

Abstract

How Does Attending Vipassana Retreats Affect the Self- and World-relationship of Healthcare Professionals

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Studies on the effects of meditation often posit a one-dimensional causal relationship between intervention (e.g., meditation courses) and outcome (e.g., increased equanimity or compassion). However, these studies frequently overlook the fact that the impact of meditation depends on how practitioners interpret the teachings and their experiences. Following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, we assert that the effectiveness of meditation is contingent on the individual's self-relationship.

Methods: This qualitative reconstructive study examined the impact of a 10-day Vipassana retreat on the professional attitudes and stress management of doctors and nurses. Interviews were reanalyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to reconstruct the self- and world-relationship of practitioners in detail. To validate results and identify criteria for healthy and unhealthy uses of meditation, findings were correlated with the DFG-funded study "Buddhism in the West", involving in-depth interviews with over a hundred Buddhist meditation practitioners.

Results: Findings showed meditation experiences are utilized in diverse ways, sometimes beneficial and sometimes detrimental. The study revealed a typology of

three different forms of reception: the *self-regulation type*, the *experience seeking type* and the *compassionate type*. The effects of meditation cannot be universally answered but must consider how practitioners integrate their specific self- and world-relationship with meditation. In terms of the findings of the DFG study, we found that a profound confrontation with one's suffering often marks a turning point. Initially, many students enjoy their practice, feeling empowered by the growing concentration and spiritual experiences of peace, bliss, and love. These early experiences support the self-regulation type—"I can control this"—while the experience-seeking type indulge in what Chögyam Trungpa called "Spiritual Materialism". However, the transition to deep (self-) compassion in the face of people's painful circumstances – the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice – is a difficult one.

Discussion: Since Mind-Body Medicine aims to reconnect people with their living body, we inevitably need to address how to handle suffering. We should ask ourselves if we are ready to manage potential challenges, such as encountering profound suffering. Yet, these experiences are not always negative; in many cases, facing the "dark night of the soul" is what paves the way to deeper healing.

Keywords: Vipassana meditation, Health Care Professionals, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Merleau-Ponty

References

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