

The Effect of Four Years of Participation in a Tibetan Buddhist Retreat on Perceptions of Physiological and Psychological Well-Being

MALCOM MACLACHLAN
EILISH McAULIFFE
RICHARD C. PAGE
DEBORAH B. ALTSCHUL
REBECCA TABONY

The researchers assessed the effect of participation in a Tibetan retreat at a center in Scotland over a 4-year period using the General Health Questionnaire-60 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1988). Residence at the retreat center did not show any harmful or beneficial effects on the participants' levels of stress and general health as measured by these scales.

Buddhism is a philosophy of life that has as its ultimate goal helping people to achieve awareness and eventually enlightenment (Tenzin Gyatso, 1995). Having begun in India approximately 2,000 years ago, Buddhism spread throughout Asia, changing nuances as it integrated with divergent cultural groups (Humphreys, 1951). Consequently, many diverse sects of Buddhism exist today, resulting in a myriad of interpretations of traditional Buddhist principles.

Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, was established during the seventh century B.C. through the convergence of the animistic and shamanistic beliefs of the indigenous Bon culture of Tibet with the traditional Indian Buddhism prominent at the time (Batchelor, 1987). Over the course of 400 years (approximately 700–1100 A.D.), Buddhism was formally established in Tibet through the meticulous translation of the entire Sanskrit written corpus and through travels of Tibetans to India in search of knowledge, as well as travels of Indians to Tibet with the intent of providing instruction (Batchelor, 1987). Thus, much of the original doctrinal content remains intact as a result

Malcom MacLachlan is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. Eilish McAuliffe is a health services management specialist in the health services unit of the Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, Ireland. Richard C. Page is a professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, The University of Georgia, Athens. Deborah B. Altschul and Rebecca Tabony are doctoral students in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services, The University of Georgia, Athens. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Richard C. Page, Dept. of Counseling and Human Development Services, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, 30602 (email: rpage@coe.uga.edu).

of the strong foundation in Indian Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism differs, however, in the way in which it organizes this content (Batchelor, 1987). The basic principles therefore persist, although the logic behind them is uniquely Tibetan.

Enlightenment, for instance, is a concept relevant to all sects of Buddhism as the principal goal of the individuals who practice Buddhism (Humphreys, 1951). A definition of enlightenment is a state of complete freedom, which releases people from their own recalcitrant habitual tendencies that have been created by their misconceptions about the nature of reality. (Tenzin Gyatso, 1995). This definition is based on the premise that only by awakening oneself from ignorance and the realization of desires (e.g., wealth, fame, power, sex, and relationships) as the source of suffering can the path of true enlightenment be obtained (Powers, 1996). Although it is a standard concept found throughout Buddhist traditions, enlightenment is achieved through unique means in Tibetan Buddhist practice (Batchelor, 1987).

The Four Noble Truths are integral to the attainment of enlightenment in all Buddhist traditions (Humphreys, 1951; Powers, 1996; Tenzin Gyatso, 1995). This attainment consists of coming to a realization that: (a) all mundane existence involves suffering; (b) suffering is caused by attachment to desire; (c) the end of suffering is letting go of desire; and (d) suffering will end by following the Noble Eightfold Path (Powers, 1996). The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path were detailed in the first sermon given by Buddha after he became enlightened. The Four Noble Truths describe the major philosophical premises of Buddhism, and the Noble Eightfold Path describes the code Buddhists should live by in their journey toward enlightenment (Prabhavananda, 1963). Although these principles are common to Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism uses distinctive techniques, such as *tantras* (meditations combining mind and body), to obtain enlightenment (Batchelor, 1987).

Within Buddhism are two major systems of thought and practice: the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana*. The principal differences between these two vehicles are their views of selflessness and the perceived outcome of enlightenment. The *Hinayana* ideal is to obtain selflessness and enlightenment in relation to person or personal identity, with the goal being personal growth and emancipation (Powers, 1996; Tenzin Gyatso, 1995). The *Mahayana* ideal, on the other hand, is to understand selflessness as a universal principle encompassing the entire spectrum of existence (Powers, 1996; Tenzin Gyatso, 1995). Tibetan Buddhism is based on the *Mahayana* type of Buddhism, which sees the attainment of a universal perspective as the only means of eliminating ignorance and delusion. The attainment of a universal perspective allows individuals to achieve enlightenment and then to help others to find the path to final happiness (Tenzin Gyatso, 1995).

The *tantric* vehicle, included within the universal vehicle, is considered the highest vehicle in Tibetan Buddhism. Through meditative practices involving the subtle coordination of mind and body, individuals are able to

accelerate the process of overcoming ignorance and reaching enlightenment. This is accomplished through advanced techniques using a variety of elements of the physical body to mentally penetrate essential points in the body, which, according to Tibetan Buddhism, is where energy centers are located (Tenzin Gyatso, 1995). Through this process, individuals, according to Tibetan Buddhism, integrate the enlightened qualities of a Buddhist deity into their own consciousness. Thus, Buddhism came alive for Tibetans through their unique usage of *tantric* deities and forces that personified and embodied the characteristics necessary for enlightenment. This moved Buddhist principles from abstract to concrete, while also appealing to the spiritual traditions of Tibetans (Batchelor, 1987).

Western psychologists have explored similarities between the search for enlightenment and Western therapeutic goals such as self-actualization (Chang & Page, 1991; de Silva, 1990; Watts, 1961). Both enlightenment and self-actualization conceptualize the human potential of people in positive ways. The ideas held by Western humanistic psychologists about self-actualization and Buddhist ideas of enlightenment both stress the positive potential of people, the connection people have to nature, the caring and concern people can show for one another, and the ability people have to improve themselves. Descriptions of self-actualization and enlightenment also emphasize the potential for people to experience bliss when they reach a higher state of consciousness.

BUDDHISM IN COUNSELING LITERATURE

The literature consistently recognizes the potential for growth and development that results from Buddhist practice. (Chang & Page, 1991; Delmonte & Kenny, 1985; de Silva, 1990; Page & Berkow, 1991; Page & Chang, 1989; Rubin, 1996). Some would argue that the integration of specific Buddhist techniques with psychotherapy is more practical and desirable than following the path toward "Buddhahood" (Delmonte & Kenny, 1985). Meditation, for instance, may be seen merely as a vehicle for achieving the goal of self-actualization rather than enlightenment, as occurs in most forms of Buddhism. In this instance psychology provides the context to instigate change, and Buddhism offers the mode of operation.

Conversely, there are those who recognize Buddhism as having a rich history of psychological content, arguing that the practice of Buddhism as a religion and way of life involves much in terms of psychological change (de Silva, 1990). The ultimate goal of enlightenment, for instance, is attainable through following the Noble Eightfold Path. This process involves steps clearly linked to what might be seen as goals similar to some of the goals of Western therapies. For instance, the Noble Eightfold Path emphasizes that individuals should develop the following attitudes and behaviors: "right view, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation" (Prabhavananda, 1963,

p. 210). According to Prabhavananda (1963), following the Noble Eightfold Path leads to peace of mind, a higher wisdom, and a more balanced lifestyle. Many Western therapies also try to help people to lead more balanced lives and to gain a more peaceful, less emotional perspective about events that occur in their lives.

In Tibetan Buddhism this is also often achieved through the use of *tantras*, which help individuals internalize the wisdom and compassion of specific deities (Batchelor, 1987). Thus, individuals are helped to become more caring persons and to develop the ability to handle their lives in a wiser manner by internalizing some of the attitudes of these deities.

THE STUDY

Regardless of the aforementioned perspectives, scholars often agree that the benefits of Buddhist philosophy are congruent with the struggle toward psychological growth and development. Because those involved in Buddhist training are engaged in this process, it is likely that they will experience psychological and perhaps physiological changes. Thus, to assess the benefits of Buddhist philosophy on mental health, it would be helpful to examine the experience of individuals engaged in monastic instruction. How they experience their retreat is affected by their perceptions of their own physical and psychological well-being and how those change during the course of their instruction.

Although some similarities between Western psychology and Buddhist thought have been noted (Delmonte & Kenny, 1985; de Silva, 1990; Watts, 1961), few studies have attempted to discretely examine the psychological and physiological effects of monastic teachings on individuals. Burns and Ohayv (1980) attempted to follow the psychological changes of meditating Buddhist monks in Thailand, though their research was never completed. The purpose of the current study was to measure longitudinally the physiological and psychological changes shown over a 4-year period of training in Tibetan Buddhism.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 46 individuals from diverse populations (including Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America) entered a large Tibetan Buddhist monastery located in Scotland during the spring of 1989 to engage in a retreat experience. Twenty-six men and 20 women, ranging in age from 23 to 67 years, entered this monastery at that time. The retreat was intended to last 4 years; 34 of these participants volunteered to fill out quantitative questionnaires on a yearly basis. Of those 34 volunteers, 15 were female and 19 were male. At the end of the 4-year period, 35 people completed the retreat. Only 6 female participants, however, remained active in the research throughout the 4-year period.

Setting

The Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center is located in Eskdailmure, near the Scottish boarder with England. The Center provides study, retreat, and meditation facilities. Its stated goal is to "increase the mental and spiritual well-being in the world and to preserve the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Tibet" (Kagyu Samye-Ling Tibetan Center Brochure). It is one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Europe. The teachings and the center are under the spiritual authority of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa, head of the Kagyu tradition of Buddhism, which is one of the four main schools in Tibet. The founding of this tradition was mainly concerned with the experience of Buddhism as realized through *tantric* practices rather than the intellectual abstraction prevalent at the time (Batchelor, 1987). Since 1970, the center has been under the direction of Dharma Arya Akong Rinpoche, former abbot of a monastery in eastern Tibet and founder of many centers worldwide.

The Retreat Experience

The emphasis of the retreat is study and prayer for beginning students and meditation for those who have previously attended a 4-year retreat. A typical day includes several 3- to 4-hour study sessions, personal study time, meals (when not fasting), and work in maintaining the center. Retreaters undergo visualization training, speech training, breathing training, and food training.

During the 2nd year of monastic study, retreaters undergo a 6-month period in which they are encouraged to refrain from shaving or bathing (except for their teeth and face), or from communicating with others (either inside or outside of the center). During this time retreaters remain in their sleeping quarters, spending time on reflection and meditation. The purpose of all of these practices is to help the retreaters to become more aware of themselves and their own needs and preoccupations. This is seen as helping the retreaters to give up attachments that make them unhappy and keep them from achieving a state of enlightenment.

Instruments

General Health Questionnaire-60 (GHQ-60). The GHQ-60 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) is a self-administered screening test aimed at detecting psychiatric disorders in community-based and nonpsychiatric clinical settings. The questionnaire consists of 60 multiple choice questions that can be evaluated either with a dichotomous or Likert-type scale. The GHQ-60 measures lapses in "normal" functioning, rather than lifelong traits. The questionnaire focuses on inability to continue to carry out normal healthy functioning and the appearance of new phenomena of a distressing nature. Validity and reliability of the GHQ-60 is supported by numerous studies conducted over

the last 30 years (Goldberg & Williams, 1988). Split-half reliability is .95 and test-retest reliability is .76 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988).

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). The PSS (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1988) is a 14-item self-administered scale designed to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1988). Items were designed to evaluate the degree to which individuals found their lives to be unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overloading. The scale also includes a number of direct queries about current levels of experienced stress. Validation and reliability data for the PSS were collected in three samples, two consisting of college students and one consisting of a more heterogeneous group enrolled in a smoking-cessation program (Cohen et al., 1983). Coefficient alpha reliability for the PSS was .84, .85, and .86 in each of the three samples (Cohen et al., 1983).

Procedure

The principal investigators contacted the center on a yearly basis for data collection. At those times, participants were asked to complete the GHQ-60 and PSS. In addition, journals were collected in which retreaters wrote (on a yearly basis) about their goals, aims, and expectations regarding the retreat, as well as their experience of themselves in the retreat as it progressed. (The information in these journals is being analyzed for another article by a qualitative research data analysis.)

Six repeated-measures ANOVAs were conducted for the total scales of the GHQ-60 and the PSS, comparing Time 1 to Time 2; Time 1 to Time 2 to Time 3; and Time 1 to Time 2 to Time 3 to Time 4. The grouping factor for each ANOVA was time, the independent variable was sex, and the dependent variable was the total score on the GHQ-60 or the total score on the PSS.

Three MANOVAs were conducted for the GHQ-60 and the PSS comparing those who dropped out prior to Time 2 and those present at Time 2; those who dropped out prior to Time 3 and those present at Time 3; and those who dropped out prior to Time 4 and those present at Time 4. One independent variable was drop out versus persistence. The second independent variable was sex. The dependent variables for the three MANOVAs were the total scores on the PSS and the GHQ-60. The subscales for the GHQ-60 were not examined, because the range of the variance was too small.

RESULTS

Statistical analysis of repeated-measures ANOVAs demonstrated no significant differences in GHQ-60 or PSS total scores when these scores were compared for individuals at different time periods during their retreat. In addition, the MANOVAs that were performed on those residents who dropped out comparing them to those who remained (at all three compari-

son times) on the GHQ-60 and the PSS indicated that no statistically significant differences existed between the participants who remained and the drop-outs on either scale at any time period. This was also true when the men and women were compared. This demonstrated that the people participating in the study at the different time periods had no significantly different attitudes on the GHQ-60 or the PSS when compared with the people who no longer wanted to participate.

The only overall difference that was noted was the high attrition rate from the research for male participants. Male drop out occurred quite early in the investigation, with 3 men and 12 women present at Time 3. By Time 4 there were no male participants, whereas 6 female participants were still willing to answer the questionnaires for this research. It is important to note that the male participants did not necessarily drop out of the retreat program, but rather declined further involvement in the study.

Although there were no statistically significant differences in the ways the participants scored on the GHQ-60 and the PSS at different times, there were nonsignificant differences in the mean scores of the participants at different times. The means and standard deviations of the GHQ-60 and the PSS of the six subjects who participated in this research project for the entire 4 years are presented below. It should be noted that quite a bit of variance existed in the ways that the six participants responded on the GHQ-60. Given the small number of subjects who completed the entire study, it would have taken large differences between means to produce significant differences on the repeated-measures ANOVAs comparing all of the yearly time period scores on the GHQ-60 and the PSS that were computed for this group. The means and standard deviations of scores on the GHQ-60 and the PSS for the times these tests were given are listed in Table 1.

Discussion

The investigation was based on the idea that the participants' perceived levels of stress and psychological and physiological health might change over the course of a 4-year intensive Tibetan Buddhist retreat program. The results of the study, however, indicated no significant differences, either positive or negative, for participants across time. The findings indicate that Tibetan Buddhist practice does not necessarily engender positive or negative psychological or physiological change as assessed by the GHQ-60 and PSS.

In addition, failure to obtain significant differences across time indicates that the Tibetan Buddhist retreat program was not harmful to the psychological or physical well-being of the participants evaluated (as measured on the GHQ-60 and the PSS). This finding is important because it provides evidence that involvement in intensive religious study or self-analysis does not necessarily increase stress and psychological discomfort among participants.

It is important to note that women persisted at a much higher rate throughout the study than did men. At the start of the study, 19 men and 15 women

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Scores on the GHQ-60 and the PSS

Instrument	M	SD
GHQ-60		
Time 1	10.8	15.5
Time 2	1.8	1.4
Time 3	4.0	3.2
Time 4	2.8	2.9
PSS		
Time 1	17.5	8.4
Time 3	18.5	6.4
Time 4	14.7	5.5

Note. GHQ-60 = General Health Questionnaire-60; PSS = Perceived Stress Scale. The PSS was not given at Time 2.

agreed to participate in this research project. At the end of the 4-year retreat, 35 individuals remained (18 men and 17 women) in the retreat altogether; however, only 6 had completed instruments for every phase of the research. Interestingly, of the 6 individuals who persisted, all were female. The considerable reduction of the response rates of both men and women may partly be explained by the fact that during the second year, retreaters were encouraged to refrain from talking or writing. Some of the retreaters, therefore, may have felt that participation in the study violated this period of silence. Perhaps some of the retreaters may have felt that the effect of being tested while on retreat actually disrupted or negated the typical retreat experience. The reasons for the higher retention rates of women participants in this research project are not known.

A qualitative study would provide a viable methodological design, enabling researchers to assess the meaning that individuals make of their retreat experience and the process that individuals go through over the 4-year time period. This method might also be useful in identifying global attitudes about life and society that are common to retreaters and influence psychological and physiological well-being. A qualitative research design may, therefore, identify factors that contribute to the experience of those individuals engaged in monastic training that were expressed in their journals. It is the goal of some of the current researchers to analyze other information provided by the retreaters according to a qualitative research methodology. Reporting this information is beyond the scope of this article.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, further investigation is in order. As the demographics of the world shift, it is becoming increasingly important for clinicians to develop new insights into alternative ways of helping people achieve personal growth.

Due to this change there is a recent burgeoning of interest in the examination of similarities between Western concepts such as self-actualization and Eastern constructs such as enlightenment (Chang & Page, 1991; de Silva, 1990; Rubin, 1996). It is therefore necessary to conduct systematic studies in an effort to identify whether Buddhist practice is helpful to understanding oneself, and achieving optimal psychological and physiological well-being. Attaining these insights will enable helping professionals to learn to appreciate different ways of helping people to develop their human potential.

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