

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MEDITATION AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Meditation practices of Buddhism, specifically, Samatha (calmness) and Vipassana (insight), are becoming popular in the field of mental health and psychotherapy. These archaic procedures are being brought into the present modes of therapeutic intervention such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) and even psychodynamic therapy. The given literature review focuses on the connection between Buddhist meditation and psychological recovery and mental health. It ponders on how such meditation practices can be in harmony with key goals in therapy including reduction of stress, emotional balance and self awareness. The study will rely upon the ancient Buddhist doctrine on the topic and the contemporary scientific researches on the subject of psychology to achieve a better understanding of the working of meditation on the mental and emotional plane. In this paper, the literature review methodology is implemented to analyze literature that speaks about the investigation of effect that meditation can bring to such disorders as anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. It also focuses on application of mindfulness based practices in modern day therapy. These findings demonstrate that mindfulness and insight meditation are applicable in improving the mental health by improving the concentration level, emotional stability as well as the coping styles of an individual who may harbor negative thoughts or feelings. Most psychotherapy approaches have a lot in common with Buddhist meditation approaches, especially when it comes to establishment of awareness and acceptance. In conclusion, this review has demonstrated that meditation can become a helpful complement of traditional psychotherapy. The integration of the antiquity and modernity will allow therapists and clients to work more holistically to enable them to enjoy mental health.

Keywords: Buddhist Meditation; Psychotherapy; Mindfulness; Cognitive Behavioral Therapy; Emotional Regulation

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Introduction

Buddhist meditation, in general, and meditation in particular, have become a vital theme in the discourse of mental health nowadays. Historically, there has been a traditional meditation technique that helps to relax the mind, focus better, and even boost the mood. The advantages of the approach have been realised by psychologists and mental health practitioners over the years and have been used as part of therapy. The mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) have also been shown to be effective in stress, anxiety, and depression management (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). This is a review of the possibility of Buddhist meditation as an instrument of psychotherapy and its effects on mental health care.

Background and Importance

A relationship between meditation and mental health is not so new. Especially the Buddhist doctrines are those that are captured in the Sutta Pitaka, which expounds on meditation in detail as a way of inner peace. Buddhism meditation takes two significant types, which are the Samatha (tranquility meditation) and Vipassana (insight meditation). The purpose of Samatha meditation is to relax the mind and be more concentrated, whilst Vipassana meditation can be employed in order to ensure people are intimately aware of themselves and to get to know about the nature of their thoughts and emotions (Analayo, 2003). These practices not only help in concentration, but they also help people to better manage their emotions and thus find their application in modern day psychology to be very applicable.

Instead, psychotherapy is the methodological approach to understanding mental disorders and managing them. It involves the adoption of various methods such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy and humanistic therapy, which focus on promoting mental wellness. Interestingly, the majority of the Buddhist principles of meditation overlap with these treatment practices, particularly in such areas as self-awareness, emotional control, and cognitive restructuring (Harrington and Dunne, 2015).

The problem of mental health is gaining momentum in the world today. Serious illnesses such as depression and anxiety are considered some of the major causes of disability in the world (WHO, 2021). Although conventional medicine with medicine and talk therapy is effective, interest in alternative and complementary therapies has been growing, with meditation. Studies have demonstrated that meditation-based programs can be used to alleviate stress and enhance concentration, as well as boost emotional stability (Davidson and Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Since meditation has gained prominence in clinical psychology, it is important to assess how and why it is a psychotherapeutic tool.

How Buddhist Meditation Relates to Psychotherapy

In Buddhist literature, psychological distress has three principal negative emotions: greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). These are the same feelings as those referred to by modern psychology as destructive thought processes, emotional imbalance, and behavioural problems. Trying to get rid of all these negative mental states is the goal of Buddhist meditation, which is conducted with three practices in mind: wisdom (panna), ethical conduct (sila), and mental discipline. The three dimensions of meditation are comparable to the main principles of psychotherapy:

Ethical Conduct (Sila): Behavioural Therapy:

Ethical behaviour is a vital component of mental health in Buddhism. It makes people think against bad habits and nurture benevolence and control. Behavioural therapy in psychotherapy is no different since it aims at assisting individuals to alter the negative behaviours by positive reinforcement.

Mental Discipline: Cognitive Therapy:

Samadhi is the act of mental concentration and steadiness, which assists people in gaining more control over their thoughts. This can be compared with cognitive therapy, whereby the patient learns to recognise and change the negative ways of thinking to enhance his or her mental health (Beck, 1979).

Wisdom (Panna): Panna is the power of wisdom in a person, which generates enlightenment when linked with awareness of one's own impurity.

Vipassana meditation assists individuals in getting deep insights into their thoughts and feelings, as do the psychodynamic and humanistic therapies, which concentrate on self-awareness and discovery of unconscious patterns (Freud, 1915; Rogers, 1961).

Analysing these connections, it is possible to realise that Buddhist meditation is an effective and organised approach to mental health, and this fact makes it highly compatible with modern psychotherapy.

Meditation possesses scientific and clinical evidence in its support.

The recent research has provided strong evidence that meditation positively affects the brain and mental well-being. According to the neuroimaging results, a consistent meditation practice raises brain plasticity, increases cognitive abilities as well and reduces the activity in the amygdala in the brain part that manages stress and fear (Holzel et al., 2011). These changes aid in better emotional management and clarity of mind which is highly essential in a healthy mental state.

Another psychotherapy tool that has undergone clinical trials is meditation. Mindfulness-based therapies, including MBSR and MBCT, are helpful to those patients who experience depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To explain this, it is also revealed by the research that MBSR is effective in stress and emotional stability relief, and MBCT is particularly effective in the prevention of relapse in people with frequent cases of depression (Khoury et al., 2015). These results are a strong pointer to the fact that meditation could be used as an independent treatment or an adjunct to traditional psychotherapy.

Objectives

This review aims to explore the role of Buddhist meditation in psychotherapy by addressing the following key questions:

1. How do Buddhist meditation techniques relate to modern psychotherapy?
2. What are the psychological and neurological mechanisms that explain meditation's effects on mental health?
3. What scientific research supports the effectiveness of meditation in treating mental health conditions?
4. What are the challenges and limitations of integrating meditation into traditional psychotherapy?

Methodology

Type of Study

This study used a systematic literature review methodology to explore the efficacy of Buddhist meditation as a psychotherapeutic intervention. The review is performed based on PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) as the existence of transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigour is ensured. The analysis is interdisciplinary in its approach to classical Buddhism and empirical studies, as the synthesis of both studies is possible in the review.

Research Questions

Four main research questions were followed in the review:

- (1) How are Buddhist meditation techniques related to modern psychotherapy?
- (2) How does meditation mediate its effects on mental health?
- (3) What scientific research supports meditation in treating mental disorders?
- (4) What are the limitations and future implications of incorporating meditation into psychotherapy?

Search Strategy

Academic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, JSTOR and Google Scholar were searched systematically and comprehensively. The search was conducted on publications from January 2000 to April 2023. The search terms comprised a combination of keywords in the form of Buddhist meditation, Vipassana, Samatha, Mindfulness, psychotherapy, CBT, emotional regulation, and mental health treatment. Search results could be refined with the use of Boolean operators (AND/OR) and made more relevant. Bibliographies of the main studies were also searched manually to find other sources that were relevant.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria in the review were (1) peer-reviewed, (2) written in the English language, (3) published in 2000-2023 (4) directly related to the topic of Buddhist meditation as a psychotherapy or mental health topic. Qualitative and quantitative studies were also taken into account, such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), meta-analyses, theoretical articles that included empirical references, and neurobiological studies. They were eliminated as (1) non-English texts, (2) articles that contained purely religious commentaries, and (3) articles that were not related to meditation or psychological outcomes.

Data Mining and Data Analysis

Following the preliminary screening, the research proceeded to review the relevant studies in their entirety and extract the relevant data based on a thematic analysis framework. Types of meditation applied, mental health goals targeted (e.g., anxiety, depression, PTSD), which therapeutic model was applied (e.g., CBT, MBCT, MBSR), and neurological results and clinical effectiveness in general were data points. Thematic synthesis was adopted to

classify the results into four broad areas: (1) the psychological advantages of meditation, (2) neurobiological impacts, (3) treatment results of certain disorders, and (4) the combination with psychotherapy.

Buddhist Canonic Source Materials

Along with the psychological studies, the literature of the main early Buddhist texts was discussed to base the meditation practices on their classical theoretical basis. These were the Mahasatipatthana Sutta (mindfulness meditation), the Brahmajala Sutta (views on philosophy), the Samannaphala Sutta (fruits of renunciation and meditation), and the Maharahulovada Sutta (advice on meditation). These sources were a conceptual fit with the current treatment objectives that included emotional regulation, cognitive clarity, and behavioural change.

Results

In this review, ways in which Buddhist meditation may be applied in psychotherapies shall be elaborated by discussing Buddhist meditation routines, modern psychotherapeutic theories and research studies done on the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions. The findings confirm that meditation has a positive influence on emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and the general mood. The results are categorized into four general sections which are: (1) psychological benefits of Buddhist meditation, (2) neurobiological effects, (3) its applicability in treating mental disorders, and (4) its application as an adjunct to psychotherapy.

Buddhist Meditations have psychological benefits

Buddhist meditation has many psychological benefits including emotional control, self-awareness, and cognitive restructuring. Traditional Buddhist texts claim that a method of eliminating greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) through meditation can be used to get rid of the main causes of suffering in the mind. This coincides with psychotherapeutic interventions, which are meant to change maladaptive thought processes, improve emotional control, and improve more healthful behaviours.

One of the greatest psychological benefits of Buddhist meditation is the regulation of emotions. Studies found out that mindfulness-based meditation reduces negative emotion reactivity and these individuals are able to respond more equanimously to stress. Indicatively, others such as those carried by Khoury et al. (2015) have determined that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is highly effective in the alleviation of emotional dysregulation in depressed individuals. Watching people experience certain emotions without being overcome by them is also indicative of the Buddhist concept of detachment, in which people get to learn to take emotions and wait to respond to them from a rational standpoint, rather than responding to them instinctively.

Meditation also enhances self-awareness, and it is an inherent characteristic of most psychotherapeutic models, including cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and psychodynamic therapy. Mindfulness meditation makes people who practice it more aware of automatic thought patterns, which make them experience stress and anxiety. This heightened self-awareness is the reason why people are able to become aware of what negative thought patterns they are having and replace them with healthier thought patterns. Studies have suggested that under the conditions of regular meditation, there is an improvement in meta-cognition, which is that one can see thoughts as processes that take place in the mind and not as facts (Teasdale et al., 2002).

The other notable benefit is that there is increased cognitive flexibility. Meditation improves the ability to shift between different perspectives as well as to redesign the negative experiences from a superior viewpoint. A research study conducted by Garland et al. (2010) established that mindfulness practitioners have developed cognition reappraisal, i.e. able to reorganise their negative thoughts. It is beneficial, particularly in CBT-based interventions, in which cognitive reappraisal is a significant procedure for reducing psychological distress.

Buddhist Meditation and Its Neurobiological Effects

According to the scientific researches, meditation has provided considerable evidence indicating that there are significant transformations in the brain structure and functioning of the particular parts of the brain that are involved in emotional regulation, attention, and self-awareness. The neuroimaging studies have proved that indeed, to a certain degree, meditation does increase the amount of the grey matter in the prefrontal cortex which is the part of the brain with which the executive functioning and decisions making are associated. It means that meditation enhances the ability of an individual to regulate his/her emotions, information processing, and cognitive regulation of the impulsive reactions (Holzel et al., 2011).

Among the neurobiological impacts of meditation, which is among the most frequently reported, the reality that meditation reduces activity in the amygdala, the emotional centre of the brain, is present. The amygdala also plays a role in processing of fear and stress reactions and too much activity of this part is linked with anxiety disorders and PTSD. In a study, Davidson and Kabat-Zinn (2003) have demonstrated that eight weeks of mindfulness meditation led to a significant reduction in the reactivity of amygdala which was followed by a decrease in the

amount of stress and an enhanced emotional stability. These findings may point out that meditation may be a useful tool for individuals who do not know how to cope with their chronic stress and emotional responsiveness.

The other activity that improves connections between prefrontal cortex and the limbic system, which improves emotion control, is meditation. Functional MRI (fMRI) scan surveys on brain activity indicate that meditation practitioners make more connections among self-regulation sections of the brain that are not as susceptible to impulsive reactions and unfavorable thinking (Lutz et al., 2008). The assumption that meditation can be integrated into the psychotherapy process to enhance self-control and resilience is confirmed by the discovery.

Moreover, meditation enhances neuroplasticity, i.e., the possibility of the brain to reorganize itself to new experiences. It can be applied particularly well in the context of trauma treatment and the necessity to reconnect inappropriate brain pathways to obtain a recovery. The studies on the survivor of traumas have determined that meditation increases the volume of the hippocampus which is an aspect of the brain that manages memory and processes emotion (King et al., 2013). It is based on these neurobiological observations that Buddhist meditation should be used as a psychotherapy mechanism, which is scientifically justified.

Buddhist Meditation Effectiveness in Mental Health Disorder Treatment

Meditation in a clinical setting has been proven to promise good results in the treatment of diverse mental health disorders. Research has demonstrated that meditation-based programs are effective to minimize depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use symptoms.

Depression and Anxiety:

Some meta-analyses have identified a risk of relapses of depression as lowered by almost half in those with repeated depressive episodes (Kuyken et al., 2016).

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) symptoms reduced significantly when Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was used to enhance emotional regulation and worry cycles decrease (Hoge et al., 2013).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

Research on veterans who have PTSD suggests that meditation lowers the hyperarousal and allows the individuals to process traumatic memories more efficiently (King et al., 2013).

Practices based on meditation have been identified to reduce intrusive thoughts, flashbacks due to developing an awareness of the present moment and over-rumination of the traumatic experience in the past.

Substance Use Disorders:

A study conducted by Dakwar et al. (2009) has reported that meditation decreases the cravings and body impulse of people who have completed substance addiction.

Meditation improves dopamine regulation that is important in addiction recovery as this improves the functionality of the reward system and decreases relapse.

These results indicate that meditation-based therapies offer a comprehensive treatment of mental health because they include a response to the symptoms and the cognitive patterns underlying psychological disturbance.

Buddhist Meditation as a Complement to Psychotherapy

Incorporation of meditation into psychotherapy complements the conventional treatment strategies through providing a more holistic, self-empowering, and sustainable way of mental health promotion. Therapy is also more effective as meditation assists in the development of self-regulation abilities in people, minimizing the emotional reactivity and increasing the likelihood of the behaviour change in the long run.

The fact that meditation is accessible and flexible is one of the key benefits of its implementation in therapy. Compared to medication-based therapies, where medication may have side effects and may lead to dependencies, meditation is an economical, non-invasive, and self-directed method that may be practiced on one's own free will. This renders it a good adjunct treatment to patients who are more inclined towards non-pharmaceutical treatments.

Also, meditation creates a psychological resilience that is long term and individuals gain coping mechanisms that go beyond therapy sessions. Research has indicated that the benefits that come as a result of meditation to patients who practice meditation even after the therapy are more durable, which means that meditation improves the sustainability of treatment effects (Segal et al., 2012).

One more significant feature of the Buddhist meditation is that it is focused on compassion and self-acceptance. The negative perception of oneself and self-criticism, which faces a lot of people with mental health issues, may be obstacles to recovery. The meditation techniques (loving-kindness meditation (metta)) have been discovered

to contribute to the enhancement of self-compassion and a decrease in self-judgment and thus emotional well being (Neff and Germer, 2013).

Discussion

The results of the given research point to the important role of Buddhist meditation as a psychotherapeutic instrument. The findings indicate that meditation improves emotional regulation, mental flexibility, and mental well-being. Moreover, the neurobiological advantages of meditation, including brain structure and brain functionality changes, are supported by scientific research, which leads to better mental health outcomes. It will discuss (1) similarities between Buddhist meditation and psychotherapy, (2) scientific rationale of incorporating meditation into psychotherapy, (3) benefits and limitations of medication-based interventions, and (4) the future of using meditation as a mental health intervention.

Similarities of Buddhist Meditation and Psychotherapy

The Buddhist form of meditation is very close to modern psychotherapy with regard to the focus on the self-awareness, emotional control, and mental transformation. Key aspects of psychotherapy in the Buddhist practice are the ethical morality (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (panna). Morality involves behaviour control and this is the same as behavioural therapy whose aim is to change negative behaviour. Focused attention, or concentration, one of the elements of mindfulness-based therapies, is the one that may help people become more mindful and have access to control over their thoughts and feelings. Wisdom, or wisdom is also aligned with cognitive and psychodynamic therapies, the emphasis of which is to gain greater understanding of the way one thinks and the way he or she feels.

Moreover, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can be compared with Vipassana meditation that enables the building of insight and self-awareness. Both techniques make individuals be objective in their thinking and re-establish the negative thinking patterns. Likewise, the loving-kindness meditation (metta) helps develop self-compassion and affectiveness in a positive manner, which is in line with humanistic therapies that subscribe to the self-acceptance and emotional healing. All such similarities demonstrate that meditation is not merely some spiritual practice, but it is also some structured psychological one which may be successfully introduced in the therapy.

Meditation has a scientific basis on which it can be incorporated into therapy

The scientific justification of meditation in psychotherapy is outstanding due to the neurobiological effects of this procedure. It has been discovered that meditation classes have increased the density of the grey matter of regions of the brain that are involved in emotional regulation such as the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. These changes promote cognitive abilities, thus allowing people to cope with stress, manage emotions, and develop healthier coping systems (Holzel et al., 2011). In addition, meditation has also been found to reduce the activity of the fear centre of the brain the amygdala and make individuals less emotionally responsive and anxious (Davidson and Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

One of the most interesting findings is the application of meditation that enhances neuroplasticity, the fact that the brain can restructure itself and form new neural networks. This may be particularly useful in the treatment of traumas since PTSD patients are known to have a dysregulated brain activity that is associated with intrusive thoughts as well as hyperarousal. Such maladaptive neural networks can be rewired with the help of meditation, and it is one of the non-pharmacological methods to recover after a trauma (King et al., 2013). The fact that meditation is a physical activity which physically transforms the brain in order to achieve mental health makes it a good complement to the traditional process of psychotherapy.

Benefits and Difficulties of Meditation-Based Interventions

The main advantage of psychotherapy using meditation is that it is the holistic approach to mental health. Meditation unlike drugs has the tendency to cure the causes of symptoms, which include long term emotional stability. Besides, meditation is affordable and accessible, and the person can use it even after the therapy is done without the need to invest more money. The study has shown that meditating patients outside the therapy process have long-term changes in mental health compared to patients who adopt the conventional treatment methods solely (Segal et al., 2012).

The other notable advantage is that meditation improves self-awareness and self-regulation. The automatic negative thoughts tend to be a problem to most individuals with depression and anxiety, and this can even lead to agonizing cycles. To interfere with these loops, meditation helps the meditator to be non-judgmental of her thoughts and decreases the strength of negative thinking emotions. It is known as decentering and is one of the major mechanisms of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) that has been proven to produce an incredible impact on eliminating the risk of depression relapse (Kuyken et al., 2016).

Regardless of these advantages, there are also challenges with meditation in psychotherapy. Among the weaknesses is the fact that meditation cannot work when it is not practiced regularly. Unlike medication that can lead to immediate outcomes, meditation is a long-term undertaking and not all people are willing and able to do it regularly. In addition, meditation may not apply to any mental illness. To give one example, patients whose degree of trauma or psychosis is very high may discover that unpleasant thoughts or feelings arise during the process of their meditation and aggravate the condition rather than alleviate it. In the given case, meditation needs to be done with caution and should be under the supervision of a professional.

Another issue is also present: the cultural and religious perception of meditation. It is another possibility that individuals are unwilling to learn meditation due to personal or religious beliefs, as Buddhist meditation is of Eastern origin. The modern mindfulness-based interventions, however, have redefined meditation, and it has assumed a secular tone and can now be availed to a broader audience. The misunderstandings and insensitivity towards clinical environments can be reduced by informing the population about the scientific advantages of meditation.

Future Implications of Meditation in Mental Health Treatment

Based on the current growing momentum in the research on the study of meditation, there is a possibility that its application in psychotherapy will grow exponentially. One of the most important directions of the future development is the combination of meditation and digital mental health interventions. With the current trend of the increase in the number of mental health apps, meditation-based programs are becoming more accessible to individuals who might not be lucky to receive traditional therapy. It has been shown that a mobile mindfulness program can be used to decrease the level of stress and anxiety and it is an alternative to those who cannot receive face-to-face therapy (Howells et al., 2016).

The other way forward in the future is that meditation is taken into combination with emerging therapies, such as neurofeedback and virtual reality (VR). The neurofeedback meditation systems are based on brainwave monitoring that can help an individual to have a greater control over his or her mental states, which enhances the effectiveness of meditation practice. On the same note, VR-based mindfulness interventions can be used to build immersive environments that may be used to guide people through the meditation process, making the experience more interactive and accessible. On the one hand, these inventions can change the sphere of meditation-based therapy and make it more powerful and available.

Further, the research should be done to determine the most appropriate meditation techniques applied in different psychological conditions. Mindfulness meditation has been widely researched but other forms of Buddhist meditation have not received this amount of research in clinical psychology, such as loving-kindness meditation (metta) and concentration meditation (samatha). Research in the future should focus on the impact of the different forms of meditation on different mental illnesses in order to implement more specific treatment alternatives.

Finally, there is an increasing need by mental health professionals to have more organised training programs in meditation. Even though many therapists have experienced the benefits of meditation, not everyone is trained or authorized to lead or teach meditation. Therapist standardisation through meditation-based training could contribute to making meditation implementation in psychotherapy better and more effective.

Conclusion

In this study, Buddhist meditation as a therapeutic approach in contemporary psychotherapy has been brought to the fore. The results indicate that meditation is important in improving emotional control, cognitive adaptability, and general mental health. The similarities between Buddhist meditation and psychotherapeutic interventions, including cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy, and mindfulness-based interventions, are evidence that meditation serves not only as a spiritual practice but is also a psychological instrument.

Neurobiological effects of meditation are scientifically proven, where meditation results in structural and functional modifications in the brain, especially in areas that contribute to emotional processing and self-regulation. Meditation decreases amygdala activity, improves the prefrontal cortex, and leads to neuroplasticity, all of which result in improved mental health outcomes. Empirical research supports the idea that meditation-based interventions can be effective in the alleviation of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorder symptoms.

Accessibility, cost-effectiveness and long-term advantages are some of the most important benefits of meditation as a psychotherapeutic device. Nevertheless, there are still difficulties, such as the necessity to train regularly, the attitude towards cultures, and the restrictions towards particular psychological disorders.

In the future, meditation is expected to become a primary component in mental health care, especially as digital therapy, neurofeedback, and virtual reality (VR)-based mindfulness programs develop. To achieve the greatest

potential, research on the most successful methods of meditation in certain mental disorders should be conducted, and meditation training sessions designed to teach therapists how to meditate.

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