

Chapter 15

Interpersonal Aspects of Mindfulness and Concentrative Meditations

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses the interpersonal aspects of mindfulness and concentrative meditations in terms of the four Brahmavihara/bhavana, also known as four immeasurables. These are maitri/mettā (loving-kindness), muditā (empathetic, appreciative joy), karuṇā (compassion), and upeksha/upekkhā or samata (equanimity). This practice is considered pre-Buddhist (Hindu) and extra-Buddhist (Jain) in its origin, with references present in Vedas, Upanishads, Tantras, Bhagawad Gita, Yoga Vashistha, and Patanjali Yoga Sutras and further elaborated in Buddhism. This chapter will cover both conceptual and application dimension of the Brahmaviharas.

INTRODUCTION

Meditation is considered as ‘a means or technique to control the mind’ (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). It is ‘deep exploration of mind’ which may lead to transformation of ourselves (Goleman & Davidson, 2017). Over the past few decades, meditation has emerged as a significant area of interest. Meditation can be defined as a self-regulatory practice aimed at obtaining the voluntary control of mental processes, through training of attention and awareness (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 228). The empirical research has demonstrated the potential of meditation to enhance mental well-being along with physical health (Brand et al., 2012; Davidson & McEwen, 2012; Kaliman et al., 2014; Ospina, 2007; Sedlmeier et al., 2012).

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There are various types of meditations and a common way to categorize them has been open awareness versus focused attention types. One of the popular forms of open awareness meditation is Mindfulness Meditation, wherein an individual attends to and examines, the stream of thought or the feeling state or one's sensory experiences, with a non-judgmental stance (Hofmann et al., 2011). The other type of meditation is concentrative meditation which involves focusing one's attention on a specific idea, image, sound etc. The focus of attention differs as per the tradition/technique. Such concentrative meditations have its own usefulness in terms of cultivating states of mind, specific skills or attitudes and have been discussed in Yogic-Vedantic traditions, as well as in Buddhism.

The research literature that examines the role of meditation as an intervention for mental health, principally focuses on the benefits of enhancing mindfulness for mental content and one's body. Such mindfulness-based interventions have empirically demonstrated reduction in a variety of negative psychological states, from depression and anxiety, to everyday stress (Hofmann et al., 2011). Further, traditionally the literature has focused more on the inner and transcendental experiences associated with these meditative traditions, which are known as 'nirvana' and 'moksha'.

However, the meditative traditions with its long and varied streams also include interpersonal aspects, but research in this area trails behind. Only in recent times the exploration of meditation has widened to include other types of meditations. The interpersonal aspects are about relationship between individuals and/or actual or imagined presence of other people. In the meditative tradition, one component of it can mean focusing attention on cultivating attitudes favorable to other people. Such interpersonal aspects need to be studied, as much as cognitive-affective aspects of meditation. These aspects are useful in the modern world, where majority of meditation practitioners live a life populated with interpersonal joys, interactions, concerns and suffering, which are intimately related to their mental health. In this context one may note that since ancient times, cultivation of certain qualities collectively known as Brahmaviharas, have been given prominence in India. These are maitri/mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (empathetic/appreciative joy) and upeksha/upekkhā, or samatva (equanimity). These emotions and attitudes are positive and interpersonal in their focus.

Positive Interpersonal Aspects: Attitudes and Emotions

Attitudes are predispositions towards something and are a combination of thoughts, beliefs (cognitions) and feelings (affect). Attitudes can influence behaviors, on the other hand behaviors can also influence attitudes. Similarly, emotions comprising of subjective experiences, physiological aspects and behavioral reactions (Nairne, 2000) can influence attitudes. One broad group of emotions has been categorised as social emotions, such as shame, empathy etc., since these are exclusively associated with social concerns, involve social appraisal and have a social function (Buck, 1999). Another way to categorise emotions is based on positive and negative valence, with positive emotions linked to approach motivation. Cultivation of positive emotions has been found to undo the after-effects of negative emotions, while also building cognitive and social resources (Broaden and build theory, Fredrickson, 2001). Although no single theory has been proposed to tie the variety of positive interpersonal emotions together, the concept of brahmaviharas may easily do so.

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