

ABSTRACT



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Forward to the Roots

Evaluation of a Non-Religious Workshop Program Inspired by Original Buddhist Sources

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It is the goal of this thesis to examine whether a non-religious workshop program inspired by original Buddhist sources is a useful tool to improve the quality of life.

1. Introduction

Could there be a new reception of Buddhism that would combine the best of two worlds: the experience with the mind that has been preserved in the Buddhist religious traditions and the straightforward approach of Western scientific thinking?

The first step in the author's project was to standardize a workshop program on the issue:

In Which Way Can Buddhism independent from religious elements be taught as a practical method of improvement of the quality of life?

With regard to standardization, Buddhist source material was studied, evaluated by Original Source Cross Referencing and interpreted in a transcultural context. In the process of standardization of the working program, the author was supported by his training in Tibetan Buddhism including 14 years in a Buddhist monastery. Details on this first step are given in Appendix I.

The second step of the project referred to the issue:

Will people who are confronted with the workshop program on non-religious Buddhist methods perceive them as beneficial?

2. Methods: Expert Interviews and Participants' Evaluation

Two methods are used to examine the effects of the workshop program on a non-religious approach to Buddhism: Expert Interviews and Participants' Evaluation. The base material for both the interviews and the workshop can be found in Appendix II.

Expert Interviews

Four different experts from the fields of psychology, clinical psychology, management-training, coaching and Buddhism were interviewed. They received an abstract of a standardized workshop on non-religious Buddhism (4 pages, Appendix II) and were asked to comment it freely, to give their impressions and state their opinion, give commentaries and point out what was not clear or not comprehensible to them. They were also invited to ask questions that arise from reading the text.

Participants' Evaluation

A total of 25 university students have participated in a 2-day workshop program on non-religious Buddhism. At the end of the workshop, an evaluation sheet was distributed to the participants: They were asked which, if any, benefits they had experienced subjectively.

After that qualitative question, participants are also asked to state their age, their field of study, their gender, whether they had previous experience with meditation, religious practice and Buddhism.

3. Results

Both the experts and the workshop participants saw great benefits in the working program in non-religious Buddhism presented (in the case of the workshop, participants also put the methods into practice). The main benefits perceived by the participants were in the fields of meditation and present moment awareness (mindfulness), self-awareness and self-management and stress-management.

Expert Interviews

The fields where non-religious Buddhist methods could be useful were named by the experts: schooling and academic training, psychotherapy, self-awareness and stress management.

Participants' Evaluation

Overall, 96% of participants had little or no previous meditative experience. Yet 88% do attribute at least one benefit they have obtained in this category. More than three quarters of the participants stated that they had obtained a benefit in the stress-management category which is also due to the focus on stress-management in this workshop.

A very strong feedback concerning self-awareness and self-management made it necessary to create a distinct category for them.

Probably the most stunning result was that 60% of all participants have attributed benefits that were categorized as "New Approaches to Life and Impulses for Change".

4. Implications for the Reception of Buddhism

The study suggests that a "middle way" (between a religious reception of Buddhism and the descriptive scientific approach) can be successfully standardized, e.g. as a workshop program referring to an applied science of life including the essentials in the works of Siddhattha Gotama.

Based on the results there is hope that the reception of Buddhism as a Science of Life will contribute to the well-being of people in modern society. Not presented in the religious context, these methods would be open to skeptic individuals as well as to practitioners of all religions. Seeing Buddhism from a new angle might even bring fresh initiative into the existing forms of Buddhism already established today.