

Calm In The Chaos: Studying The Impact Of Attending Meditation Classes On Sri Lankan Lay Community

S. A. M. C. Senevirathna

Introduction

Diverse aspects of Buddhist teachings have swept through the contemporary world. This revival is marked by many lay people turning towards Buddhist education. Sri Lanka, being a Buddhist country, certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy and value system have already been instilled in the lay people too. Such popular practices include alms giving, pirith chanting and observing sil. However, among the three main facets of meritorious acts, namely; generosity (dana), morality (sila) and meditation (bhavana) which lead an individual towards attaining the highest goal of dhamma, education and practice of meditation remained quite untouched even among the until lately. In fact meditation began to receive much acceptance and attraction from the laity only in the recent past. While meditation has captured interest in scholars, researchers and in general public, much complications attached to practice can also be witnessed. Researchers have identified both significant benefits and complications of meditation practices. Talking about its emerging market value especially, attached to mindfulness in the modern day as a common commodity, Huntington, C. W. (2015) observes that there are “tech-savvy, scientific gurus” in the West who incorporates mindfulness into psychotherapy. Young and Taylor in their rather radical theory pronounce that meditation has its characteristic of having a “wakeful hypometabolic state of parasympathetic dominance”. Moreover, some researchers have found that the impact of meditation on the practitioner also varies according to the chosen meditative tradition. Some researchers say that both relaxation and arousal could be possible due to meditation. Yet, literature remains pressing with regards to this subject related to contemporary Sri Lankan lay communities. Specially, the lay practitioner’s perspective has not been discussed adequately. Sri Lankan lay community trying to educate themselves on meditation and attending Buddhist meditation classes has become so common. Not only do they participate in retreats for short periods but for weeks and for months. Hence, it is quite timely to consider how such practices really impact them solely through their perspective. This study thus focuses on seventeen laypeople, currently following meditating classes in Sri Lanka.

As an initiation to this study I had some informal discussions with different individuals from different sections of the society. During those discussions, I found many interesting factors regarding their meditation practices including stories of meditation classes having tremendous impact on their spiritual, social and personal lives. It was these friendly chats that actually prompted me to study those influential results at a more systematic level in order to better understand the nature of impact that Sri Lankan lay Buddhists gain while attending meditation classes.

Methodology

I selected the 17 Sri Lankan lay mediators based on convenience sampling and carried out in-depth interviews. In my sample I had two male respondents and 15 female respondents. My study being qualitative in nature, thematic analysis was used in analysing the collected data.

Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed that 12 respondents out of 17 have their meditation classes either in the village temple or in a meditation centre under the guidance of monks or nuns. Duration of their sessions vary from two or two and a half hours to eight hours. There are weekly sessions while some attend monthly classes.

One respondent is attending her classes online, while participating in one day retreats with some recorded guided meditation videos. Four respondents have their sessions under the guidance of lay Buddhist masters. The two male respondents have been regular temple goers for their meditation sessions. While revealing the impact that they have got from the classes, one mentioned about going into deep meditative states. They both mentioned some exciting experiences as rewarding. One of them said that his meditation practice has lead him to help many more friends and fellow villagers to start meditation. One female was a Catholic who has been trying to understand the sense of the world and found Buddhist teachings as an answer. For her, online meditation retreats have become immensely helpful. Yet, she revealed that not having ‘genuinely practising’ meditation teacher to discuss her meditation issues privately as a barrier to overcome some obstacles. Her online meditation classes have influenced her to ignore some negativities of the people around. She also said that when mindfulness increases, she gets to see things quite distantly from herself. There was one respondent who said that spending two hours at class makes her incredibly relaxed and calm, so that she can manage her work at home with two kids better. Interestingly, the impact that all of my respondents have had is not always a positive package. As one young female mediator revealed, at certain points in her meditation journey, ‘things just fall apart’. For her, both relaxation and restlessness have been with her. Another female respondent quite hesitantly mentioned an experience of betrayal that she

had to face while participating in her meditation classes. Thus, it has impacted her losing trust with her teacher. However, quite interestingly, she admits that her practice itself ‘helps’ her to handle the experiencing grief and confusion mindfully. One female practitioner said that her attending classes regularly has made her very calm. She further explains that the instances of having angry reactions to ‘difficult’ co-workers’ actions have become less now. She attributes her calmness totally to the guidance that she has gained by her meditation teacher who conducts weekly classes and teaches them sutta. Though her attendance has become irregular due to Covid 19 pandemic, the positive impact drives her to practice meditation at home the same day that she used to visit the temple. Another female mediator mentioned that she finds her eyesight improving due to regular meditation classes. She further explains that thanks to her practice, she does not feel lonely at home even when her children are aboard.

Conclusion

The findings vary across a spectrum of experiences that the selected Sri Lankan lay mediators have revealed. Nevertheless, it could be concluded that there are many common advantages quoted such as relaxation and calmness. The paper also acknowledges the severe complexities attached to meditation practice. As mentioned by the respondents, the impact of attending meditation classes also extends towards subjective social factors as well.

Key Ward : Sri Lankan, lay community, mediators, impact, meditation classes

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