

Effects of Meditation on Lay-Practitioners: A Case Study of Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N Goenka

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Abstract

Vipassana meditation is widely popular among lay practitioners nowadays. Besides monastic institutions, various vipassana centers teach this technique for interested lay practitioners. Nepal Vipassana center which was established in 1981, conducted regular 10-day Vipassana courses twice a month as taught by S.N Goenka for common householders. Using secondary data as well as practical experience sharing of 108 old students of Nepal Vipassana Center Kathmandu (Dharma Sringha), this study analyzed the effects of Vipassana mediation among lay practitioners. The trends show that about 37 percent of meditators repeated the 10-day Vipassana courses in Dharma Sringha. Out of 108 meditators, 51 percent were male, and the remaining 49 percent were female. About 93 percent of meditators said that they feel improvement in their physical health, about 94 percent reported improvement in their mental health. Similarly, about 76 percent of meditators feel more easiness in their day-to-day life after they practice this technique. 15 out of 108 shared that before joining the course, they had problems of some kind of addiction and vipassana practice helped them to leave or reduce occurrence such bad habits.

Keywords: vipassana, meditation, effect, meditator

Introduction:

Vipassana is an ancient meditation technique which was discovered by the Buddha, the enlightened one, during the course of his enlightenment. Initially, this technique was taught to monks for the purpose of total purification of mind and achievement of nirvana. Gradually, this technique was also passed to nuns and then, other common householders. Many monks, nuns as well as householders became *arahant* during the time of Buddha. After Buddha's *Mahaparinirvana*, followers of Buddha were divided into many groups. And until fifth council, there were 18 different schools which claim to teach Buddha's teachings (Santina, 1997:155). Such different schools may have taught vipassana meditation in different ways. Gradually, vipassana technique was limited to few people as teacher-tutee traditions in Myanmar and again it was revitalized in India, Nepal and the west. Nowadays, broadly two schools of thought *Theravada* and *Mahayana* (including *Vajrayana*) teach vipassana. *Mahayana* as well as *Vajrayana* tradition emphasized on full commitment and quite longer process to learn Vipassana. And normally, vipassana practice is taught in monastic institutions. Some of the traditions have made tailor-made vipassana courses for common

householders. S.N. Goenka, who represents Ledi Sayadaw lineage is one of them. Ledi Sayadaw, a renowned monk of Myanmar, passed this technique to SayaThet, Saya passed it to Sayagyi U Ba Khin and then to S.N. Goenka (Goenka, 2011:219-31). Goenka himself doesn't claim to be of a specific school. He just emphasized on pure dhamma. Based on common criteria, his teaching could be categorized within *Theravada* system. He has developed 10 days customized vipassana course for common householders which is popular not only Nepal and India but also among western people. The course is conducted in vipassana centers in residential basis.

Nepal Vipassana Center was established in 1981 and nowadays, regular 10-day vipassana courses are conducted twice a month as taught by S.N Goenka for common households.

This article is concentrated on the effects of vipassana meditation on common practitioners. Based on primary as well as secondary data, this study attempts to evaluate the effect of vipassana meditation among lay practitioners.

Materials and Methods

Primary as well as secondary sources of information are used in this study. Information from previous research reports, books, journal articles have been taken as secondary sources of information. Anecdotes of old vipassana students included their application form is taken as the primary source of information. In the application form, centers requested old students what changes have they noticed in themselves since they have started vipassana meditation. There are four specific questions: (i) reform in physical ailment (health) (ii) reform in mental temperament (iii) help in problem-solving and behavior life (iv) help in reduction of any addiction alcohol or substance abuse at present and in the past. As discussed detail in below section about 37 percent students repeated the course. However, only few of them share their experiences in their application forms. Some of them write their specific experiences. 108 forms of Nepal Vipassana center in which applicants remark their experience are selected as sample for the study. Selection of the sample was done from participants from 2018 to 2021. The bases for the selection of the sample is the large number of old students who participated in the batches. All forms of old students of that batch which included experience sharing remarks are selected for the sample. 12 participants from the batch 1-12 August 2021; 4 participants from batch 14-25 July 2021; 5 participants from batch 1-12 July 2021; 11 participants from batch 14-26 January 2018; 53 participants from batch 1-12 April 2018; 18 participants from batch 15-27 March 2018; and 5 participants from batch 2-14 March 2018 are selected for the study. Four variables which are related to effects of vipassana meditation are taken as dependent variables and number of 10 day courses, respondents' age and gender are taken as independent variable. If respondents mark or positive remarks on these four questions is decoded as 1, if left blank or negative remarks, coded as zero. SPSS software is used for data processing and chi square test is applied at five percent level of significant.

Literature Survey

Some studies focus on the effects of vipassana meditation. Bhikkhu Amritananda (1979:34-36) summarized the effects

of vipassana meditation on 58 laypeople of Buddha's time. They are engaged either in agriculture works or business and some of them were employed in various institutions. And by practicing vipassana some of them became *arahants* and all of them developed their personal as well as professional wellbeing. In other historical works, he has narrated that how 31 *Brahmans* and 10 laywomen had developed perfection on loving-kindness meditation and had changed their lifestyles and progress in well-being of their personal life (Bhikkhu Amritananda, 1971:13-15 and 1973:3-5).

Pradhan and Ajithkumar (2018:6-7) analyzed the effect of vipassana on the psychological well-being of employees. They evaluated whether regular meditation practice has affected the psychological well-being of participants. Despite the various demographic factors like age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, work sector, working position, the study found the conclusion that regular meditation practice positively effects to improve the psychological well-being of the meditators. Bhatnagar (2014:501-2) also found vipassana increases the efficiency and effectiveness of employees and it has a positive impact on an organizational level. For employees' level, this technique helps to increase control of their emotions, a reduction in feelings of anger, tension, hostility, revenge, and helplessness. Similarly, at an organizational level, by creating efficiency and effectiveness this technique helps to create a healthy work environment. Pariar (2004) found that vipassana meditation has helped to bring about a positive change in the mental attitude and effectiveness of the employees. The occupational stress of the meditators reduces significantly with the years of meditation practice. It brings a positive impact on the personal and professional lives of the employees. There was a positive change in their mental attitude and effectiveness. In addition, vipassana meditation could help in reducing corrupt practices, increasing efficiency and productivity, creating healthy work environments, improving relations with seniors and subordinates, and reducing physical and mental health problems.

Kumar (2012:48-57) found that vipassana could increase the life effectiveness of the meditators. He found

that meditation technique helps to reduce their stress at workplace and it supports to increase self-awareness process and helps the emerging professional to face the challenges and opportunities through positive outlook and matured behavior. This technique is also effective to control emotional imbalances and leading to better interpersonal relationships and development of communication skills, teamwork and group work culture, mutual respect, and group cohesiveness. Modak (1994:11-15) has listed the benefits of vipassana meditation to the individual as well as society. Besides the purification of the mind, by this meditation technique, the meditator also experiences gains at the physical and psychological levels. At a personal level, vipassana meditator makes greater clarity of thinking, improves his relationships with other people, both in personal as well as professional life, could increase their working capacity and work efficiency both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Shah (1999:63-64) highlighted the positive role of vipassana meditation in business management. vipassana practice could be helpful for business executives and managers by transforming their attitudes, making their profession as right livelihood and healthy business environment. Jyoti (1979:22-24) has expressed a similar experience that vipassana provides an opportunity to learn an appropriate skill to deal with all types of situations in day to day business environment. Relating his personal experience of several business enterprises, he has emphasized that the introduction of vipassana meditation to the people in the organization has improved the working atmosphere, the cooperative attitudes, the discipline, and the harmony within. Managers have become more patient in dealing with business uncertainties and more tolerant in dealing with troublesome employees. Workers have become more disciplined and better capable of carrying out their tasks, even if they entailed repetitious and monotonous routines. He further highlighted that vipassana could work as the art of total corporate management.

Rathi (1972:103-4) presents his self-observation in details of his medical records before and after vipassana meditation. After he has practiced vipassana regularly between a two-year period, he found a visible and noticeable improvement in his physical health. Weight loss, headaches, and waist pain were significantly reduced and discomfort from piles that was in the operation stages got reduced by 50 percent in two years. In addition, regular vipassana practice helped him to regain and balance his mind, and this results in further improvement in mental peace with consequent improvement in physical health. He took vipassana meditation as a tool to get rid of suffering (*DukkhaMuktikiSadhana*). Agrawal and Bedi (2002:45-46) have explored the effect of vipassana meditation in transforming the inner life and changes in the professional attitudes of Delhi Police training personnel. After they seek feedback from 45 participants in three questions. They found that participants felt greater control in their mind and desire, control over anger, and peace within themselves. They further answered that vipassana may help to improve their organizational image, reduce work stress and increase the strength of work, attitude towards criminals had become more compassionate, get rid of intoxication, and control their mind. They found a positive change in their family life as a result of vipassana, job tension no more transferred to the home, they are more patient towards their children, and peace and happiness have developed in their home.

Finding and Discussion

Since S.N. Goenka's visit in 1981, the Nepal Vipassana Center has been conducting vipassana courses regularly. As seen in Table 1, the number of students who have completed the 10 days' residential course is 81514 out of them, 41858 (51 percent) were male and 39656 (49 percent) female as of the end of December 2021.

Table 1: Repetition Trends of Vipassana courses in Dharmasringha (% in Parenthesis)

Years	Total Participants	Male	Female	New Students	Old Students	National	International
1984-1990	3364	1447 (43)	1917 (57)	1920 (57)	1444 (43)	2813 (84)	551 (16)

1991-2000	17281	8855 (51)	8426 (49)	11246 (65)	6035 (35)	13174 (76)	4107 (24)
2001-2010	27257	14404 (53)	12853 (47)	17132 (63)	10125 (37)	23055 (85)	4202 (15)
2011-2021	33612	17152 (51)	16460 (49)	21048 (63)	12564 (37)	26123 (78)	7480 (22)
Total	129416 (100.00)	66564 (51.00)	62852 (49.00)	81644 (63.00)	47772 (37.00)	104207 (81.00)	25200 (19.00)

Source: Nepal Vipassana Center, Dharmasringha Kathmandu.

During the period, the ratio of national and international students is 81:19. In this system participants for the first time are called new students and participants who repeat the course more than one are called old students. The ratio of new and old students was 57:43 in 1984-1990, slightly decreased the ratio of old students in the decade of '90s and reach 35:65. Then remain in the constant trends of 37:63 in next two decades 2002-2010 and 2011-2021. The average ratio of the new and old students during 1984-2021 is found 37:63. This means that about 37 percent of students had repeated the course during the period. The composition and tendency of course repetition also showed the encouraging result. Out of 108

respondents 67 (62 percent) were male and 41 (38 percent) female. Respondents' age varies 17 at minimum and 81 at maximum. About 26 percent repeated the course one time, 52 percent repeated the course 2-5 times, 15 percent repeated the course 6-10 times and 7 percent repeated the course more than 10 times. People from various professions repeated the course. Among them, about 19 percent did not disclose their profession, about 19 percent housewives, about 18 percent from business, about 18 percent from professionals like- doctors, engineers, nurses, writers, about 17 percent employed in government as well as the private sector and about seven percent are students.

Table 2: Effects of Vipassana Meditation

Effects of Vipassana Meditation	Frequency (% in Parenthesis)		Chi square Test Result (p-value in parenthesis)		
	Positive Effects	No Response or No Effect	With Gender	With Age	With Number of 10-day course
Physical ailment	100 (92.60)	8 (7.40)	9.002* (0.00)	29.16 (0.98)	30.02* (0.01)
Mental temperament	102 (94.40)	6 (5.60)	5.553* (0.01)	40.84 (0.79)	5.74 (0.98)
Reduction in Addiction	15 (13.90)	93 (86.10)	7.24* (0.00)	43.10 (0.71)	12.37 (0.65)
Helps Behavioral Problems	82 (75.90)	26 (24.10)	0.752 (0.38)	46.00 (0.59)	10.60 (0.78)

Source: Calculation from Anecdotes of old vipassana practitioners

Effects of vipassana meditation is presented in table 2. About 93 percent (100 out of 108) reported that they feel as their physical health improved after they practiced

vipassana meditation. Chi-square results also support this agreement. Relationship with the number of 10-day courses P-value=0.01<0.05, which is significant. Again, the

relationship with gender $p\text{-value} = 0.00 < 0.05$ is also significant however no difference is seen with the age factor. This indicates that as meditators increase their practices with course repetition it helps to improve their physical health condition. In addition, women practitioners achieve more benefits than male participants. About 94 percent of respondents reported that they have experienced that Vipassana practice helps them to improve their mental health. The statistical test is not significant with the number of 10-day courses and age factor, however, is significant with gender ($p\text{-value} = 0.01 < 0.05$). This means women participants who repeated the courses could improve mental health more than male participants. About 76 percent of old students expressed that they could solve problems of day-to-day life easier than before. However, the test result is not significant. About 14 percent (only 15 out of 108) of old students had reported that they had faced some kind of addiction either alcohol or drugs and vipassana helped them to reduce such addiction. The test result is not significant with the number of 10-day courses and age factor however it is significant with gender ($p\text{-value} = 0.00 < 0.05$). This means women participants improve their addiction habits more than male participants after practicing vipassana along with course repetition.

The anecdotes of old students also support that they received improvements to physical as well as mental health, reduction in their addictive behaviors. Most of them write some additional remarks as they feel good physical health, strong mental ability, reduced anger, and more practical in daily life. In addition, vipassana practice helps them to develop a positive attitude, stress reduction, control of high blood pressure, weight loss, and mental peace. Similarly, they also reported that they have increased their problem-solving capacity, became less reactive and happier than before. The repetition trends also justified the fact that the course would be helpful for them. Out of 108 meditators, the repetition trends vary a minimum of one time to 20 times.

Conclusion

Vipassana is a unique meditation technique applied by the Buddha during his enlightenment. Besides whole-time

practitioners in monostatic institutions, this technique is also popular among laypeople. After 1950, vipassana was widespread not only in Nepal and India but, also among western people. S.N Goenka had played an important role to popularize vipassana as a tailor-made 10-day course and taught this technique to a wide range of common people of India, Nepal as well as western countries. This study is based on secondary information and, anecdotes of 108 vipassana meditators. The overall result shows positive effects of the vipassana meditation technique on lay practitioners. As a specific meditation technique, it helps regular practitioners to reduce their stress, anger, and negativity and they became calm, equanimous, and achieve peace of mind which ultimately supports their personal as well as professional well-being. This study concentrated on regular old vipassana meditators and found that this technique is much more helpful to bring improvement on their physical as well as mental health. And day to day life also became easier for them after they continued their practice. Some of the respondents also agreed that vipassana practice helps them to reduce their habits like drinking alcohol or different kinds of drugs addiction.

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