

STRESS MANAGEMENT THROUGH ZEN MEDITATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 Pandemic has increased the level of stress among the people worldwide. There may be different reasons and factors responsible for it. This paper attempts to search solutions to reduce stress level through Zen meditation, which is a powerful technique to keep oneself happy and stress free. Stress related to Covid-19 can also be managed by changing our lifestyle and including yogic practices in our daily routine.

To achieve the objective of stress reduction among people, an online survey was conducted among a group of 40 people, who continuously practiced meditation and yogic practices in online mode during the lockdown period. The outcome of the result is discussed in this paper. It helped to achieve a relaxed state of mind. This paper attempts to emphasize the importance of meditation for all during Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: stress, Zen meditation, lifestyle, pandemic

1. Introduction

It is a well known fact that Yoga has been practiced in India since ancient times. It dates back to Indus valley civilization. Fossils and remains found during the excavation of Indus valley civilization shows the postures and figurines performing yogic postures. Since then we have been practicing yogic postures through different forms and mediums. Yoga helps to control stress.

In India the word 'meditation' was called '*dhyana*', later when Bodhi Dharma¹ introduced '*dhyana*' to China in the sixth century, it became '*Chan*'. Finally when meditation reached Japan '*Chan*' became '*Zen*'. The uniqueness of Zen lies in the fact that it is a meeting point of Gautam Buddha's meditation in India and Lao Tzu's realization in China. When Zen reached to Japan

¹ Bodhi Dharma was a monk from south India.

and came in contact with the native religion i.e. Shinto; a major change happened, which helped Zen to develop as a unique and natural way of meditation.

During Covid-19 Pandemic when the whole world was suffering from stress due to many reasons, and were trying to search its medicine and vaccines; there were many people in India, who started practicing the traditional knowledge system, which is deeply rooted in the lifestyle of Indian people. People changed their daily habits and started practicing exercises to keep themselves fit and healthy.

Yoga and meditation is one of such techniques, which proved to be very successful during Covid-19 Pandemic to maintain a good healthy life. A person practicing meditation has a disciplined life and it increases the immunity level as well. Zen meditation also helps to achieve the state of no-mind, resulting into zero stress. If we can take out some time everyday to meditate for few minutes, we can control our stress level even during this Covid-19 Pandemic.

According to Dr. Suzuki² there are three kinds of knowledge. The first is gained from reading or listening from some sources. The bulk of our knowledge is of this kind wherein self experience is not involved. The second kind of knowledge is gained from scientific observation and experiment, analysis and speculation. Here, personal experience is involved to some extent and it has a strong foundation than the first knowledge. The third kind of knowledge is attained by an intuitive mode of understanding. It totally depends on personal experience.³

Zen meditation attempts to attain the third form of knowledge. It penetrates to deeper level of our own being. The Japanese Zen master defines Zen meditation saying, "*Sitting silently and doing nothing, spring comes and flower blooms by its own*". During Covid-19 Pandemic, when people were forced to remain within the boundary walls of their homes, it actually provided a golden opportunity to critically analyze and reexamine our thought processes. The self inspection of our daily habits encouraged us to do something, which can provide happiness without going outside. We also realized that by changing our thought processes and by doing simple exercises, we can control the level of stress caused by homesickness without spending any money. Covid-19 Pandemic is an eye opener for all of us to search new innovative ways of happiness within the four walls of our home at minimum cost.

² Dr. Suzuki was the first person from Japan who introduced Zen to the western people.

³ Daisetz T. Suzuki. Zen and Japanese culture. pp 22.

There are two types of Stress: Eustress and Distress⁴. This term was coined by endocrinologist Hans Selye. Eustress is the positive stress, which help and motivate us to work hard. For example, getting a promotion or buying something new. It also creates stress. But, this is for good cause. Distress is the negative stress, which causes problems; for example, loss of dear ones or loss of a job or being abused by someone.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic it has been realized that Stress is a very subjective experience. There are people who never get into stress, whatever may be the situation. On the contrary, there are few people, who get stressed even while facing small challenges of life. Getting into stress is not a big issue. It is a normal act. The real challenge is how to get out of stress, because initially it takes time to recognize that someone has stress. However, if stress continues for a longer time, then it takes the form of mental disorders. Once stress starts controlling our life, it becomes very difficult to get out of it. Sometimes, it causes suicidal tendencies as well. People end their life simply because they were not able to come out of stress.

Social, psychological and personal challenges of people due to Covid-19 Pandemic need to be addressed by the government. This will reduce mental pressures and stress of common people. Many people lost their job during the pandemic, resulting into various Socio-psychological problems in the life of working class. The objective of this paper is to suggest new ways of stress management during Covid-19 Pandemic.

2. Materials

The first sutra of Patanjali in '*Samadhipaad*' says, "*Aath Yoga Anushashnam*", which means Yoga is discipline. The discipline has been given so much importance in Yoga. Since morning to evening, we have to live a disciplined life. A person having disciplined life can never be in stress. Covid-19 Pandemic taught us a lesson to live a disciplined life.

There are many ancient texts, which talks about the significance of Yoga in our life such as '*Hathpradipika*' written by Swami Swatma Ram in 15th century and '*Gherand Samhita*' written by Gherand Muni in the 17th century. The stanza no. fifty of 2nd chapter of Bhagwad Geeta says, "*Yoga Karmasu Kaushalam*", meaning yoga brings excellence in life.

We have been searching new ways of remaining happy and successful in the Covid-19 Pandemic. Many researchers have tried to find the solution. It is a well known fact that if stress is prolonged, it causes physical and mental problems.

⁴ Sivasubramanian. International Journal of research in humanities and social sciences. Vol. 4, July 2016

3. Method

An online survey was conducted among a group of 40 people, who practiced yoga and meditation every Sunday during the Covid-19 pandemic for three months during February-April 2021. It was a mixed group of people including both male and female. The average age was between 18 to 40 years. Participants were asked to share their experiences and the methods through which they managed their stress levels during Covid-19 Pandemic. The data were collected, summarized and suggestions were given to find out common ways of reducing stress during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

It was found that people practicing meditation were relaxed and had less stress. It influenced their daily routine life and increased their efficiency towards hard work. The results of the survey are discussed below and inferences have been drawn. The sample size of participants was less; however, it indicated that practicing meditation even once a week helps to manage the stress level during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

4. Results and Discussion

The result of the online survey conducted during the Covid-19 Pandemic emphasized that all the people practicing continuous meditation were happy and had less stress. The level of acceptance has increased and they accepted Covid-19 as a challenge. There was a discipline in their life. Their physical fitness and mental strength increased. It also helped them to strengthen their immunity level and brought a physical, mental and emotional balance in their life.

It was agreed by all of them that during Covid-19 pandemic, stress had started causing mental problems to them. They started participating in online meditation sessions. The result was unbelievable. Many of them agreed that stress is created by them only. Due to our dual mind, we are not able to decide what is right and what is wrong. This conflict of indecisiveness in our mind causes stress. While they were practicing meditation, they experienced that the body and mind is connected, therefore, if they continue practicing meditation their body-mind will function well, thus keeping them away from stress during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

People also agreed that 'change in modern life style' is a major cause of stress in recent times. Especially during Covid-19 Pandemic, lifestyle changed suddenly. People were working from home and their timing of taking food and going to bed changed drastically, which were causing stress and anxiety to them.

There is also scientifically proved evidence that during sleep, our body releases many useful hormones necessary for our body functioning. If we sleep late, these hormones are not released causing many problems including insomnia. During Covid-19 Pandemic, physical activities almost became zero. Lack of physical activities has resulted into slow functioning of the mind resulting into various mental problems. The spread of Corona Virus added more problems and challenges to the pre existing ones, and because people were not ready to accept it, suffered a lot. All the participants practicing Yoga and meditation were happy that because of regular yogic practice they maintained a discipline and balance between their normal and professional life.

Various reasons of stress were highlighted due to Covid-19 Pandemic. Common reasons found for stress was mostly related to Social and family responsibilities. Since we live in a world, where expectation is too high and cut throat competition is being faced everywhere, people develop a tendency to have stress. We want to achieve everything quickly in a short time, resulting in mental stress. Covid-19 Pandemic has taught us a lesson that one can be happy by following the traditional knowledge systems of Yoga and meditation and therefore, by spending less and living a better quality of life will help us to manage a balance between social and professional life.

5. Conclusion

We need to work at personal and governmental levels both. Stress is because of our ignorance and little knowledge. The need of the hour is to include meditation in our life. Yogic practices help to reduce stress. We need to start following our traditional knowledge system. The problem of stress need to be addressed by all and the solution lies in the fact that we must take out few minutes to meditate.

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