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Buddhism as a way of life: An empirical study

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Abstract

The Buddhist perspective is unique in its core tenets and emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life (to be explained later), on the end of psychological suffering and on the pursuit of achieving sustainable happiness amidst adversity by providing antidotes against the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance on the illusion of self/soul, the delusion of god(s) and the working of mind. The present study mustered the responses from 200 respondents on the Buddhism. The article gives an empirical study from the respondents in connection with the Buddhism as a Way of Life.

Keywords: Buddhism, the noble eightfold path, Brahma Viharas

Introduction

Buddhism- An Overview

Buddha is unique among the founders of wisdom traditions in that he never claimed to be other than just a human being—‘someone who simply woke up and saw things as they are’ (Coleman, 2001, p. 5)—thereby implying that every person has a “potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if s/he so wills it and endeavors” (Rahula, 1974, p. 1).

Our fascination with the Buddha, the man, dates back to a familiar story, which each of us encountered in books (Smith & Novak, 2003, and Kornfield, 1993). The story is shared of the Buddha meeting a man on the road, who was struck by the “radiance and peaceful presence” of the awakened one. The story originates from the Dona Sutta¹, and actually describes an encounter between the Brahman Dona and the Buddha, in which Dona follows the extraordinary footprints of the Buddha, finds him sitting in lotus position under a tree, and asks him whether he is a god, a demon, a divine being, or a human being, to which the Buddha consistently denies. The Buddha then clarifies to the puzzled man that, just like a lotus that rose above the water and now stands un-smearred, he too has managed to overcome the world and live un-smearred by it. He therefore invites the Brahman to remember him as “awakened” (Thanissaro, 2005).

Buddhism: Some Basic Concepts

For the next 45 years of his life, the Buddha wandered from place to place the Ganges valley plains, roughly between the present Nepal foothills and Bihar, constantly teaching his Dhamma to everyone who cared to listen. The Pali word Dhamma “probably has more meanings than any other term in the entire vocabulary of Buddhism” (Sangharakshita, 1993, p. 9). Along with the Buddha and the Sangha (commune of Buddhist hermits), Dhamma is part of what is called “Triple-Gem” (Buddha, Sangha, Dhamma) into which one might take refuge. It might denote:

- The principles and realities as uncovered by the Buddha and to be experienced verified or falsified, by oneself
- The body of the Buddha’s teachings as an expression of those principles, not to be blindly followed (but to be used like a raft)
- The practices based on those teachings that lead to awakening and liberation from suffering (cf. Bodhi, 2005)
- With a small case d, dhamma means: the smallest unit of experience

The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path describes the way to the end of suffering, as it was laid out by Siddhartha Gautama.

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It is a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions; and it finally leads to understanding the truth about all things. Together with the Four Noble Truths it constitutes the gist of Buddhism. Great emphasis is put on the practical aspect, because it is only through practice that one can attain a higher level of existence and finally reach Nirvana. The eight aspects of the path are not to be understood as a sequence of single steps, instead they are highly interdependent principles that have to be seen in relationship with each other.

Chart 1: The Noble Eightfold Path

01	Right View	Wisdom (Panna)
02	Right Intention	
03	Right Speech	Ethical Conduct(Sila)
04	Right Action	
05	Right Livelihood	
06	Right Effort	Mental Development/ Concentration (Samadhi)
07	Right Mindfulness	
08	Right Concentration	

Primary Data

The study conducted in-depth, structured interviews with 200 authorities in Buddhism, Vipassana meditation practitioners and Bhagavad Gita practitioners.

Number of Spiritual Discourses /Programmes Attended

In the study, to mitigate or avoid sampling error and to make the study more objective, the respondents with more number of spiritual retreat/ programmes courses have been interviewed and gathered the relevant data. This is in order to know the crucial impact of Bhagavad-Gita on the reduction of the stress, anxiety, anger, anguish and the improvement of loving kindness, compassion and generosity.

Table 1: Number of spiritual discourses/programmes attended

Number of Spiritual Discourses/Programmes Attended	Responses (n=200)	
	Number	Percentage
Less than 10	25	12.5
10 - 30	80	40.0
30 - 50	35	17.5
More than 50	60	30.0
Total	200	100

Analysis

Table shows that overwhelming number of the respondents (40 percent) were attended spiritual discourses in between 10 – 30 and remaining (30 percent) were more than 50 classes, whereas 12.5 percent of the respondents were attended less than 10 discourses or programme. 17.5 percent of respondents attended between 30 – 50. The majority of the respondents were attended more than 10 discourses/programmes to gain the knowledge of spirituality.

Table 2: Buddhism in General

Statements		Responses (n=200)				
		Scale				
		SA	A	N	DA	SD
Buddhism is neither a religion nor a philosophy—though it has the elements of both—but rather a psychology, that is an art of life and a science of mind and behavior.	N	90	90	10	0	10
	%	45	45	5	0	5
Buddha taught the “Dhamma” that has come to be known by the people at large for its wisdom, tolerance, compassion, equanimity, and even happiness.	N	140	60	0	0	0
	%	70	30	0	0	0
Lord Buddha taught that the root of unwholesomeness lies in our own mind—in our ignorance of what we hold as the nature of reality, and that freedom lies in our experiencing/realizing and practicing of acquired wisdom.	N	140	60	0	0	0
	%	70	30	0	0	0
The goal of Buddhism is twofold: awakening by cleansing the mind toward emptiness and disseminating loving-kindness, compassion, joy in even-mindedness.	N	100	80	20	0	0
	%	50	40	10	0	0
Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic because it maintains a rather grounded perspective on life and the world.	N	120	80	0	0	0
	%	60	40	0	0	0
Buddhism entails a set of moral and ethical principles and meditation which, reveals valuable concepts about the mind and the phenomenal world.	N	80	80	40	0	0
	%	40	40	20	0	0

(Source: Field Survey)

Analysis

Buddha dhamma is neither a religion nor a philosophy. However it contains the elements of religion and philosophy. Basically what Buddha taught was the science of human behavior and minds that deals with art of life and the science of the mind. Nine-tenth of the sample respondents affirmed the given statement positively. However one-tenth of the respondent for the best reasons known to him and the level of understanding has negated the given statement.

Seven-tenth of the sample respondents (200) have expressed and strongly agreed to the fact that dhamma came into existence from Buddha for tolerance, compassion, joy and rapture and leading to wisdom, whereas the remaining three-tenth conceded the statement put forth for them. The root of unwholesomeness (*akusala*) lies in one’s own mind due to

the stark ignorance of the reality and the panacea is the wisdom through vipassana practice says the same percentage of respondents as indicated above.

As far as half of the respondents strongly accepted the goals of the Buddhism that is awakening by cleansing the mind towards emptiness (*sunyata, voidness*) and spread of loving kindness, compassion, joy and even mindedness. Four-tenth of respondents vouched the same and the remaining one-tenth remained neutral. Further, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic; this was strongly agreed by 60 percent of the respondents and just agreed by forty percent of the respondents. Buddhism sets way for the maintenance of morality and paves way for understanding one’s own mind and the world. 80 percent affirmed the statement and twenty percent remained neutral.

Table 3: Noble Eightfold Path

Statements	Responses (n=200)					
		Scale				
		SA	A	N	DA	SD
Eightfold path is a practical guideline to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions.	N	120	80	0	0	0
	%	60	40	0	0	0
The meditative ones who practice the eightfold path are released from the bonds of evil.	N	110	80	10	0	0
	%	55	40	5	0	0
Right livelihood, right thinking, right mindfulness, and right action have an immediate correlation with and influence on the nature of work.	N	130	70	0	0	0
	%	65	35	0	0	0
Right livelihood considers work to have at least three functions: 1) to give a person a chance to utilize and develop his talents; 2) to enable a person to overcome his ego-centeredness by joining with other people in a common task; and 3) To bring forth the goods and services needed for a decent existence.	N	100	80	20	0	0
	%	50	40	10	0	0

Analysis

The fourth noble truth of Buddha is the path leading to cessation of craving. The path contains the tools for morality, concentration, and wisdom. They are the practical guidelines to ethical and mental development with the goal of freeing the individual from attachments and delusions. Three-fifth of the respondents strongly agreed to the statement on account of their 10 day residential vipassana meditation course completion ranging from one to more than three courses. The remaining two-fifth of the respondents affirmed the same.

Fifty five percent of the respondents (n=200) indicated that the meditative ones who practice the eightfold path are released from the bonds of evil, whereas forty percent of the

respondents aired positive opinion to the given second statement in the table. Only five percent of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed to the given statement.

Right livelihood, right thinking, right mindfulness and right action have an immediate correlation with the work as well as influence on the nature of work performed by the sample respondents. Sixty five percent strongly agreed and thirty five percent agreed with the statement given.

Right livelihood considers work to have at least three functions-chances to utilize and develop workers talents, overcoming of ego-centeredness and bringing forth needed goods and services by workers. Half of the total sample respondents strongly agreed, forty percent just agreed and ten percent kept neutral.

Table 4: Four Immeasurables (Brahmma viharas)

Statements	Responses (n=200)					
		Scale				
		SA	A	N	DA	SD
The Buddhist themes of non-independence, that is interdependence and interconnectedness, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity seem to suggest solutions to a wide array of personal and professional challenges.	N	120	70	10	0	0
	%	60	35	5	0	0
In Buddhism, the “Four Immeasurables”—Loving Kindness, Empathic Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, and Relational Equanimity—are considered to be the essential nature of an awakened heart and mind.	N	140	60	0	0	0
	%	70	30	0	0	0
An individual can overcome his or her anger by the practice of loving-kindness, as it has the capacity to bring happiness to others without demanding anything in return (<i>metta</i>)	N	120	60	20	0	0
	%	60	30	10	0	0
An individual can overcome his or her hatred by the practice of sympathetic joy, as it arises when one rejoices over the happiness of others and wishes others wellbeing and success (<i>mudita</i>)	N	90	80	30	0	0
	%	45	40	15	0	0
Deep contemplation and dedicated practice of four immeasurables helps one to transform ignorance, greed, hatred, and self-centeredness into wisdom, love, compassion, and equanimity.	N	100	70	30	0	0
	%	50	35	15	0	0

Analysis

A vipassana practitioner on the continuous practice attains jhanic factor (absorption knowledge) that is he/she moves from vittaka (aim), vicara (rubbing), piti (rapture), sukha

(happiness) to ekaggata (equanimity). With the last stage the practitioners resorts to “no likes and no dislikes” and is oblivious to the world’s opposites.

Table 5: Mindfulness and their impact on the individual practitioner

Statements	Responses (n=200)					
		Scale				
		SA	A	N	DA	SD
Mindfulness is a means to decrease chronic unhappiness as meditation, mindfulness, and positive emotions are linked to produce psychological well-being of individual employees.	N	110	70	20	0	0
	%	55	35	10	0	0
Mindfulness is a process of “drawing novel distinctions” or “noticing new things”, which can lead to number of outcomes, including (1) a greater sensitivity to one’s environment, (2) more openness to new information (3) the creation of new categories for structuring perception, and (4) Enhanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving.	N	110	70	20	0	0
	%	55	35	10	0	0
Mindfulness fosters a state of self-acceptance since it encompasses an attitude of acceptance of and	N	100	50	40	10	0

exploration of present experience rather than of self-evaluation and self-criticism	%	50	25	20	5	0
The Buddhist practice of mindfulness focuses more on the body and the mind's internal landscape—on breath, on various sensations, on various postures and movements of the body; on feelings, thoughts, and other contents and objects of the mind	N	110	50	20	20	0
	%	55	25	10	10	0

Analysis

In today's cross border trade context, the amount of craving increased steeply day by day. The fissure in the moral fabric of the society can be noticed by anybody. The chasm in the moral fabric is on account of greed, hatred and delusion. Mindlessly the resources are wasted in the material and sensual pursuits. The said pursuits eventually lead to irreparable sufferings. Consequently, the majority of the people in the modern world laments and concludes that there exists no peace of mind. The secret lies in understanding the inner and not the outer. Man without giving thought to the impermanence of his existence and the world clings to short term pleasures and gaiety. The essence lies in understanding the purpose of life. Dhamma provides the way out for ending of human sufferings and go for ultimate deliverance. Self judgment and self criticism are negatives. Man scolds the creator God, who is not in existence in fact kamma is his property and kamma fuels the future life. Without understanding this, man blames something which is not in existence. It is on account of ignorance and craving.

Mindfulness practice at ten day vipasana meditation course removes chronic unhappiness and displeasure. Mindfulness in these retreats produces psychological well beings of the practitioners. When expanded awareness arises, one can see the larger picture of any phenomenon. It helps to solve the problems easily. Mindlessly one cannot solve the problems because he is caught up in the labyrinth of alternatives. Nine-tenth of the sample respondents positively acknowledged the eternal facts of mindfulness as enunciated by the Lord Buddha.

Materiality and mentality is the landscape of Buddha's teachings. Whatever one finds outside of this physical body are well within the human being. This is to say that the external elements of earth, fire, water and air are found well within the human being. The experiment happens in Buddhism with body and mind as the subject matter. Body and mind are interrelated. Body is akin to the lame person and the mind is akin to the blind person. Blind person is carried on shoulder by the lame person as piggy back. The blind person cannot see and the lame person cannot travel too far and thus the body is influenced by the mind in terms of feeling perception extra and vice-versa. If the practitioner is wise enough, he can understand all the ephemeral plays, drama and gimmicks of the mind. Mindfulness is the panacea for all mental ills and bodily ailments. Three-fourth of the sample respondents accepted the above facts of the realities revealed under dhamma vinaya.

Findings

Abstain from all unwholesome deeds,
Cultivate the capital of wholesome deeds,
Purify your own mind completely—
This is the teaching of the Buddhas.
—Dhammapada, verse 185
“It is easy to be mindful.
What is difficult is to remember to be mindful.”
—Thanissaro.

True to the phenomenological research model, the article presents verbatim statements from the interviewees to illustrate their responses on the research questions. Through illustrative charts and graphs the study reflects the most important findings.

- The most important principle in daily life, to begin with, is ethics, in terms of our activities my own activities, body, speech and mind: I do try my best not to engage in injurious behavior; injurious to myself and others; and the other aspect of Buddhist ethics is to be of service wherever possible.
- The reason for benefiting others is that our happiness depends on others, because without others, we cannot survive. So, we have to serve others and work for them, make an effort for their welfare.
- In terms of the food and the clothing you get: everything comes from other people's hard work, their labor. There is no point of saying that you get something because you paid money for it. That is a wrong way of thinking.
- Wisdom, knowledge of reality and knowledge of interconnectedness and interdependency, will be very useful [at work]. If you are somebody who has that wisdom and nurtures this wider perspective, you will also be able to develop stronger love and compassioning your workplace and everywhere else.
- We have something called The Five Precepts, which you are probably familiar with. In some other Buddhist traditions there are addition precepts, but in my tradition there are five: Abstain from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants. And all of those are designed not to harm yourself or others. So again, I think it just boils down to one: do not harm others.

Conclusion

The study feels compelled to stress that its mainly earned confirmation of the fact that Buddhism is a magnificently path toward greater awareness and mindfulness, leading to greater consciousness in personal and professional life and realized now, more than ever, the strength behind the insight of Inter being. Once a person realizes the “relational” nature of reality—that everything inter-is, there is no room left for mental or emotional distance or separateness. The study realized that, as in everything, implementing Buddhist psychology in 21st century workplaces will have to happen cautiously, as it could easily offend workforce members who are adherents to various religions and may perceive Buddhism as a religion. The good news for Buddhist psychology is that this era has started with some heavy disillusion about the pillars of modern society. This has opened the room for new thinking, and Buddhism has been praised more than any other psychology as a flexible, easily adapting one. Buddhism also furnishes a do-it-yourself orientation: “You have to do your own work”; Awakened Ones will only show the way.” (Dhammapada). The recent history has already indicated that the ground has been made fertile for Buddhist psychology to take root. It will be up to

those who believe in its merits and actually make it happen in our life and in our work.

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