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Meditation: A Balance of Human and Social Growth in Education

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Thank you to Simone Elias and Rachel Vassak



MEDITATION: A BALANCE OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL GROWTH IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

This best practice article explores meditation as a holistic method of nurturing the balanced integration of human and social development in educational environments. It inquires into the meaning of meditation and considers a dilemma that exists between the holistic meditation practices of its traditional religious and yogic practitioners, and recent academic studies of meditation in educational contexts which often seek scientific explanations focusing on quantitative studies for utilitarian and institutional purposes. In performing the research, this article examines the writings and Dharma talks of two world-renowned Buddhist monks and meditation experts about the practice and purpose of meditation. The article concludes by considering the application of meditation as a holistic concept in educational studies that may enrich the integrated growth of students and faculty in contemporary education.

Introduction

This best practice article explores meditation in the context of education as a method of self-discovery that may assist the holistic human, social, and academic growth of students. It suggests that meditation has a deeper meaning than mindfulness. Interpreted and utilized in its traditional essence, meditation may lead to the development of human traits such as human and social sensitivity, non-judgmental thinking, and kindness. Academic studies have attempted to quantify meditation using scientific methods that do not accommodate its holistic nature. This paper suggests that while academic studies using scientific methods may be beneficial as a means of studying and introducing the techniques of meditation to education, it is best understood as a holistic practice through which students may grow in their unique ways.

Meditation Practice in Educational Studies

A dilemma arises between the traditional practice of yogic meditation and academic studies which may attempt to quantify the effects of meditation when practiced in educational settings. Practiced in its traditional form, meditation is a holistic individual and introspective practice which may lead to self-awareness and the clarity of loving-kindness toward all living beings (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019). In comparison, academic studies have sought scientific explanations focusing on aspects of meditation using quantitative methods, which are in many instances intended to show cause and effect for utilitarian educational purposes such as increasing student performance on test scores and relieving stress in students and faculty (Leland, 2015; Csaszar, Curry, & Lastrapes, 2018).

In a review of academic studies on the relationship between meditation and education Chung (2018) found only thirty-four articles that met the inclusion criteria of meditation or yoga combined with education or youth. Most of these reviews seem to focus on concepts such as mindfulness and social emotional learning, two examples of which may include Butzer, Bury, Telles, and Khalsa (2016) and Mendelson, Dariotis, Gould, A. S. Smith, A. A. Smith, Gonzalez, and Greenberg (2013). The use of the terms mindfulness and concentration can be traced to a secular misinterpretation of the term Samadhi in the Buddhist scriptures by Thomas Rhys Davids who performed the first translations into English from Pali, which was the language of Buddha (Punnaji, 2015). The correct translation of the term Samadhi is the state of equality, unification, peace, and balance of the mind (Sujatha, 2019; Punnaji, 2015). While modern scientific analysis of concepts such as mindfulness may provide useful details about the concepts studied, and offer the practical benefits of introducing meditation to education, they do not do justice to the deeper holistic practices of meditation which may lead to introspection, self-discovery, inner peace, and the balance of personal and social growth.

Most studies on yoga and meditation in education refer to practices originating in eastern culture and religion. In Rockefeller (2006) writing of meditation in higher education, it mentioned that practices like those originating in eastern religion are also practiced in the contemplative prayer of traditional Christianity, practices which until modern times, were rarely found outside of monasteries. To study meditation within its holistic nature may provide a deeper understanding of the benefits of its integration with modern education.

Meditation in the Eyes of the Masters

Two basic questions educational researchers may consider asking are: 1) What is meditation? and, 2) How do the yogis, monks, and masters practice meditation? To answer these questions reference was made to the writings, lectures, and Dharma talks of a select few of the most venerated Buddhist meditation experts. They agreed that meditation is not mindfulness, a term that stems from a linguistic misinterpretation of Buddhist scriptures (Punnaji, 2015). They indicated that the term mindfulness has become an industry in America, and certifications are not enough to experience, understand, or teach meditation. The certifications and business motivations surrounding mindfulness are forms of materialism, which may lead to comparison, and do not bring joy or contentment (Sujatha, 2019).

Bhante (Venerable Sir: refers to Buddhist monks in Theravada Buddhism) Sujatha in Lewke and Sujatha (2019) expressed that we seek our spiritual lives in two ways. First, Head Dharma which is study and the seeking of intellect; and second, Heart Dharma which is the integration of a few core principles into the heart of our actions in daily life. We seek wisdom in three ways through thinking, listening, and meditating (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019). The fundamental essence of Buddha's teachings remains the same, but how people are guided, and how they apply the circumstances in their lives may differ. Therefore, while the basic concepts of meditation remain the same, how each person approaches and experiences meditation may differ. For this reason, a beginner can understand and apply meditation to their spiritual life (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019).

There are several genres of meditation. Punnaji (2001) teaches a meditation technique intended for people living a secular life, having responsibilities, and involved in relationships. Using this technique, practitioners learn to purify their minds and control their emotions to find

inner peace, healthy relationships, and self-confidence. Through mental tranquility, they experience inner happiness, kindness, and compassion.

To assist in understanding the roots of meditation, we should first comprehend the core principles of Buddhism known as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths embrace that being alive means we experience suffering and that the end of suffering is possible. The Eightfold Path is a series of eight practices that may be used as a guide that leads to liberation from suffering and awakening to an enlightened life and happiness (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019). The ultimate purpose of Buddhism is to free the individual from the emotional self; therefore the ideal level of mental health, purity, and loving kindness are reached when one has lost the experience of self (Punnaji, 2001).

When meditating practitioners seek depth of introspection, an awareness that turns inward toward self-realization and discovery. Introspection nurtures self-awareness and clarity of mind. Through discovery and self-awareness, it becomes possible to find happiness and contentment and to cultivate kindness and compassion. The experience of self-realization leads to Samadhi, a state of equality, balance, and peace, which nurtures the awareness that we are the same as all beings. This realization of equality helps to cultivate the practice of loving kindness. Through introspection, we learn to love ourselves and understand that all beings are one with the world, before practicing loving kindness toward the world (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019; Sujatha, 2019).

Both Bhante Sujatha in (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019; Sujatha, 2019), and Bhante Punnaji (2015) suggest three similar steps of introspection and turning awareness inward towards true mindfulness. The first step is Paying Attention to Our Senses. We observe our sensations, thoughts, and breaths. Breath is a technique that calms the system and brings peace. Breath is not meditation, it is a biological activity that is used as a technique to assist meditation (Sujatha, 2019). We come to the self-realization that we may be the root cause of our suffering and learn to take responsibility for our actions. That there are negative senses to which we should not pay attention, for example eating too much or the delusions of a marketing culture (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019; Sujatha, 2019). It is learned that when we excite our senses both good and bad reactions may happen. Those false expectations may lead to suffering. In the teachings of Buddha, the "I" is a false belief. It is not real; it is a delusion. There are two types of truths, conventional truth, which are the labels that humans place on things, and ultimate truth, which is the realization that conventional truth does not exist, and that the world is impermanent and constantly changing. Therefore, the "I", the ego, must be rejected as it is only an illusion, which may lead to delusions, false expectations, and suffering. (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019). The rigorous practice of meditation helps to remove the ego, release anger, and achieve balance. It helps us learn to become aware of how other people see things and become part of the spiritual community.

The second step is to Live in the Present Moment (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019; Sujatha, 2019; Punnaji 2015). It does no good to worry or regret about the past or the present. The past cannot be undone, but we can be concerned about cause and reactions. Our present actions matter today, not just in the future. It is beneficial to learn to deal with memories happily and to plan, not worry about it. The world is constantly changing, and we must learn to embrace that change. Rigorous practice helps to accept the holiness of the present moment. Working on our actions today may help create future reactions that will make life better and add love to the world (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019).

The third step is to be Non-Judgmental (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019; Sujatha, 2019; Punnaji 2015). It is reasonable to seek to understand and to make decisions to survive, but not to condemn, discriminate, or make negative judgments. The term judgments may have strong negative and religious connotations which may lead to guilt (Sujatha, 2019). One source of unhappiness comes from the expectations resulting from making judgments. Meditation helps the practitioner to remain emotionally balanced and to be grateful even when criticized. It is important to be mindful and helpful right now, and not to judge people according to surface appearance, but on the inner character. We learn to practice for our salvation, to become more sensitive, and to help achieve loving kindness with the Dharma (Lewke & Sujatha, 2019).

Samadhi is the state of tranquility of the mind in which peace and balance may be found (Punnaji, 2001; Sujatha 2019). Achieving Samadhi involves the avoidance of extremes. The middle is Holy Ground, a place of wisdom and growth, joy and contentment. When in the middle it is possible to see both extremes and gain wisdom. But this is still not bliss. To achieve bliss it is necessary to give up the middle. To radiate the wisdom and compassion of the Dharma it is necessary to let go of delusions, to let go of the "I", the illusions of the ego and expectations that lead to confusion. To find loving kindness we must have clarity of mind. The clarity that all beings are equal, all are one. To let our delusions of ego go, and not harm ourselves or other beings. Love alone is an emotion, but loving kindness is a quality (Sujatha, 2019). We strive to have loving kindness and compassion. To live a relaxed and joyful life. According to Punnaji (2015), Dharma and meditation are simple, have fun and enjoy life. There is a need for the above concepts in contemporary education. In this era of division, the balance of human and social growth in education should be holistically embraced for the benefit of society.

Conclusion

According to Punnaji (2001), meditation is a growth technique, in which higher levels of emotional maturity are experienced through purification of the mind. Meditation is a holistic practice that cultivates the self-realization and inner growth of the individual and the development of a social worldview, and practices, which foster peace, loving kindness, and compassion. These are traits embraced in progressive educational theory, and which align with the educational objectives of most educators and educational concepts. While the goals of western educational theory may align with the traditions of meditation practitioners, the practices of western education have not been as accommodating (Rockefeller, 2006). Instead western education has thwarted the growth of these traits by standardizing and categorizing education using positivistic concepts that place high stakes testing, numerical details, and political expediency over the beautiful individual abilities and expressions of every unique student, and the realization of human and social values (Freire, 1970; Unsworth, 1992; Rolling, 2006; Kesson & Henderson, 2010).

Meditation as an educational practice is not new, it has a tradition in eastern and western religious education, in yoga ayurvedic studies, and progressive educational concepts. It is in the process of being rediscovered in modern education in the US. The spread of yoga and eastern practices in the US has hastened this development. The scientific studies, although few, which have been conducted by academics into meditation and yoga in education, are beneficial if we keep the perspective of meditation as a holistic practice that involves the entire human being physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. The close integration of meditation with practices

such as yoga, ayurvedic and homeopathic medicine, and education in eastern cultures provides ample evidence of the relevance of meditation to scientific investigation and educationally motivated studies. These studies deepen our knowledge of meditation, its benefits in education, and how it may assist students and faculty. The educational applications and knowledge which emerge from these studies and their evolution into new theories that may help to alleviate suffering and promote happiness and kindness are beneficial to individuals and society. The studies of meditation which are now appearing in academia may be a beginning, an introduction to deeper holistic principles, which may continue to grow and develop as a best practice in education. Meditation fosters much more than individual discovery, sensitivity, and happiness. It nurtures the practice of equality, loving kindness, and compassion in education and society.

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