

THE IMPACT OF EXTERNAL PHENOMENA ON PARTICIPANTS IN A LONG-TERM BUDDHIST RETREAT

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In a previous paper published in the *Journal* (Page, Weiss, Stowers Wright, McAuliffe, Ugyan & MacLachlan, 1997), we reported the results of a qualitative study of the *internal experiences* of retreatants, specifically, the statements of self-awareness of individuals who were participants in a Tibetan Buddhist retreat. That study concluded that a rigorous six-month period of silence helped to enhance retreatants' self-awareness.

In this complimentary qualitative study, based on data collected during the previous study, we examine the *external phenomena* described by the same men and women who participated in the four-year retreat held at the Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center in Dumfrieshire, Scotland. As reported previously (Page, et. al., 1997), the retreatants gave written descriptions of their experiences upon completion of a six-month period of isolation, silence, and meditation, during the third year of a four-year retreat.

The question addressed in the present study is: To what extent are retreatants, who are predominantly from a Western culture, able to let go of the influences of *external phenomena* in order to achieve an ultimate goal of awareness and enlightenment? For purposes of this study, the definition of *external* was informed by a Tibetan Buddhist perspective. Thus, external encompassed anything physical, either in the environment or in the body, and which is outside the mind, i.e. "events or experiences outside the mental boundaries of the retreatant, including references to daily routines, tasks, meals, other persons, or the retreat environment." This definition also includes

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physical discomforts of retreatants, such as ulcers or backaches. Such a definition is consistent with the connotation of the Tibetan word for body, "which means 'something you leave behind,' like baggage" (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1992, p. 20).

THEMES OF THE EXTERNAL STATEMENTS

The external statements of the 23 participants were sorted by three raters into six themes: 1) physical ailments; 2) communication; 3) daily routine/activities; 4) bodily needs; 5) reaction to practice; and 6) aspirations.

Overall, the attitudes indicated by the participants in each of the six external themes are described in the following summaries.

1) The responses constituting the *physical ailments* theme seemed to address the intense training required during this six-month period of *the* retreat and its wearing effects on a few of the retreatants' bodies. Only a small minority of the respondents admitted having a difficult time physically (e.g., muscle aches and ulcer pain) with the strenuous practices of this Tibetan Buddhist retreat.

2) In regard to *communication*, the respondent" seemed to believe the six-month period of silence was important for enhancing their meditative practices. Nevertheless, some retreatants were glad the silence was over and mentioned that they enjoyed the opportunity to communicate with others.

3) The *daily routine activities* theme had the highest number of statements, all of which focused on the different activities and practices of the retreat.

4) The *bodily needs* theme emerged from responses related to retreatants' thoughts or experiences involving food and sleep. During the six-month period of silence, the retreatants spent their time in intense meditation, awakening at 4:00 AM and not going to sleep until 11:00 PM. The retreatants' diet was light, with lunch usually consisting of a salad and a piece of bread, and sometimes fasting occurred. Some retreatants' sleepiness appeared to impact their ability to meditate, especially late at night and upon awakening early in the morning.

5) The theme labeled *reactions to practice* consisted of external responses ranging from acceptance and appreciation to boredom. While the majority of subjects' responses revealed either acceptance or appreciation, two retreatants offered responses containing references to boredom. Their boredom appeared to be related to their daily practices rather than to the spiritual practices of the retreat.

6) The last theme, *aspirations*, primarily consisted of statements regarding the future spiritual practices of the retreat. In our original study of retreatants' internal responses (Page, et. al., 1997), there were 22 statements related to a parallel internal theme that we entitled "goals/expectations." In the current study, there were fewer external statements (eight) related to aspirations/expectations. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that this contrast is consistent with the Tibetan Buddhist retreat focus of increasing emphases on self-awareness while decreasing emphases on external phenomena.

DISCUSSION

It would appear from some of the retreatants' responses that they were still struggling with trying to achieve the annihilation of individual consciousness that is central to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism. In other words, some retreatants appeared to be more focused on external phenomena than other retreatants. For example, 2 of the 23 respondents offered 32 of the 100 external statements (16 each). One of the aforementioned retreatants had 11 responses in the physical ailments category describing his ulcer and its effects on him and his retreat experience. The second respondent also had many external statements, however his statements were more positive in regard to retreat practices; other than struggling with a need for sleep, his comments were focused on activities like washing, communication, and aspirations of future spiritual practices. Comparatively, these same retreatants recorded less than half as many internal statements. The man with ulcer complications had seven internal responses and the other respondent, also a male, had eight internal statements. The response patterns of these two retreatants suggest that they were preoccupied with their external rather than internal experiences during the rigorous six-month period of the retreat. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that external phenomena influenced their internal experience during this portion of the retreat.

Thus, the ages-old struggle between the mind and body seems to have been operative among some of the retreatants, as illustrated by statements concerning the impact of physical ailments and the need for sleep. Overall, however, most of the respondents offered positive or accepting comments regarding the spiritual practices and meditative activities of the retreat. Their comments indicated a commitment to cooperate with the retreat process as a whole. The differences between retreatants who were preoccupied with their bodies and the environment, and other respondents, emerged most clearly in the themes of physical ailments and bodily needs. While external phenomena were more influential and prevalent among the statements of retreatants who had physical ailments or concerns regarding the need for sleep, retreatants who were focused on meditation and inner self-awareness had more responses related to internal than external themes. It is difficult to determine how the physical obstacles that some retreatants endured impinged upon what they gained from the retreat, but it seems to be the case that internal awareness could be compromised by an overemphasis on external phenomena.

The only noticeable gender difference among the retreatants' responses was found under the theme of physical ailments, in which the females had fewer statements (2 to 17). Due to the responses being de-identified, it is not possible to determine if there was a difference between the responses of Westerners and non-Westerners.

While the content of Tibetan Buddhism is valued by those who embrace it as a philosophy of life, perhaps an equally important contribution it offers the West is a different phenomenology, a different way of seeing and valuing personal experience. Western culture historically has encouraged individuals to pursue personal independence and uniqueness in order to facilitate the attainment of individual goals. Eastern culture, on the other hand, tends to be more collective, often emphasizing the pursuit of a purposeful and fulfilling life, not just for the individual's benefit, but for the benefit of all (Brennan, 1998).

A limitation of this study flows from the fact that the data we examined is based upon the immediate, subjective experience of persons who intentionally immersed themselves in a partially ineffable spiritual experience. Their responses sprang from the sort of inner, total, organismic experiences which are only partially and imperfectly communicable. *It may be that the process participants undergo in generating these experiences is more important than the content of the experiences, thus eluding our direct examination.* Additionally, considering the fact that more than half of the retreatants are Western Europeans, cultural biases may have further affected the implications of this study. One question that remains unanswered: Were there experiences of the participants in this Tibetan Buddhist retreat framed within a Western belief system, or were the retreatants able to work beyond this framework?

CONCLUSION

The examination of subjects' external responses revealed that, despite the rigorous nature of the retreat experience, the impact of the environment, bodily needs, and physical ailments did not unduly influence the majority of retreatants in their retreat experiences. Thus, while some subjects focused on the physical struggles they endured, there was a noticeable under-emphasis on external phenomena on the part of most of the retreatants.

It seems reasonable to conclude, in light of the rigorous requirements of the four-year Tibetan Buddhist retreat, that the participants we studied were able to let go of external ties and physical comforts in their efforts to obtain enlightenment and increased self-awareness. Further, we believe that this study of the retreatants' external responses reveals that some participants were more successful than others in negotiating the unique requirements and struggles of the retreat, at least through the third year of this demanding four-year program.

NOTE

¹ The data, in the form of the subjects' statements about external phenomena, is available from co-author Richard C. Page, Professor, Dept. of Counseling and Human Development, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602-7142.

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