



Management and Exploration of Physical & Mental Health Changes in Practitioners of Spirituality

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Abstract

Spirituality is found to impact both physical and mental health. This study explores how spiritual experiences not only bring about health-related changes but result in experiential understanding. Data regarding the spiritual experiences are systematically gathered and analyzed by collecting qualitative data using the semi-structured interview method and from published literary sources. The final sample consisted of a total of 31 subjects with 15 spiritual practitioners from literary sources, and 16 (8 female; 8 male) who are current practitioners of spirituality. They belonged to 24 different traditions. The subjects were between the ages of 15 to 78 years. After analyzing the data using thematic analysis the experiences of happiness have been studied further. The numerous experiences of the subjects regarding the various hues and levels of happiness were studied in light of the physical and mental changes. The experiences make the mind get immersed gradually and lead it to overcome its limitations, enabling the practitioner to experience indescribable bliss. This helps them to gain an experiential understanding of some philosophical truths and improve both physical and mental wellbeing.

Disciplinary: Applied Psychology, Yoga, Mental Healthcare & Management, Religion & Belief.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Information

Spiritual practices such as prayer, yoga, meditation have been scientifically studied and their efficacy in improving physical and mental health has been established to some extent. The mystical

experiences are experienced by many people the world over, irrespective of their background. It is interesting to study how the actual experiences by the spiritual seekers help in the management of both physical and mental health. Anecdotal references and the latest research suggest that such experiences leave positive impacts on the experiencer, usually by bringing about changes in their thinking and lifestyles as reflected in leading healthier and happier lives. According to Bhagavad Gita (5.24) people who are happy within themselves and enjoy the delight of God within are illumined by the inner light. Such people seem to be experiencing transformative changes that result in better management of physical and mental health.

2 Review of Literature

Numerous physical and mental changes are documented both in scientific as well as in classical textual references in spirituality practitioners. It has been found that sometimes they tend to encounter the release of repressed unconscious thoughts, emotions, and images especially while meditating which brings about this transformation [1, 2]. Thematic content analysis of the meditation data collected by Lindahl et al. (2017) yielded 59 categories of experiences across 7 domains, including cognitive, perceptual, affective, somatic, conative, sense of self, and social [3]. Actual meditation data that focused specifically on meditative replays of past life events used a semi-structured interview method and gathered data about positive, neutral, and negative life events that surfaced during meditation [4]. These replays happened in an episodic manner and occurred in more than one meditation session sometimes. The replays seemed to have stopped once cognitive reappraisal had happened and the individual no longer had issues.

Similar studies which collected qualitative data focused on different aspects. For example, Full et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study and attempted to analyze the alterations in perception that take place in practitioners of tranquility and insight meditation [5]. By conducting semi-structured interviews with meditators in Burma the researchers identified four categories of alterations in perception. They are: increase in the quality of perception, comprehension of interdependences in perception processing, cessation of subject/object-based perception, and nonconceptual perception. Strick et al. (2012) conducted two experiments to test if meditation increases access to unconscious information.[6] Some of the zen meditators were asked to meditate immediately prior to the experiment, whereas others were asked to engage in a relaxing activity. In both the experiments short-term effects of meditation were tested, wherein the Remote Associates trails were used to test accessibility to unconscious material. The results showed that zen meditation facilitated improved access to the unconscious. The authors concluded that meditation leads to a 'greater correspondence between attention and the contents of consciousness'.

Some studies focused on the changes in the practitioners of spirituality that can be linked to the process of cognitive reappraisal and emotional re-experience of life events.[7] Meditation was found to promote congruence between implicit and explicit self-esteem. Emotional regulation was found to enhance due to the practice of meditation and was experimentally investigated in recent studies.[8] Research shows that those who use cognitive reappraisal have better physical health,

mental health, and improved social functioning [9, 10]. It is interesting to study how spirituality practices help in the management of not only mental health but also physical health. In this study, such an attempt is made by focusing on the happiness experiences of spirituality since it involves both physical and mental changes in the practitioners, who belonged to different spiritual traditions.

3 Method

The sample of this study was selected both from literary sources and current practitioners of spirituality. Autobiographies of spiritual practitioners who followed Indian spiritual traditions and had listed a sufficient number of experiences were the basis for the literary sources. After initial exploration of the local spiritual traditions, the current practitioners of spirituality were selected. Personal visits to different spiritual centers were made and after collecting details regarding the traditional history, the purpose of the present study was shared with them, and willingness to either participate or suggest suitable practitioners was sought. The final participants were selected after initial informal interviews with several members of the traditions who are in regular spiritual practice for more than two years, willing to share their spiritual experiences, and have a considerable number of spiritual experiences.

The final sample a total of 31 subjects with 15 spiritual practitioners from literary sources, and 16 (8 female; 8 male) who are current practitioners of spirituality. They belonged to 24 different traditions. The subjects were between the ages of 15-78 years. The duration of spiritual practice ranged from 6 years to more than 30 years (for more details see [11]). After a careful and thorough reading of select books, the meditative and non-meditative spiritual experiences mentioned by the authors were collected. Firstly, each literary source was given an initial reading with an open mind and enjoying the contents of the book. At this stage, the spiritual experiences and the investigator's reactions were mentally noted. After ascertaining that the autobiographical book had a considerable number of spiritual experiences then a thorough reading was initiated. During this reading, the personal and traditional details were identified to the extent to which they are mentioned. The spiritual experiences were excerpted along with noting the 'reactions and feelings of the investigator.

On the other hand, data from the actual subjects were collected by way of semi-structured interviews. For this purpose, lead questions/topics were identified and developed into a format, the Spiritual Experiences Record which covered personal details of the subject and particulars about the spiritual tradition followed in addition to a summary of the current spiritual practices apart from focusing on meditative and non-meditative personal spiritual experiences of the subject. Few questions/items on the impacts of such spiritual experiences are also included.

4 Result and Discussion

The data collected from both literary sources and the current practitioners of spirituality was subjected to thematic analysis. Experiences relevant to happiness/bliss that led to physical and

mental changes were segregated and presented here. Both the physical and psychological changes that were brought about by these mystical experiences were highlighted.

4.1 Impact of Indescribable Happiness

The practitioners of this study shared that some of their happiness-related experiences are indescribable. Raju (all names of actual subjects were changed) is a Sri Ramachandra Mission follower that propagates the Sahaj Marg or the Natural Path. During the second transmission or pranahuti session, Raju had a blissful experience that was so intense that even though he was walking in the hot mid-day sun, he felt like he was in the moonlight. According to him, 'on that day I came back home. Then my mind experienced a lot of happiness that was overwhelming. I cannot express the immense joy I experienced.' These experiences are validated by classical texts which explain that the spiritual practitioners will feel that, 'This is it - Thus they recognize the highest, indescribable happiness' (Katha Upanishad, 5.14) [12].

Happiness experience was also felt like the 'highest' by several subjects. Jyoti, a follower of the bhakti path, stated that her happiness experience was superior to any other blissful happy experiences she has experienced before. In her words: 'I felt like I am getting entangled like a creeper onto a tree, with this particular 'feeling'...this feeling has no form, or solidity and is not being comprehensible.' Similarly, Lorraine Walshe, who is a devotee of Shirdi Sai Baba, wrote about how she felt when she was looking at His picture, 'I was stupefied. He was there looking at me, the light, the flesh, the eyes. My tears rolled, having never experienced such a blissful, full godly darshan' (seeing a holy person) [13]. Reddy who happened to learn kundalini mantras with chakra meditation from a local guru and had numerous happiness experiences summarized, 'Happiness means.... it has no expression at all!' Thus, the indescribable joy or bliss the subjects felt brought about physical and mental positive changes in them.

4.2 Impact of Guru Experiences

Guru Gita from the Skanda Purana, empathetically states that the Guru is the very form of happiness that leads the disciples to immortality. He/she can also transfer the bliss to others and make them experience a taste of the Supreme bliss. This experience can motivate the followers to make further efforts and achieve this state by themselves. It can also heal them physically and mentally as was the experience of a recently widowed Kamala a follower of Anushtana Yoga Vedanta tradition. According to her while looking and listening to her Guru, she was healed thus: 'I used to feel as if something from him is coming and healing my heart. It used to be very cool and I used to experience happiness...felt contented.' The Guru's presence and touch even if in a dream or in a vision can be as influencing. Jyoti explained her dream experiences: 'In that, I saw guruji. He touched me with one finger. Then I felt electricity-like energy pass through my whole body. My body has shivered, I was in ecstasy for some time.' Such energy experiences bring in many changes both physically and cognitively.

Champaklal, a close devotee of Sri Aurbindo and The Mother, experienced immense happiness when he saw The Mother in one of his visions, He wrote, 'It seemed to me as if the Mother were standing and looking at me from the window. I was so happy to see it (Her) and was enjoying it very much' [14]. The Guru in his/her own silent incomparable style ignites the spark of devotion in the disciple. As the disciple progresses, the intensity of this love for the Guru increases. Swami Yogananda wrote about the changes that happened to him when he was looking into the eyes of his guru: 'A blissful wave engulfed me; I was conscious that the Lord, in the form of my guru, was expanding the small ardours of my heart into the incompressible reaches of cosmic love' [15].

4.3 Awakened Energies

Yoga texts state that the spark of divinity lies sleeping at the base of the spine termed kundalini. It is widely held belief that when kundalini energy is awakened it might lead to several physical and mental changes. Gopi Krishna wrote, 'the state of exalted and extended consciousness permeated with an inexpressible, supermundane happiness, which I experienced on the first appearance of the serpent fire in me' [16]. Swami Satyananda Saraswati observed that when kundalini is awakened many physical changes take place. For example, the cells in the body are completely charged and a process of rejuvenation starts whereby the voice, smell of the body, and hormonal secretions change. [17] This seems to be exactly the experience of Adi Da Samraj, a follower of Swami Muktananda, who stated that he had heightened energy levels. 'The energy in my body was overwhelming, and there was an ecstasy in every cell that was almost intolerable in its pressure, light, and force' [18].

Mrs. Jyoti explained that during the Kundalini experiences, her body had shuddered right from all the cells filled with physical and mental ecstasy. In the Mahanirvana Tantra (VII. 39-41), it is said that one who worships the Mistress (Kundalini) of the three worlds, become like Brihaspati (guru of Celestials) in learning and in wealth like Kubera (God of wealth), which implies that there is transformation at all levels.

4.4 Perceptual Experiences – Light

The philosophical texts made it clear that the human being is in fact connected to that light and it is the same light that shines in everyone. According to Chandogya Upanishad (3:13:7), 'there is a Light that shines above this heaven, above all worlds, above everything that exists in the highest worlds beyond which there are no higher--this is the Light that shines within man'. [12] This was reflected in the experience of Rama Rao who described his experience while he was looking at the deity, Lord Venkataraman. He wrote, 'Suddenly, it was only light everywhere, and no idol to be seen. Even my body disappeared to merge with the fabulous effulgence. I was totally immersed in inexplicable bliss' [19].

One of the interviewees, Rajeswarai who is presently a follower of Anustana Yoga Vedanta tradition, mentioned that during meditation she first sees a small dot of light that eventually envelops her whole body and fills her with joy. Swami Yogananda also experienced happiness after

a vision of Supreme light which has inspired him to seek more. He wrote in his book how his vision of light has impacted him thus: ‘out of the slow dwindling of my divine ecstasy, I salvaged a permanent legacy of inspiration to seek God’ [15]. Srirama Sharma, a devotee of Mata Gayatri, experienced light that enveloped his full body and led him to experience joy. He wrote, ‘I started experiencing that my entire self had become a field of light, a column of fire; and divine nectar was flowing through each and every cell of my body, my entire being’ [20]. Adi Da Samraj, on the other hand, felt energy, light, and bliss happening together when he wrote, ‘It was an expanding sphere of joy from the heart. And I was a radiant form, a source of energy, bliss, and light in the midst of what is entirely energy, bliss, and light’ [18].

4.5 Transformative Physical and Mental Changes

The classical texts mention that the higher spiritual experiences will lead the practitioner to transformation both at the physical and mental levels. Specifically, there is a change in the worldview since they begin to ‘see more, feel more, and understand more.’ The awakening of inner energies will result in the activation of brain centers that are hitherto not active resulting in transformative changes. The Tejobindu Upanishad affirms that ‘the great one of the nature of bliss, that which illuminates all luminaries, the ‘wise who perceive Him’ come to realize that ‘this is it’ (Katha Upanishad). [12] The spiritual experiences collected in this study showed that some of them reveal the ‘hidden truths’ and lead the practitioner to higher realms of Consciousness by bestowing upon them ‘Divya Cakshusu’ (Divine eyes that can perceive and cognize more). Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa explained this lucidly as, “Mahabhava – that is, divine ecstasy – disturbs the body and the mind violently. It is like a big elephant pushing its way into a straw cottage. The whole house is shaken.” [21]

As a result, the practitioner experiences many changes in both the body and the mental states. They also get to experientially understand certain philosophical truths which are otherwise not understandable. This seems to be happening to most of them in a gradual manner, viz., first they experience happiness and then the happiness spreads to each and every cell of their bodies, as was narrated in earlier excerpts. Later or in the same spiritual experience, the happiness spreads around them and they also seem to lose body consciousness around this time. Eventually, some practitioners progress to deeper experiences of cosmos visions and finally an experience of ‘That’ and, ‘I am that’ in various manners and intensities.

Swami Jnanananda wrote in his book the Saint and the Scientist that, “I would lose complete body sensation experiencing the bliss of being one with Lord Sri Krishna, my beloved Lord”. [22] Shalini summarized, “when bliss flows it is God”. The world is then forgotten during this feeling of union. Swami Vivekananda expressed that when on the behest of Sri Ramakrishna, he went to see the Mother in the temple hoping to ask her for boons, he was transported into another world upon beholding her and ‘this world was forgotten.’[23] A similar experience was shared by Raju as ‘when

I am in that happiness I had no relation with this world. I felt that the joy is bouncing. I did not remember any issues of the family or friends or anything else’.

Giridhar of the Anustana Yoga Vedanta Tradition once experienced an ecstatic state and he shared, “at that time I actually felt ‘I’ am not doing the movements but could ‘see’ that the ‘body’ is doing”, wherein he experienced the true Self which is not the body and could perceive it as a separate entity. Mr. Niranjana of the same tradition had the experience of Sakshibava. While meditating, he used to move out of his body and could see it ‘face-to-face’ from the outside; wherein he became the seer and his body, the seen. Paul Brunton, the disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi wrote how he emerged as a new being during the spiritual experience and could see-through this world, ‘I touch, as in a flash, the meaning of this mysterious universal drama which is being enacted in space, and then return to the primal point of my being. I, the new I, rest in the lap of holy bliss’ [24].

‘It is a glimpse of the Great Beyond, a taste of the Holy Manna, Immortality. It was a moment of Cosmic Joy, the Bliss of the Beyond where I was lifted to the Heights and all-time disappeared. As the mind began to melt, I was left in Tune with the Infinite’.[22] This was how Swami Omkar of the Shanti Ashram, wrote. As the mind has ceased its activity, he could experience Divine Consciousness. Gopi Krishna explained that he was no longer “a small point of awareness confined in a body, but instead was a vast circle of consciousness” and he was bathed in light experiencing immense bliss.[16] Such higher-level experiences bring about total transformation of the individual at various levels. They can relate to other beings around them since their sense of individuality gets expanded and encompasses the whole creation.

5 Conclusion

According to the results of this study, once a person entered the spiritual realm experiencing bliss will have become a part of the process, especially if one learned to tap into the Super Conscious States. This study has thus shown that the followers of spirituality, whatever their tradition is, seem to be experiencing happiness at all stages of their sadhana. Unlike the popular belief that spirituality is a hard route where one needs to sacrifice happiness, adopting the spiritual practices lead one to a healthier and happier life. This can motivate more people to adapt to this mode of life.

This study showed that happiness or rather traces of this everlasting ‘imperishable’ happiness, is experienced while on the path, and in fact, such experiences motivate the seekers in intensifying their practices, bring about transformative changes in them, and lead them to higher realms of consciousness. The spiritual experiences that especially involve happiness, make the mind get immersed gradually and lead it to lose its hold, enabling the practitioner to experience indescribable bliss, which is the highest. This otherworldly experience helps them to have an experiential understanding of philosophical truths which are otherwise difficult to discern. Rabindranath Tagore summarized beautifully, “When one knows thee, then alien there is none,

then no door is shut. Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the one in the play of many” [25].

This study is an important contribution to understanding how some practitioners of spirituality experience positive physical and mental health changes. It showcased the actual process of this change and thus serves as an explanation to scientific findings of the huge changes in the brain by neuroscience studies. However, future studies should include more samples and try to include spirituality practitioners from other faiths.

6 Availability of Data and Material

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding authors.

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