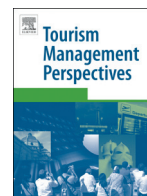




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Meditation retreats: Spiritual tourism well-being interventions

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ABSTRACT

Meditation retreats now constitute a notable sub-section of the tourism industry, with examples found around the world. Despite this, meditation retreat tourism remains largely undocumented in scholarly literature. Findings from research of an overlapping phenomenon, spiritual tourism, suggest certain motivational themes may have great utility for helping to understand meditation retreat tourism practices. Notably absent from this research, however, is scientific investigation of the outcomes for tourists. Since the early 2000s, meditation has rapidly increased in popularity and social status, and is now promoted as a health and well-being practice. This paper uses literature on spiritual tourism, meditation practice outcomes, and well-being to argue that meditation retreat tourism functions as a self-administered well-being intervention. With this conceptual understanding, researchers can locate meditation retreat tourism within Western socio-historical discourse, and situate the phenomenon within the field of well-being studies so that these issues may be further investigated in their social and historical contexts.

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1. Introduction

In many Buddhist community groups, meditation retreats are understood as opportunities for individuals to refine their meditation practice, and therein develop habits to promote well-being. Meditation is taught variously as a technique of personal insight, emotional stability, and psychological ease. Since the mid-1970s, leaders in Western Buddhist traditions and offshoots have been writing and teaching about the benefits of habitual meditation practice for both the self and for others with whom meditators relate (Goldstein & Kornfield, 2001; Kornfield, 1993; Salzberg, 2004). During the same period, popular interest in Buddhism and particularly in meditation practices has increased. Meditation training is now available in most urban centres, and, thanks to substantial media coverage and celebrity endorsement, the teachings of Buddhist meditation leaders are widely available. Retreats, which are typically periods of intensive meditation practice undertaken in a setting away from one's normal daily routine, offer practitioners an opportunity to hone their methods of self-understanding, regulation, and orientation.

There has recently been intense scientific interest in the psychological and physiological effects of meditation practices, yet relatively little attention has been paid to their social and cultural dimensions. Scientific literature on meditative practices includes topics as varied as immune function (Davidson et al., 2003), stress (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner,

1998), attention (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008), working memory (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010), immune cell telomerase activity (Jacobs et al., 2011), and improved socioemotional functioning (Sahdra et al., 2011). There is also a developing interest in the phenomenological explication of meditative practices (Lutz, Jha, Dunne, & Saron, 2015), and in negative outcomes (e.g. Rocha, 2014). Along with interest in Buddhist meditation practices, the field of 'mindfulness research', which has similarly produced findings implicating meditative practice in positive social and emotional outcomes (Shapiro et al., 1998). Importantly, both mindfulness training traditions and many meditative practices understand 'mindfulness' as an attribute of consciousness, and that scientific research has associated with well-being through declines in stress and mood disturbance (Brown & Ryan, 2003). While these findings point towards potential benefits for those engaged in meditative practices, the majority of this research has ignored retreats, despite the fact that many Buddhist and mindfulness traditions emphasise their importance. That meditation retreats are also tourism phenomena, involving staying away from home for more than one night (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2010) and taking place in non-work time, opens up possibilities for researchers seeking to understand their socio-cultural aspects. Insofar as meditation training can be seen to offer individuals the chance to develop their capacities to live psychologically and emotionally healthy lives, retreats, as periods of concentrated learning and practice thereof, ought to be phenomena of interest for understanding subjective well-being in social context.

In *Spiritual Tourism*, Norman (2011) argued that tourism practices driven by a desire for self-improvement or that were characterised by

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a desire to seek answers to problems in life, often coincided with religious practice. In the 20th century, humanistic psychological discourse developed the value of individual human experience for wellbeing enhancement, and writers like Maslow (1994, p. 4) emphasised the “spiritual values” inhered in the science of psychology. Scientific enquiry was transformed into a mechanism of human spiritual development. This broad movement coalesces into what has more recently been called “self-spirituality” (Heelas, 1996, p. 2) or “spiritualities of life” (Heelas, 2008), that has as its core value and aim the betterment of individuals and through them all humanity. As Graburn (1989, p. 24) noted, tourism too is associated with “mental and physical health, social status, and diverse, exotic experiences”. What Norman (2011, 2012) called ‘spiritual tourism’ was a product of the confluence of these social forces coincident with the secularisation of Western societies, which, among other things, forced religious expression and activity into the non-work or leisure sphere. Leisure time has become the space in which individuals pursue their spiritual goals, which may include projects of personal meaning and purpose in life, and questions about identity. In other words, spiritual tourism as Norman defined it, is a practice of subjective well-being work.

This article is a discussion of the literature on subjective well-being and meditation retreats through the conceptual framework of spiritual tourism. Western Buddhist meditation retreats, when understood as spiritual tourism phenomena, provide subjective well-being researchers with opportunities to investigate community-based well-being practices. In particular, the gap in well-being research regarding community-based understandings of ‘being well’ is outlined, and work from contemporary philosophers of happiness and well-being is used to focus scholarly and scientific attention on practices of ‘reflective life’ concerns. As there is limited research specifically on Buddhist meditation retreat practices, the aim of this study is to argue for greater attention to be paid to them, and equivalent practices in other community groups, so as to better understand the social dimensions of well-being.

2. Subjective well-being

The topic of well-being is of increasing interest for governments, policy makers, and community groups around the world (Taylor, 2013). Daily life-based strategies, as opposed to economic ones, are gaining attention as providing effective well-being maintenance outcomes (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). Research on well-being indicates that simple interventions encouraging reflection or reconsideration of one’s life may be important in maintaining well-being, but understanding of how these work in social context is still in its infancy (Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2014). The concept of spiritual tourism serves as a useful example with which to flesh out the notion of well-being as practiced reflexivity. Understanding spiritual tourism as a well-being intervention gives researchers interested in subjective well-being useful access points for research. With these, researchers can begin to look at the ways communities and individuals self-consciously attempt to maintain and increase their own sense of being well.

Underpinning research on what is called ‘subjective well-being’ is the question of what makes a good life, and, therefore, how our lives might go were we to engage in activities thought to be or to produce such goods. Recent research has demonstrated the influence social connections have on both physical and psychological health (Rhodes, 2004; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). Being around others tends to be a positive experience, as people report higher positive and lower negative affect when they are socializing (Pavot, Diener, & Fujita, 1990), along with greater overall happiness (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). People in a positive, happy mood are then, in turn, motivated to engage in social activities (Whelan & Zelenski, 2012) and are more likely to interact with others in ways that are deeper and more meaningful (Berry & Hansen, 1996). Over time these interactions likely give rise to better quality and closer relationships. In contrast, people who are lonely or lack these social connections are at greater risk of developing depression

(Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). As such, the relationship between social connections and well-being operates as a positive feedback loop (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013), wherein beneficial social relations lead to greater well-being, which in turn fosters the cultivation of high quality relationships.

Given the importance of social relationships to well-being, cultivating well-being would appear to require exploring factors that facilitate healthy relationships with others. It is clear that emotions play a central role in virtually all aspects of human experience, including our interactions with others (Dolan, 2002; Lazarus, 2006), and emotional states can be contagious and spread between individuals (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Individuals who are better able to read and regulate the emotional states of others as well as of themselves – what has been referred to as emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) – are more socially skillful and have better relationships with others (Schutte et al., 2001). This process involves two different aspects: one, broadly construed, is empathy, or sharing in the emotional experience of another, which involves being able to take the perspective of the other person (Davis, 1980). The other is emotion regulation, which can be conceptualized as the ability to respond appropriately and flexibly to situational demands, including the management of what emotions are experienced and how they are expressed over time (Gross, 1998). Thus, the maintenance and flourishing of close relationships is linked to skilful regulatory and perspective-taking abilities (Gross, 2002; Lopes, Salovey, Côté, & Beers, 2005; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010; Schutte et al., 2001).

On the surface it may seem that increasing the amount of pleasure and/or positive affect of an individual necessarily results in high well-being. However, the inability to regulate positive affect is associated with mania (Giovannelli, Hoerger, Johnson, & Gruber, 2013), and striving for moments of pleasure can actually result in personal disappointment, loneliness, and depressive symptoms (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2014; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011; Mauss et al., 2012). Seeking constant pleasure is also not consistent with the experience of daily life, in which one must bear emotional highs and lows, successes and disappointments, affirmations and slights, all; “a mingled yarn, good and ill together” as Shakespeare put it. In fact, it may be more important that one experiences a mix of both positive and negative emotions, particularly during challenging events (Adler & Hershfield, 2012). Such experiences often provide meaning, which has also been connected with well-being (Schueller & Seligman, 2010). It is more likely, therefore, that ‘a good life’ entails flexibility and balance in weathering the positive and negative, as well as having the skills to correct affective imbalance when it is experienced. Furthermore, well-being is about more than momentary pleasure and/or positivity, and is generally understood to consist of the amalgam of moment-to-moment experience, reflective assessment of one’s experiences of life overall, and one’s general outlook on life (Stone et al., 2013), which are characterised as experienced, evaluative, and eudaimonic well-being respectively.

Philosophically, well-being is connected with considerations of prudential value, which is the notion of what is ‘good for’ a person, as distinct from aesthetic value, moral value, and so on. Prudential value, however, is not the same as well-being (Tiberius, 2015). Where a well-being assessment typically involves a judgment about the state of a person (they are doing well, now or overall), prudential value involves a judgment about what might or might not be ‘good for’ a person, but it is not necessarily about people. That is, we might say that *sauna* has prudential value for a particular person, meaning that we judge it to be something that tends to make that person’s life go better (for the curious, see Tsonis, 2016). It is not, nor does it imply, a judgment about that person’s overall well-being. Things with prudential value are, however, things that contribute to making life go well for a person. Furthermore, prudential value can be intrinsic, in that it makes that person’s life go better, or instrumental in that it gives a person a skill/mechanism/opportunity to make their life go better in the future.

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