

**EQ Self Study Report:
Effect of Meditation on One's Empathetic Abilities**

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(1245 Words)

Introduction

Buddha said, “Never speak harsh words, for once spoken they may return to you. Angry words are painful and there may be blows for blows” (Rarick, 2007). When it comes to interactions with others, Buddhism encourages its followers to be more mindful of their own emotions as opposed to direct confrontation. This softer approach focuses on creating authentic relationships through the evaluations of the effects of one’s actions on their surroundings.

Meditation in the Tibetan Buddhist practice focuses on enhancing one’s emotional awareness and promotes empathic actions and feelings towards others (Abrams, 2012). Its main intentions are to shift and refocus the meditator’s attention from being self-oriented to other-oriented. While meditation is said to enhance one’s social awareness, there is little known information that proves this theory. The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of a daily meditation practice on one’s empathic abilities.

Literature Review

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the ability to observe, interpret and manage the emotions of one’s self and of others. While one’s emotional intelligence is based on the ability to analyze one’s self, it also includes their ability to analyze others. This is known as social awareness. Which has a direct effect on the building of a person’s relationships with others as well as the quality of those affiliations. More specifically, interpersonal communication and interactions are heavily based on a person’s ability to empathize with others.

Empathy is a person’s ability to assess, understand and conform to another person’s emotions. It can be broken up into three classifications: cognitive, emotional and empathic (Goleman, 2013). Cognitive empathy is the understanding of how another person thinks and seeing things from their point of view. The resonance of one’s feelings with another person’s

feelings is emotional empathy. Lastly, empathic empathy is the expression of one's care and desire to help the other person. Essential qualities like persuasion, collaboration, motivation and listening are all built on these categories of empathy.

Empathy alleviates aggression in conflict by integrating the consideration of the other parties' viewpoint. The effect of the absence of empathy can be seen in children who act out aggressively over, what an adult would consider, a small-scale problem (Bjorkqvist & Kaukiainen, 2008). Or the difference in a person's email response time to their superior versus their subordinate. Listening and understanding the feelings and viewpoints of our peers establishes confidence in ourselves. Thus, the confidence one gains by empathizing leads to more stimulating discussions, increasing the effectiveness of leaders and enhances the quality relationships.

Method

The goal of the Buddhist path is to reach nirvana, which is achieved through The Eightfold Path. The path consists of eight steps: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

With the intension of improving empathic abilities, the intervention of a daily meditation and journaling practice was initiated. The intervention lasted eight days, one devoted to each step of the Eightfold Path. A five-minute meditation session was practiced each day, occurring at no specific time. Data was collected through the qualitative method of journaling. This was initiated before and after each session, occurring with no definitive time constraint.

Results

There were three main observations that were prevalent throughout each day. 1) The development in the definition of each step; 2) the questioning of what determines whether

something is “right;” 3) a theme of empathic effect on others.

At the start of each journaling session, I wrote down definitions of each daily step before and after meditation. Before meditation, I typically wrote down synonyms, and after meditation, I wrote either a definition or a complete thought. On day seven, which focused on right livelihood, my thoughts on the subject went from “attentive, consciousness” to “awareness of those around us.”

Each step of The Eightfold Path follows the word “right.” Throughout the intervention, I consistently question who and what determines whether something is correct. Majority of the sources listed were either external objects or principles of validation. Written entries each day mentioned authoritative figures like “parents, experts, teachers and government leaders,” listed on day three. There was also mention of guiding values like what was listed on day five, “the law, ideals, religious beliefs and society.”

The reoccurrence of cognitive empathy was another observation made from this intervention. This is especially seen in entries journaled after meditation. From day one, right view, I wrote, “the object that is being viewed determines whether it is being view the right way.” To “upholding promises with others will increase the confidence they have in you and in your relationship,” written on day four, right action. Progression is seen from the beginning to the end of the intervention with thoughts going beyond just the presence of others.

Discussion

Journaling before allowed for thoughts about each topic to form on a baseline level. Journaling after meditation showed the progression in one’s own interpretation of each step. Thoughts going from a very surface level to a depth examination in an external context. The transition from “to see, to observe” to “the shifting of our gaze or our position to see the subject

in the correct way” shows that development. From only thinking about what the word means to how it determined by the feelings of our peers. Indicating that the attention to the viewpoint of others determines the morality of our intentions.

The Eightfold Steps, individually or collectively, are about as one’s effect on their surroundings. When one thought about what measures the righteousness of our intentions, it can be concluded that our actions are validated by perspective others have on them. Right mindfulness requires one to consider the surrounding contexts of the situation. The right effort depends on the perception of one’s actions by others. When looking for approval, most of the time we are trying to gain approval from others. By better recognizing and adhering to other people’s emotions we can then gain a better understanding of when something is right or wrong.

From the qualitative data one can notice a transition from the awareness of others to the emotions of others. In step eight, right concentration, I thought about witnessing a woman honking at a teenager driver earlier that day. At the start of meditation, I interpreted the action of honking as a sign that the teenage driver was doing something wrong. However, during meditation, thoughts about why we honk others in the first place began to develop. While some may enjoy pointing out the flaws of others, “we do it because we feel threatened or because we feel that our safety is compromised.” The concentration of that specific detail changed a long-term perspective on something that I’ve always viewed the same way.

Conclusion

Meditation is an individual practice that encourages and trains the mind to focus on the present situation. The stillness clears the head and forces our attention to see things, not as we typically view them, but for their true nature. Consciously recognizing and understanding the emotions of others cannot be attained by evaluating them at a surface level. Concentration gives

our mind the time to thoroughly observe and make better conclusions. Therefore, gaining a perspective that we may have never seen before. Attaining a better grasp of another's viewpoint allows us to become engaged in meaningful conversations and seeing the true intentions of our peers. The ability to recognize, understand and manage the emotions of are characteristics of influential leaders and trust-filled relationships. Meditation and journaling encourages and engages one to see things on a deeper level, therefore improving our empathic abilities.

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