

Purpose of Mindfulness in Teaching Learning Process: Perspective of Buddhism

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Abstract

Mindfulness is the mental awareness and practices as a tool for purification of mind for creative doings, ultimately which nurtures students' all-round development. It is beneficial to all age group as it helps to maintain the mental health with increased abilities/skills, efficiency and productivity. It develops insight and wisdom, eventually supports the best human qualities of kindness, empathy, compassion, and equanimity. As a new paradigm shift, the mindfulness approach in the education system is becoming crucial to reducing the possible mental health problems such as the depression, stress and anxiety disorder experienced by the youths around the globe. Therefore, the schools unquestionably have the mandate to offer such education which can help to create the students with a healthy mind. However, if the students do not receive the proper education to cultivate a healthy mind then the learning outcomes may go in wrong directions. In this regard, teachers can play a vital role to promote mindfulness curriculum and activities in schools through available practices. This paper discusses on conceptual understanding of mindfulness at first. Then it illustrates the purpose of mindfulness in the teaching-learning process. Afterwards, it describes the trend of Mindfulness schools with the role of teachers and ends with a conclusion.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Meditation, Teaching learning process, Mindfulness school, Teachers' role

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Introduction to mindfulness

The term mindfulness is not as simple as we understand; it is very hard to define in a single word. Mindfulness in the English translation of the Pali word *sati* and *sati* is an activity (Bhante Gunaratna, 2011). It is the activities; those are associated with the mind or experience of our mental awareness. Further, “Mindfulness comes from the Pali word *sati* and the Sanskrit word *smirti*, which connotes awareness, attention, and remembering. The background and foreground of consciousness are, respectively, awareness and attention (Neale, 2006, p.3)”.

Gunaratna (2011) again stated as; Mindfulness is nonjudgmental observation. It is that ability of the mind to observe without criticism. With this ability, one sees things without condemnation or judgment. Thus mindfulness is originally derived from the Pali language from two words meaning awareness and clear comprehension (Grecucci et al., 2015 as cited Shoemaker, 2015). Smith (2002) argued; mindfulness and awareness appear the same. They may well be the closest friend and firmly linked but they are different. Awareness is fully alive but rather passive where mindfulness is the conscious act of bringing ourselves back to the state of awareness. Thus mindfulness is not just about meditation; it is also a way of living with awareness. It is an intrinsic process requiring effort and discipline ((Hassed& Chamber, 2015, p. 7, Siegel, 2007 as cited as Liu and Wang, 2016).

On the other hand, ‘Mindfulness’ is a kind of mental training that uses various methods of meditation as a means of mindfulness but these two terms are not synonymous with each other. Generally, there are two types of meditation; tranquility or *Samatha* meditation and insight or Vipassana meditation. Whichever we practice, the main factor in mental development is mindfulness (Ven. Sujiva, 2000; Sumedho, 1987). As one of the major teachings of Buddhism is the cultivation of mind, all Buddhists practice meditation for mental culture and for spiritual development. No one can attain Nirvana or salvation without cultivating the mind through meditation (Dhammananda, 2002).

Samatha meditation is that kind of meditation which is the practice on the basis of concentrating the mind on one particular object. One chooses an object such as the sensation of breathing and puts full attention on the sensations of the inhalation and exhalation (Sumedho, 1987). Samatha meditation is also known as calm meditation; mindfulness plays a very important role in Calm meditation. One of the most common objects of concentration in *samatha* is the breath; the foremost aim of this meditation is attention the breath, perhaps at the nostrils where we can feel it passing in and out of our body, and we sustain it there (Burnett,2009). Deep concentration is necessary for the perfect benefit of meditation and this is only possible when one has the ability to stay focused on a single object during meditation (Smith, 2002). Therefore, Samatha meditation requires one-pointedness of mind and it is one of the mental factors in wholesome consciousness. Tranquility is all unperturbed, peaceful and lucid state of mind attained by strong mental concentration (Ven.Nyanatiloka, 1980). It can be said, Samatha meditation is a kind of mental exercise which helps anyone for promoting inner consciousness through deep concentration. Venerable Nyanatiloka (1980) justified, if tranquility is developed then the mind will be developed and if the mind is developed then all the lust will be abandoned.

Similarly, another way of eradicating the mental evil is Vipassana or insight meditation. Vipassana Meditation was discovered by Buddha himself, and it is the path that leads the meditator with righteous practice to be gradually liberated from the influence of defilements. "Vipassana" is a combination of the two words "Vi" and "Passana". "Vi" means clear, true, superb, and "Passana" means seeing, direct perception and right view or wisdom (Sorado, 2009).

Nyanatiloka (1980) defines; insight or Vipassana is the penetrative understanding by the direct meditative experience of the impendency, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality of all material and mental phenomenon of existence. This meditation leads the person to enter into the supermundane states of holiness and final liberation. As taught by S.N. Goenka; Vipassana means seeing things as they really are. It is the process of self-purification by self-observation. One begins by observing the natural breath to concentrate the mind. With a sharpened awareness, one proceeds to observe the changing nature of body and mind and experiences the universal truths of impermanence, suffering and egoless. This truth-realization by direct experience is the process of purification. The entire path (Dhamma) is a universal remedy for universal problems and has nothing to do with any organized religion or sectarianism (www.dhamma.org).

Literally, there are some differences between Samatha and Vipassana meditation. The true nature of Samatha is to create a peaceful mind and the true nature of Vipassana meditation is for wisdom. The characteristic of Samatha is restlessness, where Vipassana is doing for wisdom which reveals the true state of nature. The result of samatha is one-pointedness (ekaggata). The result of Vipassana is to have the right view or the true state of the nature of nama (mind) and rupa (material form or body). The benefit of Samatha meditation is, it helps to make a peaceful mind and the benefit of Vipassana meditation is the cessation of one's accumulation or defilements (Boonkanjanaram meditation centre, 1988).

In conclusion, Samatha is a Samadhi which is concentration or control of one's own mind and Vipassana is the Panna or wisdom or insight, which totally purify the mind. Thus, the first one covers right effort, right awareness and right concentration. Similarly the second one covers right thought and right understanding (Hart & Goenka, 1987). It can be sum up; there are two ways of practicing mindfulness (Sati) through concentration (Samadhi) and wisdom (Panna). Finally according to the oldest Buddhist text; meditation is not only sitting; it is a way of living. Therefore; whatever we are doing as daily work, for instance; eating, sleeping, walking, thinking or any task, it should be integrated within our day to day work in whole life. It is actually an education or training of art of living for how to see, how to hear, how to smell, how to eat, how to drink, how to walk with full awareness, which means everything should be done mindfully (Bomhard, 2015).

Purpose of mindfulness in teaching learning process

There is no perfect health without good mental health which is proved by the Medical Science. Many physical health problems are associated with stress that brings anxiety, arthritis, constipation, depression, stomach ulcer, high blood pressure, dizziness, premenstrual syndrome, slow wound healing, heart problems (Angina-chest pain) and

many others (Harvard Medical School, 2016). As many research studies were conducted on the positive impact of mindfulness in teaching-learning process, one of the studies explored that a significant number of students reported positive impacts after performing mindfulness-based activities which increased different abilities, for instance, built the capacity of insight and creativity, engaged with the moment, engaged with the learning process, transition to the class, attune/attend, and be more reflective (Slavik, 2014).

Every individual needs to keep their body hygiene for maintenance of the physical health while every person needs to take care of their mental health for perfect health. No doubt, Mindfulness is an essential element of our daily life because it is an awareness or attention, avoiding a distracted and clouded state of mind. As a result, there would be fewer chances for any accident if everyone were mindful. Pointing on the importance of mindfulness, clear-minded or mindful people could do their tasks more effectively and mannerly than contaminated minds. It would also help to increase one's efficiency and productivity (Santina, 1984).

Mindfulness also strengthens the imperative skills which are necessary for present context, especially, requires among young generations that contributes to emotional balance. Further, the mindfulness supports the best human qualities of kindness, empathy, and compassion. Paying attention to these qualities improves mental focus and contributes to the academic performance of the children (Shoerberlein & Sheth, 2009). Ven. Mahathera (1988) believed; all evil prevalent in this deluded world. The whole world is stuck on lust, though the lust is the enemy of the human civilization and through the highly ambitious mentality, which all evils come to living beings. While the fact is that the People want to fulfil their desires at any cost, whilst when obstructed by some cause is transformed into wrath.

Naturally, the untrained mind is very elusive and persuades people to commit evil and become slaves of the senses. People like to live with imagination to be something and to accomplish something, indeed; imagination and emotions always mislead humans if their minds are not properly trained. Most of the troubles which we are confronting today are due to the untrained and undeveloped mind (Dhammananda, 2002). Teenager students have many dreams but not all dreams are achievable or possible when they have experienced about on futile, in that situation they are not able to cope themselves and even committed for suicide. If someone who knows how to practice meditation will be able to control the mind when it is misled by the senses. It is already established that meditation is the remedy for many physical and mental sicknesses (Dhammananda, 2002).

Basically, the time period of school going age students are the foundation for their whole life, in terms of their holistic development. As such, schools and parents should pay attention more for tracking them in the right way. Not only secondary or college student but the students of elementary level are also living with anxiety, depression and stress and no doubt there are several responsible reasons for that. There are many causes inside and outside the school that contribute to the everyday stressors of the children. The causes could be easy access to technology, and use of the internet and the material, even though, they are not suitable to use by according to their age factor. Similarly, some other causes might be exposure to the media (crime, murder, war and

environmental disaster etc.), family issues (financial, divorce, step-parents, separation, illness, homelessness, etc.), and school-related issues like pressure for high marks, parents expectations, peer interactions, bullying, etc.(Kusz, 2009).

Some experts such as Barnes et al. (2003) also justified; as there has been an increase in negative school behaviours in the United States (U.S.) for example; intentional injuries, physical fight and other aggressive behaviours, which is partly attributable to increased exposure to chronic psychosocial stress in the form of family breakdown, violence in media, information overload, and poverty. This has resulted in children and youth exhibiting increased anger and violence, which correlates to an increase in anxiety and stress levels. According to the centre for the mental health of the U.S department of health and human services, several key risk factors are associated with poor school behaviours. Such factors are; poverty, abuse and neglect, harsh and inconsistent parenting, drug and alcohol use by caregivers, emotional and physical or sexual abuse, modelling of aggression, media violence, negative attitude towards school, family transition (death and divorce), parent criminality (Johnston,2013). This is happening not in the U.S only, probably most of the countries facing the challenging, destructive and poor school behaviours. As such Nepal is also observing in an increasing trend.

The world is entirely connected from east to west and north to south due to the development of advanced technology. This development is creating various opportunities in every field of study and in professions. But, another side, children of today are facing many challenges simultaneously such as overload. This constant overload could challenge children's thinking capacity and make their learning difficult (Fisher, 2006). As a result, these stressors might increase the risk for a variety of negative outcomes in children and youth "including social-emotional difficulties, behaviour problems, and poor academic performance" (Mendelson et al., 2010, p. 985).

Mindfulness-based interventions show promise in helping children manage stress by improving self-regulation, mood, and social-emotional development (Mendelson et al., 2010). Therefore, the potential benefits of integrating mindfulness-based training into school settings are significant in regards to the effect on cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual domains with performance skills and executive function. Many researches have been completed significantly on the actual impacts of mindfulness-based teaching-learning process and suggested the mindfulness-based practices which have a positive impact on academic performance, psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, and social skills in children and adolescents (Rempel, 2012, Weare, 2012).

It is found that mindfulness teaching-learning process can help young people pay greater attention and be more focused towards the learning, they can think in more innovative ways, can use existing or previous knowledge more effectively, improve working memory, able to enhance planning, problem-solving, and reasoning skills (Weare, 2012). There are several shreds of evidence that mindfulness-based training in schools is feasible and acceptable to those who have participated in it (Rempel, 2012). According to research from the University of Cambridge; the study which involved more than 600 Cambridge students; concluded

that the introduction of eight-week mindfulness courses in the United Kingdom (U.K.) universities could help prevent mental illness and boost students' wellbeing at a time of growing concern about mental health in the higher education sector (www.theguardian.com). Therefore, it is a proven phenomenon that the mindfulness-based activities integrated into the teaching-learning process is the best way for preparing a student with a purified or a healthy mind and finally with healthy body.

According to Buddhism, meditation is the means for mindfulness and its aim is to develop insight and wisdom and the desirable states of mind like universal love (metta), compassion (Karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha). These are the major tools and strategies for cultivation of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion (Jackson & Edwards, 2014). However, among the human society; greed, hatred and delusion are deeply rooted so the societies are in turmoil condition. Therefore, education system, especially, the school education system must prepare a student with four mental qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity through mindfulness practices.

The trend of Mindfulness schools

The school is that place which has only one mandate of preparing the students with need of society and Nation. Nowadays, because of globalization and other many reasons, the role of school has been broadening. According to Huppert and Johnson (2010); in recent years there has been a growing acceptance that schools should not provide children with a formal education only but should also consider the well-being of the children as a whole. For the most important part, this new approach focuses on identifying and managing mental health problems related to student's aggressiveness, anxiety, stress, bullying to other, and anti-social behaviours within the school context, home and their own community. In this context, some of the schools in the world are evolving as a mindfulness school, for example; a school in Texas that has been incorporating mindfulness into their curriculum for 20 years and tracking the results (Kinder, n.d.).

As the example of mindfulness schools; hundreds of schools in California alone have mindful meditation programs where the educators see benefit from it. Mindfulness is said to help with focus, attention, calming the emotions and school performance. One of the reasons of its growth is because the kids are under the pressure, and with the testing culture and the pressure put on them by teachers and parents to be successful (MacVean, 2014).

The Cable News Network (CNN) also reported that at the beginning of the school year in Marblehead High School at Massachusetts, students started moving their desks out of the way, grabbing a mat and lying down on the floor for guided meditation. The guided meditations are all part of a fast-growing trend in education, where more schools are providing mindfulness exercises to the students and teachers in response to the enormous pressures that the students are facing. So, considering the positive impacts of mindfulness, more schools are offering mindfulness exercises to combat teen stress (Wallace, 2016).

These some examples also clarify that it is a new paradigm shift establishing the education system now where many schools in the east and west are converting the general schools into mindfulness schools. The mindfulness meditation is based on the Buddha's teaching and his tested experience which is benefitted for mental health management.

In some cases, the Government itself initiated for mindfulness school approach. For example, in Bhutan, mindfulness is currently being implemented across the country's education sector (Albrecht, Albrecht & Cohen, 2012). In Sri-Lanka, a naming of Satipasala or mindfulness is introduced in general school education system in 2016. Ministry of Education started a partnership with this program and endorsed the philosophy of mindfulness in schools. The aim of this program is to introduce mindfulness and share the practices among students, teachers, Principals and entire the school community in Sri-Lanka. The decision was taken by the Government for adopting a secular approach in launching Satipasala as a pilot project in the education system of Sri-Lanka (Introducing Satipasala, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com>).

Role of teachers in mindfulness school

Most importantly, teachers are the vital player for the whole teaching-learning process, especially in the school education system. Probably, there are different approaches to prepare mindfulness teacher for mindfulness teaching-learning process. However, the mindfulness, as a discipline, can be integrated into the classroom using one of three basic approaches: indirect (the teacher develops a personal mindfulness practices and embodies mindfulness attitudes and behaviours throughout the school day); direct (programs that teach the mindfulness exercises and skills to the students); or a combination of direct and indirect approaches (Meiklejohn et al., 2010).

It is the view of many mindfulness practitioners that teachers and other users of mindfulness should work on a personal practice first before incorporating mindfulness into the classroom with children (Arthurson, 2015). As such, when teachers are fully ready for teaching, they teach better, and when students are fully ready for learning, they learn better. It's a "win-win" equation and strategy that can transform teaching-learning and the educational landscape in the right track. For this, the teacher should be the ideal person for their student. In this endeavor of the teaching-learning process, mindfulness helps teachers (to the students too) in multiple ways by supporting emotion management, reducing stress, and focusing the mind. These skills are essential for their successful professional career as well as the satisfaction of the job (Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009).

It is also promising practices which are important to note that, for centuries, many individual teachers around the world actively incorporated techniques from their own personal meditation practices to elicit and encourage a mindfulness way of being (Fisher, 2006). Some other arguments also say that most of the teachers are already started to bringing mindfulness in the school without any professional training on the subject based approach. However, this can be effective, but first, it is important to gain familiarity with the experience of mindfulness by them. As they do so, they will naturally bring their heightened attention and awareness into the classroom and teach more mindfully (Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009).

Another view is that it is better to use a more indirect approach of bringing mindfulness into the classroom by working with teachers first, to let them develop their own practices. The mindfulness could be incorporated into the teacher training or professional development program directly on a practical basis. The teachers will then bring this awareness into the classroom with the children who are embodied by the subject teachers in everyday classroom actions and instructional strategies (Meiklejohn et al. 2010). If formal curricula of teacher's professional development program typically include a mindfulness related components and its practices, then the enhanced training goes further by presenting new curricular content to the teachers, providing them with instructions in new skills, and offering opportunities for supervised practices and feedbacks (Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009).

Many kinds of research have been conducted on mindfulness related matter. Now it has lent validity to mindfulness as a valuable tool to foster wellness; practices that were once considered to mainstream in the education sector by educators only a decade ago; are now being embraced and openly recognized as integral elements in running a successful classroom. Globally, there are a growing number of school-based mindfulness programs that involve varying degrees of teacher training (Black et al., 2009). The mindfulness is beneficial and proved to both the teachers and students as it is helpful to the teacher for improving focus and awareness, increasing responsiveness to students' needs, promoting emotional balance, supporting stress management and stress reduction, supporting healthy relationships at work and home (behavior management), enhancing classroom climate, and supporting overall well-being (Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009). Some of the teachers also found that they were able to gain a holistic view of the curriculum and thus impart key concepts to the children (Albrecht, 2012).

Hence, stress in children is seen either caused by family associated issues or school-related problems. It is a quite common phenomenon for all the children both in the developed country and/or developing country. The children may feel some stress, anxiety or uneasiness one or many times during school life. The increase in the amount of homework, competition for good grades, and fear of failure, peer-pressure and bullying are some of the more common reasons for stress in the school (Allen & Klein, 1996). Some researchers also found that most of the time children are in stress condition which should be managed by preparing a mindfulness teacher or providing a mental based training course directly to the students, or in other words "train the brain" of the student by adopting the mindfulness approach from the schools. For the past 10 years, exploratory initiatives have been unfolding in the USA, the UK, Canada, Israel, and other countries to integrate the discipline of mindfulness into the field of K-12 education for the benefit of both the students' as well as teachers' physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing (Meiklejohn et al. 2010).

Conclusion

Students of today are more knowledgeable, smart, and intelligent; they have more access in every field of study and in the global job market; as the world is connected because it has become a global village. In fact, the area of every field is broadened; they are not satisfied because of the highly competitive life, hence, challenges ahead.

This opportunities and challenges both putting them always in under pressure of study, good job, break up with boyfriend and girlfriend, parental divorce, the death of loved one, desired for lavish life and many other factors. Children are compelled to face and experience all the negative circumstances which increase more stress in their daily life. Increased stress is a risk factor for depression, even committed for suicide or performing criminal activities and the stressful life events are predictive of a less positive response to anyone (Parker & Roy, 2001).

A good practical example of the use of mindfulness was seen in Thailand in June/July 2018. The 12 Thai school boys and their coach were trapped almost 10 days in a cave. Ekapol Chantwong, the coach of the 12 boys, who had already lived as a Buddhist monk, using meditation while waiting for the rescue team. The meditation helped the coacher keep calm and boys also remained in a good spirit with good health (*au.news.yahoo.com*).

Thus, mindfulness is recommended and proved by the Neuroscience also that it is as a major tool or method for good mental health. It is a reasonably strong matter to manage the mental health associated problems for all aged group. For this reason, related authorities and educational institutions like schools should take initiation for developing a mindfulness environment.

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