Editorial

Meditation: re-discovered tool for the health of mind and body

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The United Nation (UN)'s General Assembly passed a resolution to proclaim 21st December as World Meditation Day (1). The resolution emphasizes the importance of meditation for physical and mental health, acknowledges its universal practice and encourages the dissemination of information about its benefits. Earlier on, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (2). In a global emphasis of the need for improving mental wellbeing, re-discovering meditation as a tool for improving mental wellbeing is a turning point. Even though meditation featured in the eastern religions and philosophies long ago, especially in the teachings of the Buddha, many in the modern world were sceptical about the value of it in bringing about mental wellbeing, happiness and contentment. With UN's proclamation of the World Meditation Day, such sceptics have the opportunity to re-think about their stance and learn more about meditation.

Physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing are interconnected. These four elements are also connected with all other aspects of human life and the surrounding environment. However, mind is the forerunner and is superior to all other elements of human life according to what the Buddha taught (3). In many religions, a prominent place has been given to the mind over body shown by regular and frequent prayers and holy masses. Hence, giving mind a better consideration in health care is also a logical and a felt need that has not been fulfilled enough as yet. This is more so in the modern world where the mind has to face and resolve challenges that are complex, diverse and exponentially increasing, particularly with artificial intelligence (AI) standing between human perception and the real world (4).

While the physical body is made of matter and energy, mind is a non-physical but a functional entity. Mind is fed by five sensors located in the physical body namely eye, ear, nose, tongue and the rest of the body that captures the external environment. The pieces of captured information in the form of visual, audio, smell, taste and touch are taken up by the mind as thoughts, one at a time. The mind processes the thoughts and subsequently stores as memories. The memory, in turn, becomes the second source of thoughts. The third source of thoughts is the physical body itself in the form of aches and pains, thirst, hunger and urge to urinate and defecate and so on (5).

Mind has an operating system which is unique to each individual. This operating system selects what is acceptable from what falls onto its sensors and subsequently processes them one by one and stores in the memory. It has natural algorithms for retrieving such stored information, advanced decision-making, learning, adjusting and reasoning, etc. It is also linked and influenced by the transmigration of mind across many births according to the Buddha's teaching.

Meditation can be used as a tool to train the mind (5). There are many forms of meditation techniques that can be broadly classified into two, namely concentration meditation and insight meditation. In concentration meditation, the meditator fixes the attention to an object and maintains it so that other thoughts do not arise. This thought-free state gives an enhanced mental wellbeing to the practitioner during the period of meditation. The object of focus can be the breath, a piece of music, a picture or a phrase that is contemplated repeatedly. Loving kindness (compassion) meditation is another popular practice among many other concentration meditation methods available (6).

In insight meditation, both concentration and insight are cultivated together. Insight warrants an analysis of the nature of existence of self, its driving force, cessation of existence and the validity of the method of practice. This thought-free state with insight gives one the freedom from stress and is called 'enlightenment' that symbolizes complete mental wellbeing (5). Effectively describing this method and its health outcomes is nearly impossible through conventional means of communication as it is totally an experiential learning. This method of learning demands practising insight meditation for a sufficient duration of time to experience the outcomes, if one is to comprehend it beyond doubt (7).

Meditation has been known to have a positive effect on the telomere length, hence the life span of a person (8). It also has favourable effects on the neurotransmitters such as serotonin and melatonin (9) and antioxidant levels (10). These findings show that meditation is beneficial for the health of both mind and body. It is shown that long-term meditators have more environment-friendly lifestyle habits and carbon footprints (11) and better psychological resilience (12). These recent research findings show that meditation, if practised, can have many diverse health benefits.

It is known that everybody in a population will not take up meditation equally. Early adopters will be a small minority in any community (13). However, a positive paradigm shift in a community towards better health can be expected if an effort is made to popularize meditation as a means of health promotion. Such a shift can have a rippling effect and more people will be inclined to meditate with time.

A large majority of meditation methods, if not all, have positive health effects. Insight meditation gives an additional advantage of imparting ontological analytical skills that provide a discernible scientific basis for the enhanced level of mental wellbeing. To enable the delivery of meditation, a multi-prong approach with policy decisions, fund allocation and logistic facilitation should be instituted. A strong advocacy should be launched to get the attention and goodwill of the political leadership to make it a reality.

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