metaphorical expressions. This metaphor reflects a conceptualization of kilesa as something toxic, contaminating, or biologically harmful that negatively affects the mind in a manner comparable to a poison or a destructive organism. Under this metaphor, kilesa is portrayed as a dangerous element that produces harmful consequences when absorbed, consumed, or allowed to remain active within one's mental state. The linguistic expressions representing this conceptual metaphor include lexemes associated with toxicity, chemical danger, and biological harm, such as poison, sugar-coated poison, chemicals, and energy-taking. Examples of these metaphorical expressions are shown below:

- *And when you are concerned about chemicals or poisons that might be in your food, have a thought for the mind that gets sprayed with the chemicals or poisons of the kilesas, the poisons that you love to eat, love to follow and love to swallow.*

- *Than Ajahn Mahā Bua called the kilesas sugar-coated poison, sweet to taste but with a poison that has very long-lasting, deep and bitter after-effects.*

- *If our sati slips, however, the kilesas can take all the energy we have built up during practice, and we'll have to struggle to get some of it back.*

In this mapping, the target domain is kilesa, while the source domain is a harmful substance or destructive organism. Through this conceptualization, kilesa is understood in terms of toxicity, contamination, and internal harm, similar to how poison or a dangerous substance affects the physical body. This conceptualization allows practitioners to interpret mental defilements as hazardous influences that must be avoided, removed, or neutralized rather than negotiated with.

4.7 The conceptual metaphor [KILESA IS MISBEHAVING CHILD]

The conceptual metaphor KILESA IS A MISBEHAVING CHILD was the least frequent category, appearing in only 1.24% of the collected metaphorical expressions. Under this category, the abstract concept of kilesa is conceptualized through the image of a poorly behaved, attention-seeking child. The linguistic expressions representing this conceptual metaphor include lexemes associated with children and misbehavior, such as demanding attention, crying, naughty, little child, and hanging onto, as illustrated below:

- *The kilesas are constantly demanding our attention, like a little child hanging onto its mother's skirt.*

- *Similarly, in meditation practice, we shouldn't pay any attention to these crying naughty little children called kilesas.*

These examples identify the mapping between the source domain (a misbehaving child) and the target domain (kilesa). This conceptualization allows practitioners to interpret mental defilements as immature disturbances that can be managed effectively through non-reaction and disciplined attention.

From the analysis of these conceptual metaphors, it is evident that they play a crucial role in shaping how the inherently abstract notion of kilesa is understood and communicated. Across the metaphorical expressions collected from the Dhamma text, the author consistently maps kilesa onto more concrete and familiar domains, allowing complex mental and spiritual processes to be articulated in accessible terms.



Through these mappings, kilesa is represented as an entity or force that can act, obstruct, deceive, or cause harm, depending entirely on the source domain invoked.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that several of the main conceptual metaphors describe kilesa as a human-like presence, particularly within the categories KILESA IS A PERSON, KILESA IS AN OPPRESSOR, and KILESA IS A MISBEHAVING CHILD. These metaphors suggest that kilesa is understood as an entity possessing intention, influence, and behavioral force. When kilesa is described using verbs such as wanting, knowing, persuading, controlling, or demanding attention, it is presented as if it were a person actively acting upon the practitioner. This mode of conceptualization makes inner conflict easier to understand and visualize, as practitioners can view their mental struggles as a literal form of confrontation, resistance, or self-control. It also highlights an essential teaching function within Dhamma discourse, wherein abstract defilements are elucidated more clearly by presenting them as antagonistic actors that practitioners should not follow or obey.

The second group of metaphors presents kilesa not as an actor, but as a harmful condition. This is primarily evident in the categories KILESA IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION and KILESA IS A HARMFUL SUBSTANCE OR ORGANISM. In these cases, kilesa is understood as a pervasive state that surrounds or afflicts the mind. Metaphors such as darkness, fog, poison, and contamination describe kilesa as something that significantly reduces clarity or gradually causes internal harm. This grouping suggests that practitioners should focus on cleansing and illuminating the mind through mindfulness and wisdom. These metaphors align seamlessly with meditation teachings, where wisdom is frequently compared to light and defilement to obscurity.

The third pattern explains kilesa through images of behavior and systems, as seen in KILESA IS AN ANIMAL and KILESA IS A DECEPTIVE SYSTEM. Animal images conceptualize kilesa through the characteristics of beasts, emphasizing their restless and intrusive behavior that constantly disturbs the mind. Meanwhile, deceptive system metaphors describe kilesa as producing misleading appearances and false interpretations. These metaphors suggest that kilesa operates through fundamentally deceptive processes, supporting the idea that the defilement must be carefully observed and understood rather than merely suppressed. From a cognitive perspective, these metaphors help explain why kilesa can feel so convincing, further emphasizing the critical importance of careful investigation and awareness in practice.

In conclusion, these three metaphor patterns show that kilesa is not described randomly; rather, it is systematically understood through concrete experiential domains. Whether conceptualized as a human-like being, a harmful condition, or a deceptive and restless force, these metaphors consistently transform an abstract mental concept into forms that are easier to recognize and respond to in practice. This strongly supports the central tenet of conceptual metaphor theory: metaphor functions not only as a linguistic device but also as a vital cognitive tool for structuring human understanding. Within Dhamma discourse, these metaphorical mappings help communicate complex psychological and spiritual processes in practical, relatable terms. Overall, the findings confirm that conceptual metaphor plays a central role in making the notion of kilesa cognitively accessible and practically effective for Buddhist practitioners.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data are derived from a single English Dhamma text, meaning the findings may not comprehensively represent other Buddhist traditions, authors, or contexts. Second, although the MIPVU framework was utilized to identify metaphorical expressions, some level of interpretation is unavoidable, and the final categorization of the metaphors inherently reflects the researcher's perspective. Third, the focus on English-language discourse may not fully capture how kilesa is understood in its original Pali or Thai contexts. Finally, this study is based strictly on textual analysis and does not explore how readers or practitioners actually interpret these metaphors in real-world practice. Future research could address these limitations by examining a wider range of texts, conducting cross-linguistic comparisons, and incorporating empirical approaches such as reader-response or experimental methods.



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