



Review Article

IMPORTANCE OF *VIPASSANA* (BUDDHIST MEDITATION) IN THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Today, we are living in the era of developed science and technology in which human being has no utopia and generally human being now days, thinks logically and will not accept anything unless the results are beneficial, tangible, vivid and personal. In ancient times, ritual and magical practices were humanity's crucial forms of health care. *Vipassana* (Buddhist meditation) is one of the India's prehistoric meditative practices with the help of which Siddharth Gautama became the Buddha 2,500 years ago. Meaning of *Vipassana* is "Insight", (Mindfulness meditation) and it is a Pali word. Though, human being is now living in the era of developed science and technology but at the same time world is facing serious problems which threaten all mankind. After the WWII, the Coronavirus Covid-19 outbreak has become the most devastated disaster for human and its socio-economic development in the world. It seems that only *Vipassana* meditation has the capacity to eradicate total sufferings of human being. *Anicca* (Impermanence), *Dukkha* (suffering) and *Anatta* (non-substantiality) are the basic teachings of the Buddha which is the foundation of *Vipassana* meditation. It is said that change is the only constant thing in this universe and Crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic has proved it. *Vipassana* can provide an approach to live life with this constant change. Demands for unconventional forms of medicine have increasing day by day and it is being proving that there are numerous health benefits of *Vipassana* meditation. This paper briefly reviews the *Vipassana* (Buddhist meditation) and its benefits for human beings during this Covid-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS: *Vipassana*, Covid-19, Mindfulness Meditation, *Ashtang Marg*, *Arya Satya*.

INTRODUCTION

A communicable or non-communicable disease has a major impact on the mental health. Today, the whole world is in grip of COVID-19 and the countries like USA, China, Italy, France etc., are helpless in front of this pandemic catastrophe, the disturbed mental health among the people is expected.¹ Be it COVID-19 outbreak or other public health events, can cause emotional distress and anxiety.² The modern therapies have bonds both with religious systems and with scientific theories. Earlier meditation and psychedelic experiences were considered as mystical, but now these are viewed with more respect, as one can see in noting the serious work on Transcendental Meditation and LSD therapy. Past four decades has witnessed substantial scientific research on meditation as an alternative mind-body therapy. It is generally associated with healing, spiritual, growth and enlightenment. A formal acknowledgement of the academic curiosity within psychology came in 1977, when the American Psychological Association issued a statement on

meditation stating that, "meditation may facilitate the psychotherapeutic process." They also encouraged research "to evaluate its possible usefulness" (Kutz, Borysenko & Benson, 1985, p1).³

A Brief Introduction to *Vipassana* (Buddhist Meditation): According to the Buddha's teaching 'Ignorance is the cause of suffering.' And to eradicate, ignorance, *Vipassana* (Buddhist Meditation) is the only scientific technique. The ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching is to achieve *Nirwaan* and the basic foundation for *Nirwaan* is to maintain the practice of *Sila*-moral conduct due to which *Samadhi*-concentration of mind develops, and ultimately purifies the mind through *Pañña*-the wisdom of insight. *Sila* or virtuous living is necessary for *Samādhi* and *Samādhi* can develop *Pañña*. *Pañña* means, to experience *Anicca*, *Dukkha* and *Anattā* through the practice of *Vipassana*, i.e., Buddhist Meditation.

Following are the *Panchashila* (5 Precepts) essential for *Vipassana*.

1. to abstain from killing any being,
2. to abstain from stealing,
3. to abstain from all sexual activity,
4. to abstain from telling lies,
5. to abstain from all intoxicants.

The teaching of the Buddha consists of four *Arya Satya*, *Ashtang Marga* which is as follows: right understanding (*Samma ditthi*), right thought (*Samma sankappa*), right speech (*samma vaca*), right action (*Samma kammanta*), right livelihood (*Samma ajiva*), right effort (*Samma vayama*), right concentration (*Samma samadhi*), and mindfulness (*Samma sati*). In Pali, an ancient language of North-India, the word "*Vipassana*" means "seeing things as they really are." Often, the term "*Vipassana* meditation" is used interchangeably with "mindfulness meditation," but *Vipassana* is more specific. It involves observing your thoughts and emotions as they are, without judging or dwelling on them.⁴ *Vipassana* is the process of self-purification by self-observation. Anyone can start 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 non-substantiality. *Vipassana* meditation aims at the highest spiritual goals of total liberation and full enlightenment; its purpose is never simply to cure physical disease. However, as a by-product of mental purification, many psychosomatic diseases are eradicated.⁵

Anicca can be experienced through feeling:

1. By contact of visible form with the sense organ of the eye;
2. By contact of sound with the sense organ of the ear;
3. by contact of smell with the sense organ of the nose;
4. By contact of taste with the sense organ of the tongue;
5. By contact of touch with the sense organ of the body;
6. And by contact of mental objects with the sense organ of the mind.

There are ten levels of knowledge in *Vipassana*, namely:

1. **Sammāsana:** Theoretical appreciation of *Anicca*, *Dukkha* and *Anattā* by close observation and analysis.

2. **Udayabbaya:** Knowledge of the arising and dissolution of *Rūpa* and *Nāma* by direct observation.
3. **Bhanga:** Knowledge of the rapidly changing nature of *Rūpa* and *Nāma* as a swift current or stream of energy; in particular, clear awareness of the phase of dissolution.
4. **Bhaya:** knowledge that this very existence is dreadful.
5. **Ādīnava:** knowledge that this very existence is full of evils.
6. **Nibbidā:** knowledge that this very existence is disgusting.
7. **Muñcitakamyatā:** knowledge of the urgent need and wish to escape from this very existence.
8. **Paṭisankhā:** knowledge that the time has come to work for full realization of deliverance with *anicca* as the base.
9. **Sankhārupekkhā:** knowledge that the stage is now set to get detached from all conditioned phenomena (*Sankhāra*) and to break away from egocentricity.
10. **Anuloma:** knowledge that would accelerate the attempt to reach the goal. These are the levels of attainment which one goes through during the course of *Vipassana* meditation.

In *Vipassana*, the object of meditation is *Anicca*, and therefore in the case of those used to focusing their attention on bodily feelings, they can feel *Anicca* directly.⁶

Four Types of Vipassana Meditations⁷

Following are the four types of Vipassana

1. *Kayanupassana* (continuous mindfulness of the body),
2. *Vedanānupassana* (continuous mindfulness of feelings),
3. *Cittānupassana* (continuous observation of the mind),
4. *Dhammanupassana* (continuous mindfulness of mental processes).

1. Kayānupassana (Continuous Mindfulness of the Body)

In this type of *Vipassana*, there are two main objects of concentration of mind such as: the breathing process and the rising and dropping of the abdomen. Also to experience the functions of six sense organs of the body. If concentration of mind is good then it is easy to know that our very self is impermanent which helps us to overcome suffering and attain inner peace and enlightenment.

2. Vedānānupassana (Continuous Mindfulness of Feelings)

There are three types of sensations which are always present in the body as well as in the mind such as: pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. In *Vedanapassana*, one should be aware and mindful of feelings as these initiate actions.

3. *Cittanupassana* (Continuous Observation of the Mind)

In this type of *Vipassana*, one can observe the Mind's thinking process i.e. rising and dissolution of thoughts and emotions like desires, anger, illusion, greed, aversion, lust etc.

4. *Dhammanupassana* (Continuous Mindfulness of Mental Processes).

In this type of *Vipassana*, one focuses on negativities like greed, lust, doubt, anger and sloth as well as the clinging nature of our mind.

Vipassana meditation involves meditating and focusing on physical and mental sensations and feelings which aims to understand the impermanence of all things including suffering.

Benefits of *Vipassana* (Buddhist Meditation): Growing research evidence shows the benefits of mindfulness on healthcare worker's life satisfaction (Lomas et al. 2018), resilience to stress (Kinser et al. 2016), professional quality of life (Keogh et al. 2019), self-compassion (Wasson et al. 2020), trait mindfulness, compassion and general well-being (Ducar et al. 2020). The impact of a modified version of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) for emergency healthcare workers was specifically explored (Ducar et al. 2020). *Vipassana* meditation practice help to reduce anxiety, negative affect and increases positive affect and mental poise which would ultimately contribute towards better sleep structure with increased deep sleep states. Mason et al. (1997) have correlated the enhanced slow wave sleep states as a stabilized state of higher state of consciousness achieved through long years of intense meditation practice. It is said that *Vipassana* meditation technique offers an alternative, not necessarily to replace the interpersonal encounter that is the core of psychotherapy, but as a valuable technique of reducing tension, broadening awareness and making life more meaningful and pleasurable, and thereby, fulfilling the goals of all therapies. *Vipassana* can offer relief from stored up anxiety and conflict very systematically, without the need to have these sensations verbalised. But *Vipassana* gives an opportunity to get rid of old fears even at a visceral level.⁸ Through the practice of *Vipassana*, one learns that the territory of the mind is far more extensive than Freud realised. Brain researchers too have identified the enormous capacity of the human nervous system.⁹ While psychotherapy is the principal treatment for anxiety neurosis, either alone

or combined with tranquilizers, it is expensive, time consuming and available only in cities. *Vipassana* will work as a preventive as well as a curative measure. *Vipassana* should be incorporated into psychotherapeutic repertoire as it has many advantages over other psychotherapeutic techniques, since it:¹⁰ Teaches one learns how to become a detached observer, keeping in mind the impermanence of feeling and sensation, happiness or unhappiness.

- Reduces tension and anxiety.
- Reduces violence and anger.
- Increases tolerance and understanding of difficult situations.
- Helps one to take appropriate decisions and action.
- Increases constructive activity.
- Increases work efficiency.
- Improves interpersonal relationships.
- Increases receptive, perceptive and cognitive abilities
- Develops the habit of appropriate introspection.
- Helps one regain composure through facing and solving one's problems.
- Restores equilibrium by reducing stress and maximising the enjoyment of life. It may well offer a safe and plausible alternative to all forms of drug abuse.
- Improves communication.
- Encourages the resolution of emotional conflicts and allows for previously unacceptable aspects of the self to become integrated into the personality.
- Reduces the need for excessive sedation with tranquilizers.
- Normalises the sleep pattern.
- Enables one to feel fresh and alert.
- Gives one a feeling of inner happiness and lightness.

By allowing the individual to regain his vital centre of energy, satisfaction and stability, *Vipassana* can become the necessary antidote to future shock of any adverse situations such as Covid-19 from the mental health point of view.

Covid-19 and its effects on mental health

Covid-19 has been considered a relative of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which has the possibility of transmission from animals to humans.¹¹ To date, the source of the SARS-CoV-2 remains unknown. However, the SARS-CoV-2 infection has been associated with contact with a local seafood vendor in Wuhan that illegally sold some wildlife animals including bats.¹² Covid-19 with its first outbreak in Wuhan, Hubei, China, in

December 2019, and was recognised as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020.¹³ During the pandemic of Covid-19, it is observing that “A major adverse consequence of the covid-19 pandemic is likely to be increased social isolation and loneliness, which are strongly associated with anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide attempts across the lifespan.”¹⁴ It is the fact that the effects of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) on the nervous system remain unclear, there is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic is bad for mental health.¹⁵ The self-isolation and the limitations imposed on freedom of movement in light of Covid-19, like in any other recession, has led the consumers to return to more primary, essential and non-negotiable needs (Starr, 2011). However, the sudden discontinuity from usual everyday routines and the freedom from social and business obligations and support have prompted people to also face anxiety and stress (Usher et al., 2020).

Benefits of Meditation

Mind and body share a bidirectional relationship. Psychoneuroimmunology is a term used to describe the interaction between psychological factors, the central nervous system, and the neuroendocrine system.¹⁶

Regulation of the Immune System

The up and down regulation of immune function may be seen as an adaptive mechanism regulated by stress hormones. The chronic release of stress hormones can create an allostatic load (a form of physiological 'wear and tear') producing immune system dysfunction and suppression.¹⁷⁻¹⁸

Natural Killer Cells, B-lymphocytes, and Meditation

Meditation enhances immune function through different mechanisms. Several studies have shown that different forms of meditation result in an increase in natural killer (NK) cells and B-lymphocytes. NK cells are white blood cells that target and kill stressed or abnormal cells, playing a role in tumour prevention and serving as an early defence against viral infections.¹⁹

CD8+ T-Cells and Meditation

Another biological indicator of the positive effects of meditation on immune system function is the activity of CD8+ T-cells. These are white blood cells responsible for removing damaged and infected cells, preventing the spread of viruses and cancers. These cells are known to increase as a result of strenuous exercise.²⁰

Disease Progression and Meditation

Several studies report a significant effect of meditation in the treatment of various diseases. In HIV positive individuals, meditation has been shown to increase T-cell counts, as well as NK cell numbers and activity.²¹

DISCUSSION

Crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic have proved that change is the only constant thing in this universe which resembles with the teachings of the Buddha i.e. *Anicca*. Also change is never painful but oppose to the change is painful and *Vipassana* (Buddhist Meditation) emphasises the importance of basic teaching of *Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta* in the human life. It is said that to know ourselves is the real difficult task in this world and *Vipassana* is the only scientific way to understand ourselves which leads to the total eradication of human suffering.

CONCLUSIONS

It is the fact that Siddharth Gautam became the Buddha (enlightened) with the help of *Vipassana* 2500 years before. The ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching is to eradicate all human sufferings including Covid-19 pandemic also and achieve *Nirwaan* i.e. *Moksha* as per the Indian philosophical sciences. *Sila* (moral conduct) is the foundation of *Samadhi* (concentration of mind) which results in the gaining of *Panna* (Wisdom). Eradication of physical and mental diseases are the only byproducts of *Vipassana* (Buddhist Meditation) but its ultimate goal is total liberation (*Nirwaan*), enlightenment. It is the need of an hour to follow the teachings of the Buddha and do *Vipassana* for wellbeing of all human beings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wants to thank Dr.K.S.Dhiman, Director General, CCRAS, New Delhi, Dr.N.Srikanth, Deputy Director General, CCRAS, and Dr. M.M. Sharma for their support.

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Cite this article as:

Balaji Potbhare, R. Govind Reddy, Prashant Shinde, Vanmala Wakode. Importance of Vipassana (Buddhist Meditation) in the Pandemic of Covid-19: A Review. International Journal of Ayurveda and Pharma Research. 2021;9(2):94-98.

Source of support: Nil, Conflict of interest: None Declared

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