



# Effect of Mindfulness Meditation Practices on Students' Behavior Change in Secondary Schools in Trashigang District, Bhutan

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## **Author's contribution**

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research primarily focused on mindfulness meditation affecting students' behaviour change in secondary schools, Trashigang district, Bhutan. The objectives of the research were to study the levels of students' mindfulness meditation practice, to identify students' behaviour change, and to examine mindfulness meditation practice affecting students' behaviour change in secondary schools in Trashigang, Bhutan.

The study administered questionnaires on mindfulness meditation and behaviour change to 367 students in two higher secondary schools and interviewed two students and two teachers in May 2013. The quantitative data were analyzed by descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed by content analysis.

*Keywords: content analysis; Mindfulness; meditation, Bhutan, student behaviour.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Education systems around the world are increasingly integrating mindfulness meditation

as part of their curricular policy [1]. In the 21st-century, educating students to become empowered, informed, and responsible citizens has become a national educational concern.

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Many of these contemporary skills are concomitant to awareness of own cognitive processes and the ability to regulate them (i.e., metacognition). Since meditation is also considered a metacognitive skill; it has the potential to address educational concerns of increasing student behavior as a social animal by facilitating development of this contemporary skillset [2].

The education system in Bhutan underwent a major reformation in 2010 under the theme Educating for Gross National Happiness which began to be implemented and practiced as part of the school culture throughout the nation [3]. One of the goals of the reform is to enhance academic performance and to engender positive attitudes, behavior and values for the holistic improvement of a student. Mindfulness practice is one of the core values of the Psychological Wellbeing Domain of GNH which is practiced through a guided meditation in the morning assemblies, classrooms and other gatherings. The institution of mindfulness practice in Bhutanese school was an answer to the concept of the child-friendly school. Mindfulness practice enhanced attention, conflict resolution skills, empathy, calmness in the classroom, and improved the overall school environment. Participation in a Mindfulness Meditation (MM) practice program was associated with improvements in behavioral regulation [4]. Further, it was demonstrated that mindfulness practice in children had been associated with improved cognitive and behavioural outcomes [4,5,1]. Children and adolescents constantly encounter situations of peer pressure and avenues to lose self-control in and outside the classroom. The loss of self-control results in failing to abide by one or more student codes of conducts thus coming in conflict with the school norms.

Mindfulness meditation practices have been instituted into the schools of Bhutan as part of major educational reform in 2010. The ministry of education explored means to nurture GNH into schools to elevate child-friendly schools and to make learning a meaningful and relevant experience for the children [3].

Mindfulness Meditation (MM) is a spiritual tradition that is at least 2550 years old [6]. In ancient India, MM was an integral part of Buddhist philosophy promulgated by The Buddha. Meditation is practiced in spiritual and religious practices in world's major religions

throughout the centuries. The practice included yoga, tai chi, qigong, prayer-chanting, mantra recitation and insight meditation which were originated from the Buddhist traditions [4]. In the Buddhist etymology mindfulness is described as an attentive awareness of the present moment and recognition of reality of nature of phenomena [7].

The concept of meditation implied in the research literature typically involved secular definition and techniques of mindfulness and mind training without connotation to spiritual or religious context. According to the western etymological derivations meditation in Latin is —*meditari* which is to think, to dwell upon, or to exercise the mind, and mindfulness as —*mederi -to heal*. The Sanskrit derivation equivalently transcribed as —*medha-* which means —*wisdom* [8]. Although the connotations for mindfulness and meditation vary with the field of practice; clinically meditation is an intentional self-regulation of attention aimed at calming the mind and body while secular mindfulness is method to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight [8].

According to one of the pioneer Buddhist practitioners and teachers in the west, Sogyal Rinpoche, mindfulness allowed chaotic and fragmented aspects of ourselves to settle and become friends; it defuses negativity; removes the unkindness in us, revealing our true nature, our compassionate 'Good Heart' [7]. It elucidated that constant practice of being in the 'nowness' causes changes in the personality and morality of a person, and thereby becomes a source of internal healing. Parallel to the Buddhist understanding the most widely used definition of mindfulness is that of Jon Kabat-Zinn's, which concisely stated that awareness that emerged through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment [9].

Recently, contribution of talks by H.H. Dalai Lama accelerated intense interest to psychologists, biologists and physicists leading to scientific investigative studies on the impact of Tibetan meditation practices on psychological, emotional and physical self-regulation [6] [10] [11]. Another influential Asian teacher is Thich Nhat Hanh, an eccentric Vietnamese monk who influenced by both Theravadan and Chinese Zen (Ch'an) Buddhism taught through the art of 'mindful living' [12].

Lately meditation practices are taught as secular mindfulness meditation for clinical and psychological purposes. The participants are trained to focus attention on a particular mental or physical object, music or visualization to become mindful of thoughts as they arise. Virtually all meditative approaches combine elements of both concentrative and mindfulness practice, but for therapeutic purposes, there are differences in technique and application specific to the need of individual or group [13]. The practices of mindfulness meditation in school children resulted in a state of heightened calmness, physical relaxation, and psychological balance of the individual [14].

Mindfulness meditation, commonly termed as Mind-training is one of the elements of GNH education that focuses on addressing the Psychological Well-being of students in all schools [15]. Mindfulness practice begins before or after and even during the morning assembly for two-three (2-3) minutes. In the classroom mindfulness is practiced before beginning the class guided by the teacher or after the class on a regular basis. In some schools mindfulness is practiced twice a day; the first hour of the class and the last hour of the day. Mindfulness is practiced even during formal staff gatherings and during student co-curricular activities session [16] [17].

Meditation practice methods are encyclopaedic in its directions. However, meditation, as used in schools typically involves the use of secular techniques [18]. There are wide ranges of techniques employed by different instructors in the field of science and religion. The current study summarized four forms of mindfulness meditation practiced commonly in the schools around the world as; Attending the Senses: The raisin meditation [19], Awareness of Movement [20], Meditation on the Breath [21] [20] [22] [17], and Visualization Meditation [1] [3].

Guided mindfulness practice intervention in Bhutanese schools was expected to help Bhutanese children and youth to effectively cultivate GNH principles and values to lead to improvement behaviour, act rationally, and develop deeper awareness and self-control in day-to-day life. Many studies have shown a causal relationship between students' behavioural development and mindfulness practice. Researchers suggested that mindfulness training is an effective tool for children who are aggressive as it promotes self-

control and self-management [20]. Recent researches on mindfulness supported the idea that meditation practice is associated with lower levels of psychological distress, including less anxiety, depression, anger, and worry [23] [24].

Further, an institution of mindfulness practices as part of the school culture was a measure to counter the growing concerns of the increasing number of students misbehaving and coming in conflict with the Law in the schools since the abolishment of corporal punishment in 1997 as reported consistently in the national mass media [25]. It was reported that a visible and substantial improvement in students especially in terms of physical ambience, mindfulness, students' behaviour and understanding, and regard for culture, tradition and nature [26]. Further, Mindfulness meditation is found to contribute towards self-management of unhealthy behaviours through explicit cognitive control processes to adaptively regulate one's attention, emotions, cognition, and behaviour to respond effectively to internal as well as environmental demands [27].

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

The current research used both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection. The factors associated with mindfulness meditation practices are studied under variables groups of Five facet mindfulness questionnaire (FFMQ) psychometric tools. The structure itself includes observing, describing, awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity to inner and external experience [28]. The outcomes of mindfulness meditation focused on five areas of student behaviour. The areas of problem behaviour identified and adapted for the current study are social behaviour, attentional, verbal behaviour, Physical behaviour and violent behaviour pertaining to the Bhutanese school culture. The qualitative study interviewed key informants for in-depth study from two teachers and two students from each school. The interview consisted of six questions through which relevant and consistent themes are recorded.

Moreover, the research data collection was carried out in Trashigang district in Eastern Bhutan's nine Secondary school with a total of 4,495 students. The Taro Yamane formula was employed for sampling a total of 367 students. For the student, consisting of 186 students from Jigme Sherubling HSS and 181 students from Tashitse HSS.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics analysed the five-factor mindfulness questionnaire (FFMQ) which consisted of 39 items developed as a psychometric tool to explore level of mindfulness. The table 1 shows the mindfulness level surveyed in five (5) areas of observing, describing, awareness, non-judging and non-reactivity showed improved level of mindfulness at a mean of (3.53), which is moderate. The mean of factors in observing, awareness and non-judging were high with describing and non-reactivity at moderate.

#### 3.1 Respondents' Levels of Mindfulness Meditation Practice

The level of mindfulness meditation on the overall of the five-factor mindfulness

questionnaire, on average was moderate. However, the level of mindfulness meditation in its five factors varied between moderate and high. The interview finding revealed that mindfulness meditation was conducted on an average of two times a day for duration of two-three (2-3) minutes. Several researches on physiological measures showed that even two sessions of brief mindfulness meditations reduced stress to a significant level [29] [30]. Similar findings indicated that the mean score for daily meditators was significantly higher than the mean scores for those without meditation experience, and those who meditated on a weekly basis displayed significantly higher scores than yearly meditators [31]. The following table 1 represents the levels of mindfulness meditation as practiced in the last three and half years since its infusion in schools in 2010.

**Table 1. Respondents' Levels of Mindfulness Meditation Practice**

	Mindfulness Meditation	Mean	S.D	Level of Mindfulness
1	Observing	3.79	0.58	High
2	Describing	3.26	0.57	Moderate
3	Awareness	3.97	0.86	High
4	Non-judging	3.49	0.61	High
5	Non-reactivity	3.18	0.64	Moderate
	Total	3.53	0.38	Moderate

Note: 1.00-1.80=Lowest, 1.81-2.60=Low, 2.61-3.40=Moderate, 3.41-4.20=High, 4.21-5.00=Highest

**Table 2. Respondents' Level of Student Behavior Change**

SI	Student Behavior	Mean	S.D	Level of behavior change
1	Social behaviour	3.72	0.83	High
2	Attentional behavior	3.76	0.57	High
3	Verbal behaviour	3.71	0.88	High
4	Physical behaviour	3.93	0.7	High
5	Violent behaviour	3.96	0.95	High
	Total	3.81	0.79	High

Note: 1.00-1.80=Lowest, 1.81-2.60=Low, 2.61-3.40=Moderate, 3.41-4.20=High, 4.21-5.00=Highest

**Table 3. The Predictive Factors in Mindfulness Meditation that Affects Students' Behavior Change**

Variables	R	R2	R <sup>2</sup> change	Beta	T	P
				B		
Non-reactivity (X5)	0.33	0.109	0.109	0.201	0.213	4.183
Observing (X1)	0.402	0.162	0.053	0.246	0.235	4.662
Awareness (X3)	0.435	0.189	0.027	0.124	0.176	3.698
Non-judging (X4)	0.445	0.198	0.009	0.096	0.096	1.998

### 3.2 Respondents' Level of Student Behaviour Change

The descriptive statistics analysed 47 students' behaviour change questionnaire items. The areas of behaviour change were responded to in five variables which included social behaviour, attentional, verbal behaviour, physical behaviour and violent behaviour pertaining to the Bhutanese school environment. The overall mean, standard deviation and level of behaviour change of respondents showed that level of behaviour change was high at 3.81. The statistics further showed that all five-student behaviour factors were high (refer Table 2). The themes from qualitative findings demonstrated that mindfulness practice reduced work stress and has improved students' way of thinking. The students supplemented that although the practice was minimal and confined to classrooms, mindfulness meditation enhanced concentration and awareness of one's thought processes and actions. Mindfulness Awareness Practices (MAPs) delivered for 30 minutes, twice per week, for 8 weeks resulted in improvements of behavioral regulation, metacognition and overall executive function [4].

### 3.3 Predictive Factors in Student's Behaviour Change

The multicollinearity analysis performed with Pearson product moment correlation statistics on the five independent variables to test assumptions of the strength of the relationship between the mindfulness meditation and behaviour change variables showed that the mindfulness meditation affected students' behaviour change.

The stepwise multiple regression analysis carried out to examine mindfulness factors affecting students' behaviour change was at a significant level of 0.05. The four variables identified were observing (X1), awareness (X3), non-judging(X4), and non-reactivity(X5). In the multiple regression analysis, the variable describing (X2) was found to be non-significant.

When considering the influence of each independent variable to predict the dependent variable from the coefficient value (*Beta weight*= .235), it revealed that variable observing (X1) would have the greatest influence on student's behaviour change. This indicated that mindfulness meditation practices would influence their behaviour change correspondingly.

Further, Table 3 shows that when all four independent variables were included in the regression model it can explain students' behaviour change at 19.8% ( $R^2 = .198$ ). The variable non-reactivity(X5) can explain the most behaviour change at 10.9 % ( $R^2 = .109$ ), whereas observing (X1), awareness (X3) and non-judging (X4) explained 5.3%, 2.7% and 0.9% respectively ( $R^2$  change=.053, .027 and .009). The overall relationship between mindfulness meditation practice and students' behaviour change indicated that each added point ( $B = .692$ ) on mindfulness meditation increases the behaviour change by (.692). The t-value of mindfulness meditation was found to be (8.996).

The research findings statistically showed that mindfulness meditation was the predictive factor for the students' behaviour change in secondary schools in Trashigang, Bhutan. Consistent with the researcher's experience, it was observed that some adolescents lacked intrinsic interest and regular home practice to have any benefit from mindfulness meditation. The transformational potential of mindfulness practice is effective to learners who actively employed mindfulness meditation as a daily practice. Since the benefits of meditation are abstract and illusive, individuals require steadfast discipline and perseverance in self-practice [32].

### 3.4 Analysis: Student and Teacher Interviews

The semi-structured interview was carried out to study mindfulness meditation affecting students' behaviour change in the school. Mindfulness meditation undoubtedly was an important activity of the school that enriched the school atmosphere. Evidence for the study was gathered from four key informants; two teachers (X and Y) with the working experience of three years in the same school and two students (P and Q) who were office bearers and have studied in the same school for at least three years. The school generally practiced sitting meditation in the classroom guided by a teacher for one (1) to three (3) minutes. The practice was also infused into the co-curricular activities and other activities in the school. The informants believed that the students were reported to be calmer and quieter in the school premises and during instructional hours. Teachers reported a positive impact on students' psychological domains, although they did not indicate unambiguous evidence of behaviour change.

Teacher informants expressed the need for practical training on mindfulness meditation guidance. The concurrent belief was that teachers either have not received any meaningful training in meditation guidance or have inadequate training provided by principals who received a week-long mindfulness training.

## CONCLUSION

In the Buddhist theology, according to the teachings, meditation is considered as the core practice in the path to enlightenment, which is the cessation of mental afflictions. On a similar plane, meditation was referred to as a set of techniques to understand and view the mind to bring it under controlled relaxation through practices such as mantra meditation, mindfulness meditation, yoga, and Zen Buddhist meditation. The concept of meditation implied in the research literature typically involved secular definition and techniques of mindfulness and mind training without connotation to a spiritual or religious context. In the general sense meditation and mindfulness or awareness practices are terms used synonymously, particularly when applied for therapeutic and secular purposes as in mindfulness meditation in school.

Studies by clinical scientists in meditation practices indicated Mindfulness practice boosted present-moment awareness and reduced hyperactivity and inattention, as well as stress reduction [33]. Mindfulness as a dynamic process of attention intensified awareness of the mind on the present moment rather than the past or future. The projected attention does not indulge with the stream of thoughts as good or bad; rather it self-regulates from emotional distractions. The stream of thoughts may be experienced as sights, sounds, and smells, and internal bodily sensations of thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness was linked to increased clarity, attention, calmness and emotional wellbeing of those who practiced it.

The modern education system is required to educate people in a holistic way with the balance between intellectual and moral teaching. There was an urgent requirement of education to develop the 'Good Heart' through interventions to shape the mind and manners of younger generations. There have been incremental but sporadic applications of mindfulness meditation as a secular subject in school around the world as an intervention strategy to minimizing increasing socio-behavioural problems. The

fundamentals of behaviour change theories and models are founded on the common psychology of human behaviour. Behaviour can be moral or immoral according to the interplay of diverse factors and the function and norms of the society, organization or group. Behaviourism explained that student problem behaviour in adolescent was due to some environmental stimuli, while cognitive theorists argued that it was an emotion driven reaction on generated from cognitive domains.

The current researcher's experience and observation concluded that mindfulness meditation practice is a powerful coping tool for children to learn and apply in all situations. The transformational potential of mindfulness practice is effective to learners who actively employed it as a daily practice. However, children lacked intrinsic interest and regular home practice in order have any benefit from mindfulness meditation. More so, the religious connotation of meditation in Bhutanese culture as practice for enlightenment left participants with difficulty accepting it as secular, speculating the purpose and even doubting the ethics of practice. The individual requires steadfast discipline and the perseverance self-practice constantly. It increased mental perspicacity and awareness and an intrinsic feeling of peace. Evidently, the school nurtured behaviourally conducive student manners in and outside the classrooms. It was reported by the teachers in Bhutan that although there were little ways to demonstrate the evidence of the effect of mindfulness practice, student behaviour has become more constructive and positive since the institution of Educating for Gross National Happiness' paradigm with mind training as a core practice in the schools around the nation.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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