

Phenomenology of Traditional Buddhist Meditation Retreat: Subjective Experiences and Psychological Correlates

Sarika Khandelwal¹, Kavita Koradia²

Author Affiliation: ¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor, Department of Home Science, University of Rajasthan, University of Rajasthan

Corresponding Author: Sarika Khandelwal, Research Scholar, Department of Home Science, University of Rajasthan, University of Rajasthan

E-mail: sarika.khandelwal24@gmail.com

Abstract

Context: Literature on meditation suggests multi fold benefits on personality. Yet, very few researches explored meditation in its traditional context utilising both empirical and anecdotal evidence to get insights about the way it impacts the practitioners and their subjective experiences. *Aim:* The study aims to explore the impact of a Buddhist Meditation retreat on Depression, Stress, Anxiety and Affect regulation of participants and their qualitative outcomes. *Methods:* One hundred subjects were studied through convenience sampling who participated in a ten day meditational retreat for the first time at Tushita Meditation Centre. Further, qualitative analysis was conducted on ten participants who exhibited significant changes on their quantitative measures to understand their motivation, deeper perspectives and experiences of the retreat. *Results:* The retreat was found to be effective in reducing the severity of depression, anxiety and stress symptoms significantly and also in regulation of emotions (all $p > 0.001$). The qualitative analyzes yielded overarching themes - (a) self development, distress and imbalance regulation; (b) self exploration, insightful values and physical challenge; (c) internalizing Impermanence and attaining Equanimity. *Conclusion:* The findings provides a detailed understanding on the impact of retreat interventions which can be of strategic research benefit for studying as a model system to understand the transforming effects of meditation, identify the peripheral conditions or the dosage requirement to bring about an outcome and in realizing the holistic effect of meditation training at an individual level.

Keywords : Meditation Retreat; Psychological Impact; Subjective impact.

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Introduction

Meditation has been employed as a spiritual and healing therapy for nearly 5000 years yielding robust improvement in mental and emotional well-being of its practitioners. One of the ancient Indian texts, "Yoga sutra" deals with meditation classifying it as an act of inward contemplation. It defines the practice as an intermediary state between mere attention and absolute immersion within any object, mantra or state.

However, recently the otherwise Asian rooted tradition has become more widespread and secular

in agenda. Contemporary psychologists have segregated religion from the core practice making it available for the larger masses and adaptations like Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness based Stress reduction (MBSR) etc. have become prevalent.

Here, main component mindfulness (the practice of paying attention to each moment without any judgment or reactionary approach) has its foundation from traditional meditation, breathing and yogic approaches.

Prominent neurologists Dr. Lazar¹ claims that meditation helps in altering the very structure of

brain due to a mechanism called neuroplasticity where the brain cells can reorganize by forming new neural connections. This assists in cognitive maintenance particularly in improving memory, attention,² boosting creativity and also in improving pro-social dimensions apart from other diverse physiological benefits like improved cardio vascular health, blood cholesterol, boosting immunity, cognitive rigidity, and other psycho-emotional outcomes like reduced stress and anxiety, trauma relapse, perceived life satisfaction etc.³⁻⁷

With enough supporting evidence claiming multifaceted benefits of imbibing meditation into daily lives, not surprisingly these practices are being recommended and promoted vigorously by researchers, psychologists and even educationalist.

However, major part of the documented literature consists of meditation programs amalgamated with contemporary psychoanalytical approaches (CBT, DBT, ACT) explicitly intended to relieve pain, stress, disorders etc.⁸ with special focus on Western subjects. Evaluation of impact of Parent traditional meditation practices is limited and even lesser on Indian subjects. Yet, few studies do correlate advancement in traditional meditation classification with enhanced outcomes on contemporary meditation measures like Mindfulness Awareness Measure.⁹ Another study reported that intensive meditation practice in a retreat can enhance person's ability to intake and process information by rewiring areas of brain related to cognition, emotion sensing and sustain the effects.¹⁰

It is also worth understanding that for thousands of years, meditation has been predominantly studied within the milieu of traditional spiritual context. Yet, surprisingly the documented literature accounting both empirical and anecdotal accounts is limited or completely inexistent on it. Thus, the present study deals with exploring the impact of core Buddhist philosophy and its' meditative experiences in an intensive ten day retreat on its participants.

Buddhist Meditational Practice

According to Buddhist doctrines Mind and Meditation forms integral parts of self- investigation which can help in transcend unsatisfactory experiences into acceptance and a sense of peace.

Mind-It comprises of a non-physical energy where experience occurs. It is a seat of awareness where totalities of both conscious and unconscious experience happen; where the world of our

thoughts, emotions, perception, memories and dreams are present.

To explain this concept, analogy of an Ocean is used whose inherent nature is to reflect clearly. Here the momentary mental events like happiness, sadness, boredom etc. are comparable to waves that come and go. Similar to an ocean, mind is also naturally pristine and clear, when free of turbulence, waves are subdued and calm. The ability to bring a state similar to this lies in Meditation.

Meditation: Its literal meaning is to habituate while its primary function is to come to right understanding of reality using faculties of thoughts and analyzes rather than abrupt reaction and impulsivity. As otherwise, the most obvious response arising would be the most familiar response e.g. in conflict, first reaction could be hostility, anger or resentment. This happens because of habitualization of negative mental states resulting in reactionary events. On the contrary, meditation aims at making mind so familiar with positive states like love, compassion, patience etc. that they become practitioner's second nature resulting in altering the way of response inherently rather than any forced event.

There are two stages of meditation practices which were introduced during the retreat:

Stage I- Mindfulness Meditation

This technique is used to develop concentration without interruption; focus is maintained on an object (breath) for certain period of time to experience naturalness and peace.¹¹ It immediately helps in bringing a sense of spaciousness and allows one to perceive things more clearly during both, while doing meditation and rest of the day and aims at curbing the constant mind wandering.

Stage II- Analytical Meditation

After inculcation of mindfulness, the practitioner enters in stage II where development of insight or correct understanding of the ultimate nature of the reality is promoted. It enables one to develop conceptual clarity using ones creativity and intellect.

Participants after practicing mindfulness meditation for one session which usually lasts for about 45 minutes are advised to practice analytical meditation.

It can be used as a self-therapy where a person experiencing emotional instability, can experience distancing from the emotion then inculcate acceptance and then, try to apprehend the arising

emotions, its basis, intensity while recognizing if they are erroneous and finally adjusting to them with a more realistic and applicable idea in the situation.¹²

Dahl et.al., define it to be a process where maladaptive cognitive process are reversed by investigating ones internal modes of perception, cognition, and emotions to generate newer insights for self, others and the world.¹³

A study by Zanesco and Luberto 14-15 reported that inculcations of such contemplative state of mind are usually difficult by merely daily practicing amid the busy and chaotic life style. For ingraining these philosophies an isolated retreat environment is facilitating, thus, underlining the effect of the need of traditional meditational practices to bring about process oriented individual transformations.

A qualitative investigation highlighted the importance of imbibing non-attachment (measure of having a detached perspective) as a core principle which mediated to be a significant predictor of psychological well being of the participants in a week long meditation retreat.¹⁶

Furthermore, an interesting approach was reported by Machado and Coaxter who interrogated lived experiences of the participants in an intensive month long Buddhist retreat.¹⁷ They asserted that the ethnic values and principles of Buddhist philosophies form a very important criterion for both eudemonic as well as hedonic well being.¹⁸ It fosters the sense of serving a higher purpose along with promoting the insight that life is being lived with the set values and practices; this indirectly mediates the perceived and quantified improvements in well being of the participants.¹⁹⁻²⁰

Hence, it can be inferred that traditional meditation practices can have vivid impact on its practitioners and on their physical, emotional and varied psychological variables.

Objectives

- To study Depression, Anxiety and Stress level of participants prior the meditation retreat.
- To study Emotion regulation behaviour of participants preceding the retreat.
- To evaluate the effect of meditational retreat on all the aforementioned variables on the participants at the post test stage.
- To explore the subjective experiences of the participants after the meditational retreat.

Subjects and Methods: A total of hundred participants (60 males and 40 females) of mean age 32.53+₋ 10.6 years took part in 10 day retreat.

Following codes of discipline was followed:

- Participants were expected to stay within the premises of institute during the course.
- No conversation, in any form, either amongst themselves or with outside world was allowed.
- Refrain from any intoxicants, sexual activity and moral misconduct was prescribed.
- Simple vegetarian meal was served and no outside food was allowed.
- Strict meditation for seven hours a day and two hours discussions on Buddhist basic doctrines was recommended.

The inclusive criteria included:

- Novice meditators with no prior experience of attending any meditation retreat.
- Participants with only Indian ethnicity.
- Participants undergoing no therapeutic treatment for any psychological or physiological illness.

Measures

Baseline Proforma

A questionnaire studying base line demographic details like age, sex, marital status, meditation experience, ethnicity and personal health was administered.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS)

The DASS is a set of three self-report scales designed to measure the negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and stress. It was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond. Factor's coefficients of the scale were as follows: for the depression .25 to .61, for anxiety .30 to .53 and for stress .31 to .51 for overall scale. Compliance validation points of DASS were respectively found between .85 and .81 and, 80. Item total correlations were .25 to .61.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

Comprises two mood scales, one measures positive affect and the other measures negative affect. The scale was developed by Watson D. and Clark A. Reliability and Validity reported was moderately good. For the Positive Affect Scale, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.86 to 0.90; for the Negative Affect Scale, 0.84 to 0.87.

Semi Structured Interview

A brief open ended interview schedule was used to understand the experiences and perceived behavioural changes observed by the participants after the culmination of meditational retreat.

Ten participants (7 males and 3 females) were purposively selected for qualitative assessment. Only those participants who exhibited significant changes in their quantitative measures were approached to understand their motivation, deeper perspectives and experiences of the retreat.

Intervention

The meditation retreat was a ten day residential

program where day starts at 6 o'clock in the morning and ends at 8 o'clock night. Hourly sessions of meditation, group discussion and four breaks for food and tea were scheduled. Participants engaged in a total of seven hours of meditation and two hours of discussion and reflection exercises daily.

The meditation practice was mainly guided with a combination of mindfulness and analytical meditations. Following table I enumerates the taught key components of Buddhist philosophy:

Results

Quantitative data was analyzed using mean, SD and Paired test. The results are stated in accordance with the objectives of the study:

Table 1: Core components of Buddhist Philosophy

Day	Concepts	Definition
1	Stable Happiness	Striving for happiness free of afflictive emotions or attachments. Else, these mental factors perceive an object as too attractive and traps in unrealistic wishful possessiveness permanently.
2	Impermanence	Law of impermanence permeates all aspects of life where all conditioned existence is in constant state of flux and would end or separate.
3	Non-attachment	Is practiced as an antidote to attachment where a person clings to the idea of an exaggerated perception of any object to be a cause of happiness.
4	Self-Awareness	Self identity is stated to be delusional where it is primarily driven by egotistic desire-driven sense of self which results in self centeredness. Hence, the concept of non self and oneness is promoted to alleviate root cause of suffering.
5	Compassion and Empathy	Understanding that one is part of a greater whole and is interdependent and connected to that whole, this empowers all the positive mind states.
6	Equanimity	It is a steady transient state of realization where a person inculcates a shift in the perspective with a detached state of mind.
7	Emptiness	It asserts that all phenomena or things are empty of their inherent existence. Therefore, what is experienced is not the bare reality of each thing and each person but an exaggerated, filled-out image of it projected by our own mind.
8	Bodhichitta	Aspiration to develop to be a highest capable being practicing all the virtues inherently and effortlessly.

Table 2: Demographic Variables of the participants

Variables		
Age	35.53+ _ 10.6 years	
Gender	Male- 55%	Female- 45%
Educational Qualification	Graduate - 40%	Post Graduate and Above - 60%
Marital Status	Married- 85%	Single- 15%
Meditation Experience	1 year or more- 10%	Less than a year- 90%

Table II depicts the demographic variables of the participants. It reflects that the majority belonged to young adult category with more than half having post graduate or higher degrees while the rest having at least a graduate degree. Further, larger share of the participants were married and were novice meditators.

Table 3: DAS scores of the participants (Pre and Post)

Variables	Pre	Post	t- value	Df
Depression	10.56 (10.2)	7.12 (10.5)	2.12*	99
Anxiety	13.25 (9.8)	8.27 (12.1)	2.89*	99
Stress	25.46 (10.8)	14.92 (12.1)	6.43*	99

* indicates $p < .001$

Table III exhibits the changes in levels of depression, stress and anxiety experienced among the participants after completion of the retreat. It shows that all the variables had significantly dropped at the post testing stage.

Literature on meditation also supports the findings as meditation training has been highly effective in decreasing negative states of mind, stress and anxiety related symptoms while increasing positive reappraisal outlook in even negative situations. This helps in breaking the cycle of worry, anxiety and stress which otherwise can coalesce into depressive symptoms.²¹⁻²³

Table IV reflects the changes observed in the affect regulation of the participants at pre to post test stage. It suggests that significant increase in experiencing of positive emotions and drastic

reduction in negative affect was observed after the culmination of meditation retreat.

The results are coherent with many researches documenting improvement in positive affect²⁴⁻²⁵ and reduced negative affect.²⁶⁻²⁷ Possibly, It can be attributed to the fact that cultivation of even slightest of positive intention for self and others has been related with generalization of these emotions into life experiences ensuing upward spiral of positive emotions and counter spiral of negative ones.²⁸

Table V discusses the lived experiences of the participants where the section is broadly divided into three categories investigating core areas which are subdivided into major themes and subthemes along with support of the quoted narratives of the participants:

Table 4: Affect Regulation scores of participants (Pre and Post)

Variables	Pre	Post	t- value	Df
Positive Affect	31.45 (12.2)	48.23 (10.5)	6.38*	99
Negative Affect	15.94 (12.8)	10.20 (10.1)	2.10*	99

* indicates $p < .001$.

Table 5: Subjective Experiences of the Participants

Category	Master Themes	Subordinate Themes	Narratives
Motivation	Self Development (4) Distress and Imbalance Resolution (6)	Seeking Exploration Meaning to life	I came here looking for a way to realize myself fully. There needs to be something more to life which I am here to find out. I am worn out of this repeated cycle of burnout; need another way to live.
Perceived Outcomes	Self Exploration (5) Insightful Values (4) Physical pain (1)	Transactions of mind and body Foundation of Ethical principles Sensations of pain in body	I understand myself a little better now when my actions and reactions have started unfolding in synchronization for the first time. My life seems more worthwhile from within after practicing the virtues. It gets difficult and painful sometimes.
Perceived Mechanism of Action	Internalizing Impermanence(5) Contemplating Equanimity (4)	Understanding reality Developing still Awareness	Nature of If I knew this simple truth so well before, would I ever indulge in senseless clinging and restlessness. Everything changes one day. The unending cycle of wanting and not wanting ceases when you decide to stop expecting and becoming still. It's easier to let the turbulence pass by and remaining unaffected.

Motivation to participate

This category delves into understanding the intention behind people enrolling in a dedicated practice of meditation. The major causes emerged was Self Exploration and Distress and Imbalance resolution. This indicates that those who felt the inherent calling or had a seeking approach towards something deeper than the usual lives were inclined to practice such self exploratory techniques.

Another category of participants were already experiencing some imbalance, stress or other negative psychological states of mind which resulted in yearning to turn inwards rather than seeking solutions outside. Probably this stage must have reached after some trying to fix the problems outwardly.

A study by Machado and Costa²⁹ have similarly reported that practice of mediation exists as an initial gateway to either unlock the potential of

self or is viewed instinctively as a possible remedy towards re- engagement with life.

Experiences of the retreat

When the perceived outcome of the retreat was explored, majority reported positive outcome ranging from 'self exploration through introspection' to 'development of ethical principles' as a driving force for life. None reported indifference as an outcome indicating the underlying impact of the practice on each of them.

The self exploratory nature emerged from development of awareness of the sensations of body and mind. The realization by attending finely to self enhances the attention towards cyclical pattern of a physical trigger turning into a mental event and vice versa which can create imbalance.

Another group attributed this to cultivation of a value system which provides sense of purpose to the life. The findings are in line with a study reporting sense of well being intrinsically by adapting to a value system.³⁰

Noticeably, only one participant accounted for the sensations of pain after practicing meditation which persisted for a longer duration. Though, the parallel quantitative measures suggested reduction in experience of depressive and anxiety symptoms while increase in negative emotions. This suggests that regardless of the physical sensations which gave rise to feelings of distress and discomfort, participant experienced amelioration of negative mental faculties like stress and anxiety. This hints upon deeper underlying beneficial interface of meditation and mental health despite the experience of physical challenges.

Perceived mechanism behind the change

This section deals with the insights on how a participant made sense of the mechanism of action behind the practice. The analyzes highlighted the popularity of internalization of two key philosophies, namely, Impermanence and Equanimity.

The understanding of ever changing nature of reality in lights of Buddhist perspective makes an individual realize the transient existence of self which can turn ones autobiographical stance to a more experiential and evaluative stance of life. Mahasi³¹ corroborated with similar experiences of realization and shift in perspective of self towards 'non-self' leading to deeper internalizing of the analytical nature of meditation.

Another group of participants highlighted the importance of inculcating an even mindedness which embraces all the experiences equally without resistance. These insights are suggestive of internalization of philosophy of Equanimity which leads to a non clinging attitude towards all the events in life.

Similarly, Desbordes et al.³² also elaborated on the mechanism of equanimity where the good and bad events are first taken with an accepting approach which changes into a neutral perspective eventually. However, such quality of mind has been reported only by advanced practitioners where a dynamic and experiential characterization of Buddhist wisdom can take place.

Discussion

The study aimed to evaluate the impact of a ten day residential Buddhist meditational retreat on the psychological health of its participants. Further, qualitative investigations were conducted to study the motivation, experience and its perceived mechanism of change observed by the participants at the end of the retreat.

The results suggest that considerable enhancement on almost all the investigated quantitative outcomes was observed. Also the qualitative assessments revealed the in-depth accounts of participants motivation, experience and perceived mechanism of meditation.

The findings suggest that the initial motivation for meditation practice ranged from yearning to explore a sense of purpose to finding relief from distress and imbalance. However, through the introduction of ideas of Impermanence and stability; participants internalized the concepts of illusionary nature of reality and relevance of 'being' or 'striving to be' in an equitable state of mind. These practices and teachings appeared to engage them more fully with self and developing insights on the constant interaction of mind and body and how they can (often times negative) affect each other when left incognizant.

This knowledge of motivating factors helps one to understand the possible triggers which could inspire an individual to get connected with the journey of meditation experientially rather than by an external push. Hence, during the designing of interventions for a larger non committed audience, it can act as a corner stone in designing ice breaking sessions which aims at involving the audiences intrinsically instead of a forceful participation which limits the possibility of positive fruition of any experiment.

The insights into experiences of participants gives a clearer understanding of how an individual internalizes the practice and analyses the outcomes garnered through it. Such range of perceived mechanism of actions helps in realizing of how vividly different individuals internalize common teachings and practices. Also these insights into human psyche of learning make us understand the importance of philosophies of traditional meditational practices for imbibing meditations.

The contemporary meditation program designs can re-conceptualize these traditional constructs to investigate how provision of such teachings can help in its understanding in the practice and bring about a change of action rather than depriving the practice from its natural essence completely.

Overall, participants' narratives demonstrated how intense meditation practice can be of an emotional and analytical challenge, producing both positive and negative outcomes. However, it should also be kept in mind that gamut of other factors could also have possibly resulted in the concluding experiences of the participants.

Participants were given a conducive environment, away from the outer world which might have resulted in positive states of mind and reduction in negative affect.

Moreover, participants personal expectations from the retreat and motivation provided by the fellow members can also be listed as an important facilitators for the analyzed results.

Further, teachings of Buddhist philosophy like experience of impermanence, Equanimity, Compassion can also act as a very powerful antidote to all the negative mind states and flourishing of the positive ones.

Hence, in the light of all the factors it can be concluded that overall a traditional Buddhist Meditational retreat sums up to be a very proficient and powerful tool to elevate or alter psychological health of even non-clinical population. Also it captures the complexity and dynamism of the meditational trajectory a participant experiences in the journey.

Thus, the study provides detailed understanding on the impact of retreat interventions which can be of strategic research benefit for studying as a model system to understand the transforming effects of meditation. Also the information can be of baseline benefit for designing and structuring of interventions where the essence of traditional teachings, motivating factors and perceived benefits can be utilized for lay population to understand

meditation teachings and ways to integrate them into their lives more fully.³³

However, the findings of the present study are limited to following factors:

- The study was conducted only on experimental group design which limits its applicability further. Control group inclusion is recommended for comprehensive results.
- Small sample size is also a restraint. However, majority of such studies are done on limited samples due to requirement of close supervision by the teacher heading the retreat.
- Long term follow-up is also recommended due to the fact that at certain times, the change observed are momentary and at other times the positive effect of meditation could become evident after practicing certain period of time.
- Finally, though it was impossible to isolate impact of other active components of retreat like silence, healthy lifestyle, group-teacher and practitioner's dynamics while maintaining the ecological validity of the retreat. It cannot be denied that it might have had a significant impact on participants of the retreat.

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