Meditation: The Adoption of Eastern Thought to Western Social Practices

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ABSTRACT. The influences of Eastern thought on Western practices have emerged in areas of social work, health, religion, spirituality, even pop culture. This trend is apparent as individuals enroll in yoga classes, practice meditation, and listen to Eastern music mixed with Western lyrics. Globalization, which connects the Eastern and Western worlds, has a great impact on the Western way of life. One such impact in social work practice is meditation, defined as an “act of spiritual contemplation” (Perez-de-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000, p. 49). As exposure to Eastern practices increases, individuals in the West view meditation as a helping and problem solving process.

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philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. The authors then analyze how Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts have influenced and encouraged the migration of meditation into Western society. Finally, the conclusion examines how meditation can be integrated into social work practice as a supplement to on-going talk therapy.

KEYWORDS. Eastern meditation, Western social practices, spirituality, social work

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This manuscript examines meditation and its migration from the Eastern world to Western social practices. The authors begin by comparing and contrasting religion and spirituality. The duality of Eastern and Western practice of meditation lies in these two constructs. The next section briefly touches upon the development of insight meditation within the philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism. The authors then analyze how Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts have influenced and encouraged the migration of meditation into Western society. Finally, the conclusion examines how meditation can be integrated into social work practice as a supplement to on-going talk therapy.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

The migration of insight mediation from the East to the West brings to focus the terms spirituality and religion. Religion, an organized form of social entity, concentrates on prescribed beliefs, rituals, and practices.
Spirituality, on the other hand, is an attribute of an individual, is subjective, and based in individual experience. The practice of religion contains specific boundaries and principles that are well defined and stringent; spirituality has no boundaries due to its individualistic nature. Payne (2005) writes that spirituality guides purpose-seeking and is a source of healing. Historically, spiritual healers maintained a sense of leadership in the healing process of both physical and mental health (Miller, 1999).

Before science-based health trends, culturally defined healers served as health care providers. Functions of healing were often blended with those of spiritual leadership within a community. For example, the Native American shaman and the Mexican curandero/a were solicited for both spiritual and physical healing (Miller, 1999). While the medical-technological model currently serves the foundation for medicine and psychology and provides effective treatment for certain diseases, it omits social, behavioral, environmental, and emotional dimensions of illnesses (Miller, 1999). This gap allows for the space required for alternative healing methods such as insight meditation. For a majority of Americans, spirituality plays a large part in daily living. As is personality and health, spirituality is extremely complex due to the interplay of many different individualistic layers. It is the heightened awareness of spirituality in the Western world that has led to the transmigration of meditation from its Eastern roots within Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. Cultural underpinnings of Eastern insight meditation within the Western world portray the evolution of spiritual practice.

The two main Eastern traditions credited for the birth of meditation are Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. Chandran (2004) writes “philosophy is the intellectual effort of man to understand himself and the world external to him” (p. 2). Insight meditation in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions require reflection of the truth within oneself, the world, and the nature of knowledge itself. Literature reveals that truth discovery leads to expanded awareness about the world and oneself. While an entire manuscript can be written on the next two subsections of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, the intent of the authors is to only touch upon the cultural underpinnings of insight meditation.

**Hindu Philosophy**

Religious and spiritual philosophy in India originates not only from intellectual curiosity, but also from a powerful desire to go beyond the limitations of life (Chandran, 2004). The most sacred religious scripture of Hinduism is the Vedas. Combined with the later Upanishad texts,
Hinduism is guided through an interconnected and philosophical religious compilation of spirituality, yoga, and meditation. The four main branches of yoga philosophy are: Karma (action) yoga, Bhakti (devotion) yoga, Jnana (knowledge) yoga, and Raja (meditation) yoga. The Vedas define yoga as a means of uniting the individual being with a higher being. Raja yoga is the critical link to insight meditation. This meditative typology “is a psychophysical method or a technique of training the mind and developing its subtle powers of perception to discover spiritual truths that provide the basis for religious principles and practices” (Pandit, 1998, p. 89). Raja Yoga contains the formal organization of meditation.

Meditation is the key in Hindu religious philosophy and spirituality. Meditation is where the mind is in an absolute state of non-doing. According to Hindu religion, the soul (atman) is the source of unlimited power and wisdom in a human being, and meditation is the means of contacting this great wisdom (Pandit, 1998). In the original view of the Hindu scriptures, meditation is not an action that one can perform, but rather a phenomenon that occurs spontaneously and effortlessly within a mind that is in a state of non-doing or uninterrupted concentration. This Eastern spiritual practice offers a therapeutic influence via perspectives and uses of meditation adapted to Western social practice, especially in social work. Hindu tradition reveals that meditation is a personal endeavor and leads to insight into self and the divine.

**Buddhist Philosophy**

Hindu meditation aspires for spiritual insights, and as complement, Buddhist meditation seeks enlightenment (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). The path to enlightenment in Buddhist tradition is through insight meditation, which requires mastering mindfulness, effort and energy, investigation, concentration, tranquility, and equanimity. Mindfulness is a “clear awareness of what is happening each moment” (Goldstein & Kornfield, p. 62). Energy, effort, and investigation of nature and reality are investments in stimulating the mind. Concentration, tranquility, and equanimity serve the purpose of equalizing the mind and focusing on insight meditation (Goldstein & Kornfield). The outcomes of these skills are peacefulness, right understanding, and opening to and investigating values and suffering (Goldstein & Kornfield). Buddhists believe that the attachment of greed, hatred, and delusion inside person (dukkha and samudaya) creates dissatisfaction from the acquisition of material possessions, leading to suffering (Burns, 1994). Achieving enlightenment
through the meditative path reveals the understanding that nirvana exists inside of a person and consciousness distracts us from this reality (Rahula, 1974). Thus, through insight meditation in the Buddhist tradition, we are all capable of achieving enlightenment; we all have the potential to feel complete and serene. This insight is a self-directed process.

Spiritual ideologies of Hinduism and Buddhism and their basic tenets are displayed in Table 1. Enlightenment through a path of detachment is central to both philosophies. Meditation is a powerful guide to such detachment and insight into one’s values and self-being in achieving enlightenment, fundamental in Hindu and Buddhist spiritual practice. These components of Eastern practice become translated to a search for meaning in life through exploration of self identity and self expression in the West (Henery, 2003). As the diversity of Eastern religious faiths in the West grows the adoption of insight meditation continues to gain popularity as two generations of people explore the purpose of spirituality.

DEVELOPMENT OF EASTERN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN A WESTERN CONTEXT

The amendment to immigration law in 1965 increased the diversity of all the world’s faith and religions in the United States (Smith, 2002). Since then, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have increased from 0.4% in 1990 to 1.1% in the United States (Barna Group, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worldview</th>
<th>Hinduism</th>
<th>Theravada Buddhism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>1. Belief in Reincarnation</td>
<td>1. Life is full of suffering</td>
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<td>2. The cycle of Birth and Re-Birth</td>
<td>2. To release from the “Wheel of life”</td>
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<td>Personhood</td>
<td>1. Letting go of the Ego</td>
<td>1. Existence of human being is not important</td>
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<td>2. No “self”</td>
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<td>Problem</td>
<td>1. Attachment vs. Detachment</td>
<td>1. Three causes of suffering—greed, hatred and delusion</td>
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<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>1. Reaching enlightenment or Nirvana</td>
<td>1. Forsaking the world to achieve enlightenment</td>
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Eastern religious practices were brought to the forefront when two Buddhist scholars addressed the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in late 19th century, the first official presentation of practice meditation to the West (Layman, 1976). Lichstein (1988) stated that this positive reception during the conference was reported in Japan, and as a result, encouraged some Buddhist teachers to migrate to the United States to open meditation practice centers in the early twentieth century. Only a few decades later, Eastern spiritual practice would make its mark in the Western world. Through their acceptance of subjective and personal spirituality, Baby Boomers and Generation X helped solidify the adoption of meditation.

**Baby Boomers**

Adoption of Eastern philosophy, while utilizing the catalyst of meditation as path to spirituality, is evident in the generational changes taking place in Western religious practice (Martinez, 2004). Roof (1999) cites the Baby Boomer generation (birth years between 1946 and 1964) is an essential force of cultural and social shifts in American religiosity. Cultural emphasis on personal growth and seeking a higher being within the individual are some reasons for the change (Ellingson, 2001). The paradigm shift that Baby Boomers exhibit shows a change in the traditional reliance on institutions for prescription of morality and conscience matters. An individual’s path to self-ascribed spirituality excludes the basic tenets of Eastern practice through insight, meditation, and enlightenment, all originating from within the individual.

Baby Boomers may seek out nontraditional forms of sacred places (Wuthnow, 1998). As working adults, Boomers experienced a shift from community to commuting. Community as it was known in the 1950s and 1960s entailed congregating at particular times, for example, for religious meetings. Much of life revolved around the said community; however, the 1970s brought the dawn of suburbia and the necessity of commuting to work places, thus decreasing the activities within any particular community. This demographic change led to the issue that “for some people the shift is experienced as living no longer in a sacred place but between sacred places” (Ellingson, p. 258). Wuthnow (1998) identifies this separation as a shift from “spirituality of dwelling” to a “spirituality of seeking.” This demographic change of “spirituality of seeking” forced redefinition of the meaning of religion in Western culture (Ellingson, 2001; Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). Accommodating for spiritual needs in given time constraints requires self-ascription,
subjectivity, and a reliance on defining spirituality in a personal and individualistic manner. This is accomplished through insight meditation that can be accessed and practiced easily on the go.

Due to such societal changes, Baby Boomers present a negative valuation of institutionalized religion (Wuthnow, 1998). This shift has increased their positive value of spirituality as deeply subjective and grounded in an individual’s sacred experiences. The Baby Boomer generation visualized a new outlook on life. Their lifestyle differed considerably from previous generations, as they no longer followed in the footsteps of their parents, especially in religious practices. Integrating personal experiences of a spiritual nature with other aspects of their social and personal life is primary to Baby Boomers (Ellingson, 2001). The cultural changes the Baby Boomers have created reveal an acceptance, if not reliance, on tenets of Eastern meditation practices, as they search for meaning of life through insight into the self.

**Generation X**

Although Baby Boomers have led the way in self-seeking spirituality, the Generation X cohort presents a more pronounced gap between religion and spirituality. Gen-Xers (birth years between 1961 and 1981) are making more radical and resistant cultural and social shifts in religion and spirituality. Gen-Xers are suspicious of organized religion and therefore often seek God or the sacred outside the doors of organized, institutionalized religious denominations or congregations (Ellingson, 2001). Baby Boomers integrated organized religious practice with self-seeking spirituality. Gen-Xers, on the other hand, are far removed from this integration and only seek the meaning of life outside of any organized practice.

In addition to the suspicion of institutionalized religion, Gen-Xers also value and place importance on experience and ambiguity (Martinez, 2004). Gen-Xers seldom take religion at face value; they identify with it through personal experience, subjectively. For this generation, only what is concrete and proven is taken as truth. Emphasis on personal experiences allows the individual to form his or her personal identity. Living in a generation where boundaries are constantly brought into question creates even more ambiguous boundaries. Gen-Xers question the reality of the divine, communication with the divine, and the personal rewards of this belief system. Generational religious beliefs taken at face value for are not tacit for Gen-Xers. This boundary expansion results in Gen-Xers being far more removed from organized religion than preceding cohorts (Martinez, 2004). Generation X edifies Eastern philosophies
through intellectual curiosity, questioning truth and reality, and seeking answers of divine through insight meditation. Gen X-ers support the premise that equanimity complements ambiguity in an unshakable experience of the changing conditions of life, which is based in Buddhist tradition (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987). Baby Boomers and Generation X have allowed for the integration of spiritual practices into the Western way of life, via insight and the personal, which have inherent implications for social work practice.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK**

*Spiritual Practice in a Clinical Social Work*

Scientific views dominated social work practice for most of the twentieth century. Controversy occurred when the helping professions emphasized effective social work practice primarily through formats that upheld objective, scientific, deductive applications of theoretical knowledge, over subjective, humanistic, intuitive-inductive processes (Coady, 2001). Goldstein (1986) highlighted that the adoption of Freudian theory in social work emphasized modern scientific paradigms aimed at discovering universal principles for all human behavior. This ideology demands empirical testing. Under Freudian approaches, religion was an illusion and problems, such as neurosis, could be attributed to spiritual beliefs (Richards & Bergin, 2005). The behavioral schools, on the other hand, viewed religious behaviors as accidental reinforcements and superstitions that could not be explained by direct reinforcement (Skinner, 1972). Ellis (1960) criticized usage of religion in controlling one’s sorrows because it could not help counteract negative emotions.

Nevertheless, instability, social turmoil, and socio-economic structure into the twenty-first century created an age of anxiety that necessitated increased appreciation of spirituality and faith as appropriate integrations into clinical interventions within Western populations (Keefe, 1996). Richards and Bergin (2005) noted that there has been a tremendous amount of public literature on this issue. For example, *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Reports* have reported stories related to spiritual issues. Mayers (1996) expressed that “millions of Americans have taken public their search for a clearer understanding of the core principles of belief and how they can be applied to the daily experience of life” (p. 4). In addition, some scholars (Erikson, 1985; James, 1985) separated
themselves from mainstream modernist psychology and promoted the importance of a person’s mental hygiene and “process of individuation” as deep innate potentials (Kurtz, 1999). Jung (1957) was convinced that life has a spiritual goal and therefore, recognized spiritual practice as a personal experience, an essential and undeniable function throughout one’s development, regardless of group or organizational influence. Shifts in social sciences and clinical practice laid the foundation for adoption of Eastern spiritual practice.

**Meditation Applied to the Practice of Social Work**

Integration of Eastern religious and spiritual philosophies into social work is evident in social work practitioners utilizing and attending to spiritually-based needs and practice techniques. Sheridan (2004) found that 60% of practitioners were familiar with V codes in the DSM-IV that assess spiritual issues. These study findings also revealed that two-thirds of practitioner respondents apply spiritual strategies in work environments. Social work practitioners also reveal influence of generational cohorts’ spiritual ideologies in that they exhibit diversity in spiritual beliefs systems (Sheridan, 2004). Practitioners substantiate the utilization of insight meditation and the definition of the divine as a personal endeavor, seen in the examples of Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts. These practitioners reported the highest percentage of belief in a “divine dimension” as “belief in a personal God” (Sheridan, p. 20). Respondents also reported that these beliefs were more likely to be exercised on individual, personal levels and not in institutional settings (Sheridan, 2004). These findings confirm not only social work practitioners adoption of Eastern practice philosophies of insight and personal search for spirituality, but also reveal the inherent integration of these practices into social work.

Spirituality has arisen within the field of social work because social work is practiced in communities where religion and spirituality are central to everyday living. Ethnic and cultural minorities require social work sensitivity and rebalancing diverse ways of finding meaning in life (Payne, 2005). Insight meditation, while still in experimental stages in the Western culture, is necessary to address multicultural needs.

The major goal of psychotherapy is increased self-awareness. Atwood and Maltin (1991) describe how mediation is conducive to a patient’s development of patience, which in turn increases awareness that is conducive to problem solving. During meditation, one is focusing on their breath or object, and in doing so is making the mind more alert and
aware of the thoughts going in and out of the mind. Such freedom of perception and thought allows for the meditator to control inner conflict and discover the element of choice within a perceived problem. Meditation differs from other techniques or practices in its emphasis on maintaining alertness, and the philosophical/cognitive background aims at expanding self-awareness with an increased sense of integration and cohesiveness (Snaith, 1998).

Increased self-awareness, the common theme in most psychotherapies, is also the major element of insight meditation. The goal of meditation as a supplement to on-going talk therapy is to allow for greater insight of choice that enhances decision making. Presently, two disorders that have been researched frequently in terms of supplementing meditation to treatment course are anxiety and depression (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Thera, 1996; Teasdale, 1995). Teasdale found that mindfulness meditation used for stress reduction, based on the skills of attention control, achieved positive effects for maintenance and relapse prevention of depression. Also, a three-year study using a meditation-based stress reduction intervention with 22 subjects revealed positive effects for persons diagnosed with anxiety disorders (Miller, 1999). Although studies involving meditation appear promising, it is important to caution that therapists considering such should do so under supervision.

Limitations of Meditation in Social Work Practice

There are limitations in the use of meditation in the practice of social work, specifically when working with mental illness. Perez-de-Albeniz and Holmes (2000) document how it is essential that meditation not be used as a primary means for therapy. These authors also suggest that meditation is most beneficial when used with patients who are stabilized and in mid to later stages of therapy. Shapiro (1982) described several concerns for the use of meditation in people suffering from mental illness, such as psychosis, schizoid, and schizotypal personality, dissociative states, and hypochondria and somatization disorders. This author notes that risk is possible and the patient will become distressed and overwhelmed by symptomology during meditation. Cautions about meditation being used with patients experiencing psychosis are necessary. Sethi and Bhargava (2003) write that people with a previous history of psychosis are more vulnerable to a psychotic episode during intensive meditation. These authors continue that fasting, sleep and sensory
deprivation are factors outside of meditation that could contribute to the precipitation of psychosis.

**CONCLUSION**

The adoption of Eastern practices in Western culture is becoming more prominent as individuals seek other routes to discovering self. Insight meditation has been credited with many benefits including increased spirituality, health improvement, and as a supplemental aid in therapeutic interventions. Integration of Eastern practice is apparent in the cultural ideology of the Baby Boomer generation, and furthered by Generation X. These generational cohorts challenge traditional forms of religious practice by making them more relevant to present-day demands and by utilizing new definitions of spirituality. Insight meditation is a catalyst for seeking this spirituality for many individuals in the Western world.

There has been some speculation that if the Western world adopts meditation, this lessens its original intentions embedded in Eastern philosophies. The practice of meditation in India, China, Hong Kong, and other Eastern countries, is mainly understood as a path to reach enlightenment. Insight meditation, in the West, is used for spiritual fulfillment, as a form of exercise, and as a supplement to therapy. Even though motivations and outcomes for meditation are different in both cultures, it continues to reveal utility as a tool for its intended purpose.

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