



ISSN: 3049-2017

IJMH 2026; 3(2): 323-327

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www.themultijournal.com

Received: 28-03-2026

Accepted: 22-04-2026

Publish : 24-04-2026

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Vipassanā- A Buddhist Way of Healing Chronic Diseases**Dr. Shruti Hariharan Aiyer****Abstract**

Modern era marvels in technology. All facilities are at fingertips. But does it satisfy the human mind? Why do humans are facing grave chronic illnesses, heart diseases, depressions or a great deal of mental issues at all stages of life more? Given keen observation, we can identify the lack of spirituality and peaceful harmonious life. Vipassanā can be an answer to all the above-mentioned problems. Various researches and studies brighten the subject of Buddhist meditation. It holds the key in healing chronic, psychological and psycho-somatic diseases. It's a vast research field. Vipassanā has the potential of helping the stress and tensions generate in corporate culture. It also can enhance the productivity of employees and professionals.

Introduction

Human mind is like an iceberg. We can only experience a tiny part of it. The rest lies in a deep unconscious state. Meditation is one of the prominent tools which the oriental world has been using to search the depths of mind.

There are numerous techniques and teachers available nowadays who claim their own technique to be the most advantageous one. If we see closely, modern society is destitute of peace and needs mental support more than ever. Lifestyle necessitates the exploration of peace and balance which it lacks through yoga, meditation, laughter clubs and so on.

But do they truly acquire what they seek? Lesser social interactions, increased relationship with mobiles and other smart devices, suppressed feelings due to scarcity of a trustworthy person to share, financial tensions and many such 'gifts' of advanced technological era leaves humans in depression, frustration, high blood pressure, heart problems, migraine and number of other physical, psychological, psycho-somatic problems. Medicines can cure the symptoms of these illnesses and psychotherapy is can help up to some extent. Yet, it is insufficient in treating deep-rooted depression and negativity accumulated in many cases. In spite of medication and numerous counselling sessions, many patients are not healed completely. Here meditation comes for a rescue.

In this paper two main aspects will be discussed – Vipassanā meditation, chronic diseases and how *Vipassanā* helps in healing. It is a vast and fathomless field.

Vipassanā

The initial segment of this paper, *Vipassanā*, is a meditation technique, the ancient wisdom rejuvenated by Gotama The Buddha. In *Arīyapariyesan Sutta*¹ The Buddha's training under '*Ālāra Kālāma*' is mentioned. He was believed to be Jain Sramana. The Buddha learnt the technique from him and followed it for certain time. After realising the insufficient outcomes of his technique. The Buddha started to meditate on his own and set the journey of finding true Dharma. In deep meditation, he was enlightened.

This sutta states that Brahma Sahapati enlightened The Buddha. It is interesting that '*Brahma Sahapati*', instructed The Buddha to roam around the world and spread True Dharma which he has understood. It is possible that The Buddha encountered with Sramana Tradition and found it insufficient. Then he turned towards Vedic/ Yogic tradition to meditate.²

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Among His thousands of discourses, the discourse was given on Satipaṭṭhāna i.e.; Vipassanā. In Dīgha Nikāya, 22 and Majjhima Nikāya, 10 it

occurs. Kuru region was known for its nobility. People were highly ethical. Due to their solid moral base, meditation discourses were sharing deep wisdom. Vipassanā literally means 'seeing as it is'. Seeing and observing the nature of all things, true nature, and not implying or imposing our thoughts or any prejudices in grasping the truth is called Vipassanā. According to a western Buddhist monk Bhikkhu Sujato, these discourses are the later addition in to the suttas as the extension of 'Four Noble Truths'.³

Human Mind

Moving to the next segment of the paper, we look into the human mind. Through the ages, philosophers have been trying to analyze it and in modern times, many psychologists and scientists still attempt to discover the hidden components of mind. As we look upon the ancient Indian thought of mind, philosophical schools have interpreted human mind in various ways. Ancient metaphysicians, *Naiyāyikas* and *Vaiśeṣikas* impart the mind as a substance among nine 'dravyas' i.e., substances.⁴ *Vedāntis* regard mind as the part of 'antahkaraṇa'.⁵ For the sake of the study, the concept of mind has been taken into consideration with 'manas'- mind and 'citta'- consciousness both.

Many Western philosophers and psychologists too have built their theories on the mind. Philosophers such as Plato⁶, Rene Descartes⁷, C. S. Lewis⁸ or the famous psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, William James, John Dewey and Barbara Fredrickson, Susan Carey have researched on the human mind. Thousands of researches establish the fact that the meditation surely helps in anger-related issues, negativity, frustration, stress and other chronic disorders like migraine, high blood pressure, anxiety etc.

'Bhāvanā' is a term used in Pāli Canonical texts for meditation. In regard with Theravāda branch of Buddhism, meditation is considered to be of two types- *Śamatha* and *Vipassanā*. *Śamatha* i.e., *Samādhi* in Sanskrit, is a practice of building concentration. Whereas *Vipassanā* signifies keen observance or developing insight.⁹ There are other types of meditations one can pursue according to their level of understanding and mastery over *Pariyatti*¹⁰ and *Paṭipatti*¹¹. *Kāyā*, *citta*, *muditā*, *karuṇā*, *mettā*, *upekkhā* are the other *bhāvanās* annotated in Pāli tripiṭakas.¹² *Mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* are the four sublime states of mind. Nanaponika Thera explains it in the book.¹³

Kāyā bhāvanā- Contemplation on body

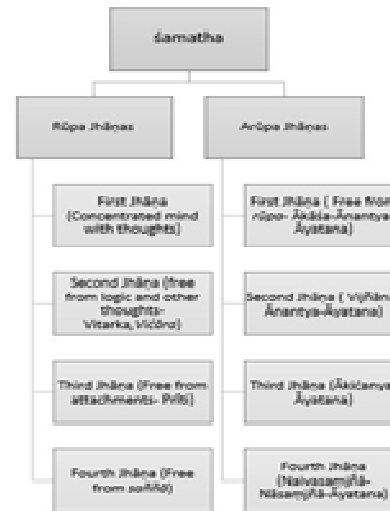
citta bhāvanā- Contemplation on mind

muditā bhāvanā- Contemplation on appreciation

karuṇā bhāvanā- Contemplation on empathy

mettā bhāvanā- Contemplation on loving kindness

upekkhā bhāvanā- Contemplation on equanimity¹⁴ Practice of *Śamatha bhāvanā* leads to cultivation of four *jhānas*.¹⁵ These *jhānas* are the states of consciousness which a meditator acquires through penetrating the mind. One pointed concentration is prerequisite to attain *jhānas*.



Vipassanābhāvanā is the meditation technique which was rediscovered by Gautama The Buddha after practicing eight types of *samādhis*, finding them insufficient in seeking ultimate truth. *Vipassanā* is derived from Sanskrit root- dr̥ś- paśya: which literally means to see/ to understand. *Vi* prefix stands for emphasis on action of seeing deeply. With the prefix, the word *Vipassanā* is often translated as 'insightful meditation'. Four *anupassanās* are followed in this meditation- *Kāyanupassanā*, *Vedanānupassanā*, *Cittānupassanā* and *Dhammānupassanā*.¹⁶ Here, dhamma is used in the sense of true nature. Or the ultimate truth. By observing these *anupassanās*, one can acquire *nibbāna*.

Mind needs training to develop these *bhāvanās*. As the jealousy, hatred, disguise are prominent negative feelings in mind. *karuṇā bhāvanā* denotes the empathetic view towards all beings. This is a broader term as a meditator understands the suffering- first *aryasatya*¹⁷- and sees other beings with the empathy that they are ignorant about their suffering and causes. And he prays for their enlightenment too.

Now, as we grasped the idea of Buddhist meditation, let's glance on the recent researches and scholarly studies of the effects of Buddhist meditation on chronic diseases.

Chronic Diseases and Vipassana

A chronic or long-term illness means having to adjust to the demands of the illness and the therapy used to treat the condition. There may be additional stresses, since chronic illness might change the way you live, see yourself and relate to others. Few studies are done in the field of meditation and its effects on chronic diseases. Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, Maharashtra, India publishes scientific research papers and studies upon the topic. For example, 'Genesis of Ill-Health or Aetiology of Disease' by

Dr. B. G. Savla, A Study Of The Effect of Vipassana Meditation Practices On Employees' satisfaction with life by Dr. Seema Pradhan, A study of Vipassana Meditation: Adolescent Behaviour Pattern by Dr. Raja Radhi, Professional Excellence Through Vipassana Meditation by Shivaraj A, Mindfulness-based stress reduction for people with chronic diseases by M Merkes etc... A large number of researches are done in the field of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation (*Ānāpānasati*), again, is a Buddhist meditation, popular in Occidental people. UK has meditation researches website meditation-research.org.uk. Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada, US etc. have centres for research in Buddhist meditation. Oriental countries such as Japan, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Sri Lanka etc. have vast research domain rooted in Buddhist meditation. In India, government has two websites as research reservoirs. pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov is a site where clinical researches are published and shodhaganga.inflibnet.ac.in is the website where all scientific research theses are preserved.

Let's have a look at few researches to elucidate our topic. First research is Shapero and Gaelle Desbordes published in April 2018.¹⁸ Research studies how it seems to change the brain in depressed patients. A neurologist and a radiologist from Harvard, present their clinical study named 'Mindfulness- Based Interventions in Psychiatry'. The study shows that physical and mental conditions, including irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, psoriasis, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders etc. are found to be healing through Vipassanā meditation. They use the fMRI and capture the brain activity during the scan. Research marks the changes in brain activity even in performing everyday tasks in meditators. Changes are observed in 'amygdala'- a part of a brain which is associated with body's fear and stress responses, also plays the vital role in memory. Subjects' brain was steady throughout the day. Meditators who observe their body and follow *Ānāpānasati* meditation, controlled variable, can quickly disengage from negative thoughts which depressed patients- uncontrolled variable- find it difficult.

This research discards the previous scientific hypothesis assumed by Prof. Herbert Benson in 1970. He explored that 'The Relaxation Response' by amygdala is identified with yoga, transcendental meditation and other forms of meditations including deep religious prayers. Like this, many researches have proved that the Buddhist meditation helps in steadying the brain sooner than any other therapies. These researches are longitudinal and observation are still going on. Sara Lazar's research is well-known in the field.¹⁹ Second research taken for discussion is 'Meditation Practices for Health: State of the Researches Evidence Report'²⁰ Maria B. Ospina, Kenneth Bond and team

reports that mindfulness and *Vipassanā* meditation have been incorporated into several clinically based meditation therapies. Research finds that though the meditation is proven in healing, yet, general descriptions of mindfulness vary with each investigator and there is no consensus on components or processes.

Team designs MBSR and MCBT standardized techniques to study mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. The practice teaches patients decentring, recognising mood swings, being reflective (not impulsive) to emotions and bodily sensations. The program consists of an 8- weeks with two hours session per week. An achievement of successful prevention of relapse based on clinical criteria is recorded.

Another clinical study is published by PMC, US- 'Mindfulness Interventions for people Diagnosed with a Current Episode of an Anxiety or Depressive Disorder: A Meta- Analysis of Randomised Controlled Trials' by Clara Strauss and team in 2014. Pubmed has many articles published by psychologists and neurologists. Sapna Oberoi and team studies 'Association of Mindfulness- based Interventions with Anxiety Severity in Adults with Cancer: A systematic Review and Meta- Analysis.

We can list a lot of researches on Buddhist meditation such as-

1. 'Different Patterns of Sleep-Dependent Procedural Memory Consolidation in *Vipassanā* Meditation Practitioners and Non-meditating Controls' by Elizaveta Solomonova and team.²¹
2. 'The effectiveness of mindfulness meditation for nurses and nursing students: An integrated literature review' by Pamela V an der Riet and team.
3. 'A Study of *Vipassanā* Meditation Adolescent Behaviour Pattern' - PhD thesis by Raja Radhi etc.
4. There are some papers presented in seminars by eminent scholars and psychologists of 20th century such as- 'Anapana Meditation for Children' by Adaviyappa, S.: Research paper presented in seminar held by *Vipassanā* Research Institute, 1994
5. The Value of Anapana and *Vipassanā* in Psychological and Psychosomatic illnesses, by Ayyar, K. S.: Paper presented in seminar
5. on *Vipassanā* Meditation for relief from addictions and better health conducted by *Vipassanā* Research Institute, Igatpuri, 1990 etc.

All the researches about Buddhist meditation bring out these facts-

- Helps in reducing high blood pressure, migraine,
- Helpful in insomnia, depression and anxiety
- Increases ability to process information
- Slower the cognitive effects of aging
- Reduce inflammation in body
- Supports the immune system

➤ Reduces symptoms of menopause

➤ Controls brain's response to pain

Among all the Buddhist meditation types, mindfulness meditation and insightful meditation needs continuous sitting in a posture. Other meditations can be developed throughout a day. As they are more of a mind- training about 'what to think and how to think'. Off course, they are not as simple as they look superficially. Developing the right thinking is the most difficult part of meditation. it demands rigorous observation and deep understanding of four *aryasatyas*.

In mindfulness and insightful meditations, meditator may face few emotional burst- outs or some other pains. These are the common complaints beginners and experienced meditators have-

➤ Pain in knees

➤ Pain in hip- joint

➤ Emotional break- down

➤ Bursting out in tears during meditation

➤ Facing deep fears and depressions

Conclusion

Body is an ocean of sensations. Pains in body parts while meditating is an indicator or a signal body gives to fetch our attention towards it. Many subtle sensations also emerge in deep concentration. Body and mind are impulsive for acting upon these signals.

It is noticeable that Buddhist meditation teaches us not to suppress these outer or inner sensations. Instead, a meditator must observe them and watch them with equanimity and patience. Sensations rise and fade away. Each sensation is impermanent. From an itching to an emotional break- down, no sensation is everlasting. Buddhist meditation helps in learning this fact of nature and a meditator can be at peace with this wisdom.

However, scientists and doctors prescribe not to replace medication with meditation. It is also not the substitute of lifestyle changes like eating healthier food, managing weight, getting physical activities or a medical treatment. In certain cases of grave illnesses, Buddhist meditation can be helpful and gradually medication can be stopped.

If we ask any meditator in the world, 'why does he/ she meditate?' the answer would definitely be 'for calmer mind, peace and happiness'. Happiness is the stimuli behind all human actions. We earn money for happiness, we marry for happiness, we even love our parents/ children for our own happiness. There are four major hormones which control happiness. Endorphin aka 'happy hormone', causes the happy feeling. Exercises, meditation in early morning, walking etc. generate endorphins in body. *Vipassanā* is a great way to increase this hormone. Second hormone,

serotonin is a mood stabilizer. Deficiency in the hormone causes extreme mood swings, anger and further depression. Praying for the wellbeing can increase levels of serotonin. *Metthā* or *Maitri* is a way of Buddhist meditation which induces the basic and wide-spread goodwill for others- living as well as for non-living beings. Hormones play a big role in the mental state. There is a vast scope in this field for research and study.

Yet, these researches, studies, articles or theses look upon physical and mental aspects of Buddhist meditation. Spiritually, for all meditation process, primary aim is the freedom from the suffering. Sigmund Freud says, most people do not really want freedom because freedom involves responsibility and most people are frightened of responsibility. Being a meditator includes understanding the responsibility of own life and *kamma*. While the improvements in mental and physical state is a by- product of Buddhist meditation, the most desired effect on the human mind is complete freedom- 'attaining *nibbāṇa*'.

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- ¹⁰ Pariyatti- theoretical knowledge
- ¹¹ Paṭipatti- Practice/ applied aspect of theoretical knowledge
- ¹² *Kāyā, citta* - Dīgha Nikāya 33.1.10, Pg. no 48, translated by Walshe, 1995, p. 486; and, Majjhima Nikāya 36, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2001, Pg. no 332-343. Muditā- AN 4.41, MN 44, *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, Pg. no 179-183 MN 62, Mahārāhulovāda sutta, Pg. no 248-250
- ¹³ Four Sublime States of Mind by Nanaponika Thera, 1994, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html>
- ¹⁴ *Kāyā* means body. In this type of meditation, limbs and organs are to be observed. *Kāyānupassanā* and *Vedanānupassanā* i.e., observation of body and bodily sensations along with mental sensations are observed. *Citta* means consciousness. Mastering the body and sensations, meditator observes his own mental formations and fabrications. This meditation needs more practice and experience. (MN, 10, Satipatthāna Sutta, Translated by Tripitakacharya Rahul Sankrutyayan, Published by Mahabodhisabha, Banaras, 1933. Pg. no 35-40)
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