

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Meditative and Mindful Practicing of Self

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This short overview is of some findings from a study on a secular meditation of children living in Pune, Maharashtra, India. The children in my study had for several years practiced a breath awareness and loving kindness meditation at the NGO where they lived and/or at the school they attend. I asked three guiding questions:

- 1) How does the child experience meditation?
- 2) How does the child build morality through meditation practice?
- 3) How does the child's meditation practice offer certain "protective" benefits?

To approach these questions I engaged with a phenomenological approach and relied on educational holistic attitudes and theory to inform me. In general, research on meditation and children is uncommon, but in the last few years that has begun to change as, internationally, people across the disciplines investigate this subject area. Other research that has been done on the subject of children and meditation is more survey oriented and clinical based.

My study is distinct in its focus on listening to and learning from the lived experiences of children who are born, raised and educated in environments that encourage meditation as integral to the

development of emotional, mental, physical, social and spiritual well-being.

I chose to conduct a phenomenological enquiry to better understand the structures of consciousness from lived experience because it is through such a process that we can understand how to live more meaningfully. I relied on holist attitudes and their theory because, similar to a phenomenology of practice, holistic attitudes and theory account for the lifeworld of an individual, and thus take into account that each person has certain needs and tendencies to grow as nature intended. This means that there is a complex interrelatedness to experience among the different aspects of an individual, others and environment.

The research participants included eight female children aged 11 to 16. The children all lived together in one house belonging to an NGO called Maher, which means *mother's house* in Marathi. The children and I worked together informally for over two and half consecutive years. We formed a meditation group that I volunteered to facilitate.

The research study involved an ongoing development of friendship, trust and participation in Indian cultures; an ongoing engagement with the children and their families, friends and communities;

and an ongoing effort around meditation through group work, observation and volunteer work. All of this involvement was integral to better understand the children—their cultures, faiths, traditions, beliefs, politics, histories, practices, geographical locations and more.

It is difficult for many of us to sit with closed eyes and observe the breath uninterrupted. If you were to imagine for a moment what concentrating would be like for the children involved in the study who lived in a rented space—paid for by donation—of three rooms housing 23 children of mixed ages and two housemothers... If you were to imagine how the participant children always had to bear in mind their many duties towards their families, house mothers, housemates, studies, Maher's fundraising matters, extra developmental activities and much, much more...

Alongside that ongoing activity, the children worked on observing the breath and generating loving kindness during Maher's community prayer, at school and throughout daily life.

It is important to note how before the children and I began working together, they had for several years been in environments valuing holistic development. As it happens though, they had never before reflected on or communicated about their meditation practice.

In our meditation group we explored meditating together and then communicating about their experiences. That work culminated in three private interviews with each child, however the youngest member of the group and I had four interviews because she was the only child to illustrate her responses. Overall, the results were largely personal due to the

subject matter and also the nature of this phenomenological enquiry. There were several results though that emerged as themes because the children's stories revealed similar lived experiences. I would say all of the following themes below relate to this study's three guiding questions.

To begin with it seemed each child's moral behaviour was connected to her meditation practice. We looked closely at how their morals were connected to their meditation practice not only during community prayer but also at school and elsewhere. An obvious example of this relates to how the children after meditating began to communicate in different ways about their own or other's moral behaviour. That phenomenon increased as time passed. The children seemed to understand more deeply their own or other's behaviours. They seemed to begin to realise how to amend their own behaviour. One child stopped meditating seriously altogether: it was only during our interview—in which we meditated together and communicated around the theme of meditation—that she said she recognised her anger towards others and said that it resulted from not meditating seriously. In the end, in so many words, she realised how unwise it was to grow angry with others who like her are suffering. She then started meditating seriously again and stopped yelling at others, as she had been doing.

Each child developed her morals during the little amount of time we seriously worked on morality. The morals we worked with were to not steal, kill, take intoxicants and tell lies, or backbite, or use harsh words or mislead anyone. One child suggested one more moral to bear in mind, which was not to blame oneself or others. Also, we worked on virtues. The virtues we

worked with in fact are the children's pseudonyms for this study in Pali language: Dana, Sila, Panna, Viriya, Khanti, Sacca, Adhithhana, Metta and Upekkha. In English those pseudonyms mean generosity, morality, wisdom, energy, tolerance, truth, determination, loving kindness and equanimity. The children blindly chose their pseudonyms from ten virtues I presented to them. Surprisingly the participant children grew to identify strongly with their pseudonyms. They would show related pride and humility as if they understood a reason for the respective virtues' association.

Another theme was how the children would use their meditation skill to self-regulate, meaning they would return to their breath to calm themselves, make them more attentive and generate feelings of good will even when they were angry and confronted with real challenges. Notably each child's determination to be more mindful during meditation time and beyond grew stronger such that in the end they relied less on me to lead the meditation and even began leading one another and being asked by others to lead in different ways. In turn the children were more united and loving among themselves and with others, whereas before this study they were more divided and aggressive. In fact, from the beginning I was told by a few people who live and work at Maher that the

participant children were "strong" girls. After working intimately with the participant children around their mindful practise, I came to understand better their personal powerful.

Another theme I observed was how the two youngest children showed signs of assimilating the affects of meditation more quickly than the other children.

Next, there is the theme of "feeling fresh." The participant children, along with other children in India from whom I have heard testimonies of their meditation experiences, expressed they felt fresh after meditating. As the participant children grew more insightful and understanding of their mindful practice, they said they felt cool after meditating. I sensed this may be because the participant children were more aware of and better able to self-regulate their anger but, again, this is only my guess.

Another theme relates to how each child spoke about situations at Maher, school or home where they had used their meditation skills in such a way as to protect themselves somehow from harm.

Last, each child, with very little extra support, increasingly moved towards uniting with herself, others and environment. It is interesting how the participant children soon after forming as a group named, by themselves, our nascent meditation group *Unity*.

Author Details

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