

Development of an Intake Interview to Identify Skilled Meditators for Scientific Research

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Introduction

Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) together with Western Medicine play a key role in addressing the rising illness rates in the present world. Meditation is understood as one of the safest practices in CAM as it effectively balances physical, emotional, and psychological states of an individual

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(Ramaswami & Shiek, 1989). The Intake Interview developed through the current study is intended to apply in recruiting skilled meditators, one of the target groups in a larger research study which focuses on understanding the effects of meditation in a variety of fields including genetics, epigenetics, cardiorespiratory, neurological and psychological functions.

Background

Even though western medicine plays a vital role in the management of diseases in the modern day world, increasing interest is developing in the field of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) and its potential benefits (Weil, 1995). The World Health Organization estimates that between 65% - 80% of the world population (i.e. about 3 billion people) practice CAM including Buddhist meditation for treatment of various diseases and to maintain health and vitality (Goldstein, 1999). CAM does not ignore the importance of Western medical practices but rather complements it. CAM tends to be less invasive, less costly and has fewer side effects. The Practice of meditation and mindfulness is regarded as one form of CAM. (Sinn, Sharma, & Datta, 1997)

In Dhammacakkappawaththana Sutta, The Lord Buddha describes the Noble Eightfold Path as the middle way of moderation, between the extremes of sensual tolerance and self-mortification. The Buddhist meditation can be described as practicing the Noble Eightfold Path. Meditation is integral to Buddhist teachings and refers to mental practices which ultimately leads to insight into understanding the nature and workings of the mind. Meditation research is considered as a cornerstone of neuroscience research in the 21st century and Buddhist meditation makes the interaction between mind and body in humans. Among the diverse mental practices which are referred to as meditation, attention on the breath, loving kindness and compassion are more commonly known (Levine et al., 2017). These mental practices, when followed under proper guidance, could lead to changes in the mind and body of humans. In Buddhism, proper guidance to the meditation which helps in removal of suffering was given by The Buddha. According to the Buddhist teachings (Dhamma), Buddhist meditation enables attainment of “Niramisa suwa” (Amihai and Kozhevnikov, 2014; Deegalle, 2017).

According to empirical evidences, the person who follows the Noble eight fold path to understand the true nature of life is called as a Buddhist meditator. According to John Yates (Yates, 2017), there are ten stages and four milestones in becoming a skilled meditator. Stage one, two and three are establishing a practice, interrupted attention, and overcoming mind-wandering, and extended attention and overcoming forgetting respectively. Skilled meditator has passed stages one to three and is considered to be in stages four through six-continuous attention and overcoming gross distraction and strong dullness, overcoming subtle dullness and

increasing mind fullness and subduing subtle distraction.

Searching for physiological effects, genetic effects, psychological effects, of meditation would add new knowledge to the growing body of research on meditation and can be used to improve quality of life of people. A study to assess all aforementioned effects, necessitates identification of skilled meditators who are likely to have established changes in the body following regular practice of meditation. Thus the aim of the study was to develop an intake interview to identify skilled meditators.

Method

Item generation for the intake interview was carried out following a thorough literature review (Draft1). Draft 1, prepared in English, consisted of 23 questions which focused on the features; duration of meditation practice, details of meditation practice, stable attention, heightened peripheral awareness, alertness, and emotional stability. The draft 1 was discussed in a focus group consisting of academics, scientists and long-term meditation practitioners (n= 15). A revised draft was prepared based on the feedback (Draft 2). The draft 2 was presented to the focus group for the approval. As, the intake interview was used for Sinhala community, the approved draft 2 was translated in to Sinhala for the initial pretesting (n=10) and pilot testing (n=14). Further revisions were done to the English version of draft 2 based on the findings of the pre and pilot tests to develop draft 3 and draft 4 respectively. An interview with the Delphi group included academics, professionals and monks with expert knowledge in meditation (n=10) was carried out with draft 4; draft 4 was revised with new questions to generate draft 5. Draft 5 was presented to the focus group and further revisions were done to develop Draft 6. Draft 6 was translated in to Sinhala and back translated and presented to the focus group and Delphi group. The final intake interview was approved by the focus group and Delphi group. Final pre-testing and pilot testing of the intake interview is currently being planned.

Results

An intake interview consisting of 30 questions examining the following six areas were considered following an extensive literature review, focus groups and Delphi interviews as features of a skilled meditator was developed; duration of meditation practice, details of meditation practice, heightened peripheral awareness, stable attention, alertness and emotional stability. This intake interview was developed as an interviewer administered questionnaire

Conclusion

An intake interview with face and content validity was developed through a rigorous process to recruit skilled meditators for a study to assess the health

benefits for humans. This interview, once finalized, could be used by other studies as a supporting tool to recruit skilled Buddhist meditators

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Keywords: Buddhist meditation, Skilled meditator, Intake interview

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