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Indian Edification Needs to Revisit Mindfulness and Sustainability from the Past Education System

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Abstract

The article, delves into the integration of mindfulness and sustainability as fundamental components of India's educational evolution. Rooted in ancient practices of mindfulness from texts like the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and the Yoga Sutras, the article explores their role in shaping ethical and sustainable individuals in harmony with nature. Key contributions include "Mindfulness for Modern Resilience," emphasizing its role in combating rising mental health issues among students, and "Educational Roots in Sustainability," drawing parallels between ancient Indian gurukul systems and contemporary educational needs. Dr. Mishra highlights the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a transformative vision combining ancient wisdom with global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advocating for mindfulness practices to foster mental resilience and environmental stewardship. Through innovative ideas such as integrating mindfulness into curricula and promoting holistic education aligned with cultural heritage, the article underscores the timeless relevance of mindfulness for addressing modern challenges. This scholarly work bridges historical insights with contemporary education policy, offering a blueprint for cultivating compassionate, sustainable, and globally competent citizens.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Sustainability, Past Education System

1. Introduction

Mindfulness has emerged as a cutting-edge concept for Indian students in the twenty-first century due to increased stress, academic pressure, and health concerns, fatal disease, family

strife, deteriorating relationships, past trauma, compulsive thoughts, intense emotion, unavoidable loss and frustration, etc.,

which are determined by education pressure, social outlooks, and the competitive career market. Off late India has been facing significant problems in students' mental health issues as suicide rates among students have increased.

As per National Crime Records Bureau in 2021, over 13,000 students died by suicide, which is tentatively 35 suicides every day. This is a 4.5% increase compared to 2020. A study by the Lancet reported that 89% of Indian teenagers aged 13-17 experience stress in school. According to a survey by The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), 7.5% of Indian children show signs of mental disorders, but stigma prevents them from seeking help. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace Report of 2024 claims that only 13% of Indian employees are happy with their work, but the rest are disgruntled due to lack of resolution, job uncertainty, or weariness.ⁱ The inflexible and extremely competitive system and stressful education examination systems like JEE, NEET, and board exams trigger immense stress. The causes are the academic debacle, career pressure, and family problems. A study published in Mindfulness Journal (2020) found that mindfulness practices advance attentiveness, academic performance, and self-discipline in students.ⁱⁱ Mindfulness practices, such as meditation and breathing exercises, have been proven to reduce cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and enhance emotional regulation. Research in India by NIMHANS (2021) revealed that mindfulness-based interventions reduced depression and anxiety levels in adolescents by over 40%. So, at present, there is change in the Global Corporate world where companies like Google, Infosys, and TCS integrate mindfulness programs to improve employee well-being and productivity.

2. Methodology

The research monologue focuses on the significance of mindfulness and sustainability for students, especially in today's digital and fast-growing world. The research is historical, analytical and based on empirical studies. The paper is based on primary as well as secondary sources. The Buddhist Pali canons like *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* of *Majjhima Nikaya* and *Digha Nikaya*, *Dhammapada* and *Jatak Katha* served as primary sources and various articles on related topics in books and peer-reviewed journals served as the secondary sources. Various case studies of different schools and universities helped in finding a link between the importance of mindfulness in the present time. The paper also highlights as how the necessity of mindfulness has made the government incorporate it in new education policy. The scope of this paper will extend to cover a wider spectrum of the techniques of mindfulness and yoga which can be used by clinical researchers to help afflicted ones with various mental disorders & stressful lives.

3. Historical background

Mindfulness was practiced in ancient Indian educational system long before the Mughal and British periods. Mindfulness techniques have been prominent in ancient Eastern texts. They are an effective recognized technique by Hindus and Buddhists from ancient times. It also has been travelled from East to West. Most of the modern research on mindfulness is essentially based on Hinduism and Buddhist mindfulness techniques. In Hinduism, mindfulness is

described as a part of yoga. On the other side, in Buddhism mindfulness is a center-seated meditation and mindful breathing process commonly known as '*Vipassana*' means discernment meditation and that of *Mudras* as reflected through postures of Budha images. Indian seers, sages, combined mindfulness techniques as part of all-inclusive education in gurukuls (traditional schools) and ashrams (hermitages). This was entrenched in the beliefs and observance of yoga, meditation, and the teachings of texts like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Yogasutras* of Patanjali. These texts emphasize awareness, self-discipline, and the unity of mind and body, which are foundational aspects of mindfulness. The key aspect of mindfulness in the ancient education system was *Dhyan* i.e. ability to develop concentration, mental clarity, and a calm demeanor. Another aspect was self-reflection or *swadhyaya*, a way to make students understand their inner selves and connect with their environment. They also emphasized *Pranayama* i.e. breath awareness. The students right from the beginning were made well versed in mindful conduct, which was called *Yama* and *Niyamas* which included non-violence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), and self-discipline (*tapas*). The sacred repetitive recitation or *Mantra Japa* enabled students to focus on mind and a deep sense of awareness. Apart from Hinduism, it was woven into Buddhism and Jainism which fostered both inner and outer well-being. The various Pali canons substantiate the facts. The students learned to live harmoniously with nature, understanding the balance of ecosystems. In later years when Buddhism came, it taught non-possessiveness and *aprigraha*, community-oriented living, austerity etc. This cohesive approach reverberates stalwartly with contemporary notions of mindfulness and sustainability which signify the eternal knowledge of ancient Indian education.

4. Reference of Mindfulness in Pali literature

The ancient Indian education system did not separate these values into distinct subjects but they aimed at creating mindful, ethical, and environmentally conscious individuals who could contribute to a balanced and sustainable society. There are innumerable examples of mindfulness i.e. Sati in Buddhist Scriptures. In Pali, "*Satipaṭṭhāna*" means "establishment of mindfulness," where "sati" means mindfulness or awareness, and "*paṭṭhāna*" refers to the establishment or foundation. *Satipatthana Sutta* found in the *Majjhima Nikaya* and *Digha Nikaya* of the Pali Canon, is one of the most detailed teachings on mindfulness. It describes four foundations of mindfulness *Kāyānupassanā* i.e. mindfulness of the body, *Vedanānupassanā* which is mindfulness of feelings, *Cittānupassanā*, which is mindfulness of the mind and *Dhammānupassanā* i.e. mindfulness of mental objects or phenomena. Verse 21 says "*Appamado amatapadam*" Meaning: Mindfulness is the path to immortality *Nibbana* or enlightenment while heedlessness leads to death and spiritual decay. Verse 23 in Pali says "*Te jhāyino sātatikā, niccam daḷhaparakkamā Phusanti dhīrā nibbānam, yogakkhemam anuttaram*", means those who are wise and mindful, with clear awareness, experience true liberation. Verse 29 says that "*Appamatto pamattesu suttesu bahujagaro, abalassa mva sighasso hitva yati sumedhaso.*" that means mindfulness leads to joy and security. Verse 36 says "*Sududdasam sunipunam yatthakāma nipātinam Cittam rakkhetha medhāvī cittam guttam sukhāvaham*" i.e. to guard the mind with mindfulness. Verse 39 says

“*anavassutacittassa ananavāhatacetaso, puññapāpapahīnassa natthi jāgarato bhayaṃ*”, Which means just as a person straightens an arrow, mindfulness serves to straighten a mind that is often distracted and unsettled.

By practicing this, one can achieve insight, liberation, and the development of concentration (*samadhi*), leading toward *Nibbana* (enlightenment). The practice encourages the practitioner to observe these four domains without attachment, aversion, or distraction, thereby cultivating wisdom (*prajna*) and inner peace. This sutta is foundational for *Vipassana* meditation practices and is considered one of the most direct and effective paths to insight and liberation in the *Theravada* tradition.

The description of *vipassanā* mentions the seeing, exploring and discerning of activities (*saṅkhārā*). The mention of ‘activities’ here implies the three characteristics—impermanence, suffering, not-self—of phenomena, conditioned according to dependent origination. The meditative discernment of the nature of conditioned reality is the core meaning of *vipassanā*. While this definition may be too narrow for some contexts, still *vipassanā* is commonly used in this sense in the Suttas and in the present day.

Samatha is also related to mindfulness and it means is steadying, settling, and unifying of the mind.

The *Ānāpānasati* Sutta is another important discourse in the Pali Canon, particularly found in the *Majjhima Nikaya*. In Pali *Āna* means inhalation and “*āpāna*” means exhalation, so it refers to the breath, specifically the process of inhaling and exhaling.ⁱⁱⁱ In the sutta, the Buddha outlines 16 steps of breath meditation. The *Ānāpānasati* Sutta is considered essential in the practice of *samatha* (calm) and *vipassana* (insight).^{iv} The *Sigalovada Sutta* from the *Digha Nikaya* offers guidelines on ethical living aligning with sustainable and mindful use of resources for laypeople.

There is another sutta i.e. *Mahāsatipatthana Sutta* which is the great discourse on the foundations of mindfulness. The *ahāsatipatthāna* Sutta also highlights the importance of full awareness in daily activities while walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.^v One can attain deep insights first into the nature of existence i.e. impermanence or *anicca* and secondly on suffering i.e. *dukkha* and thirdly on non-self-i.e. *anatta*.

In the *Dhammapadas* 129-130, there are various verses which emphasize compassion, non-violence, and respect for life, which form the ethical foundation of sustainability. Verse *Dhammapada* 129 says that “*Sabbe tasanti dandassasabbe bhayanti maccuno attanam upamam katva na haneyya na ghataye,*” which means all are afraid of the stick, all fear death. Putting oneself in another's place, one should not beat or kill others. The Jataka tales, the stories of the Buddha's past lives illustrate living harmoniously with nature and other beings. In these teachings, Buddhism weaves together mindfulness and a sustainable, respectful approach to life, encouraging followers to live with awareness, compassion, and a deep sense of responsibility toward all beings and the natural world.

5. Integration of mindfulness in ancient universities curriculum

The concepts and practices related to mindfulness were integral to the learning and spiritual traditions at ancient Indian universities like *Nalanda*, *Vikramashila*, and *Takshashila* before we became victims of enslavement. Although these institutions did not use the term “mindfulness” as it is understood today, they promoted related practices and philosophical

teachings through meditation, self-awareness, and ethical conduct, rooted primarily in Buddhist and other Indian philosophical traditions. Influential Scholars such as *Buddhaghosa*, *Nagarjuna*, and *Dharmakirti* were associated with *Nalanda* and *Atisha* from *Vikramashila* University preached mindfulness. These institutions emphasized not only academic learning but also personal growth, spiritual development, and environmental stewardship. Disciplines like Ayurveda and environmental studies focused on harmony with nature, understanding the interconnectedness of human health and the natural environment. Nalanda taught meditation, ethical behavior, and mental discipline as part of its core philosophy. The Buddhist approach to mindfulness, including awareness of the self and surroundings, was integral to student life.

Although Takshashila's curriculum was broader than Nalanda or Vikramashila's, many of its spiritual and philosophical teachings incorporated the essence of mindfulness. Courses in Ayurveda, ecology, and traditional agricultural practices reinforced the importance of living in balance with nature. Scholars like Panini (linguistics) and Kautilya (author of *Arthashastra*) were associated with Takshashila, where they practiced intellectual precision, discipline, and a mindful approach to study and debate like *Abhidharma* (Buddhist psychology) and Nyaya (logic) cultivated mindfulness by encouraging students to observe and question their perceptions and assumptions carefully. Odantapuri (8th century CE - 12th century CE, India) as a Buddhist center of learning, it trained monks and scholars in meditation and mindfulness techniques rooted in the Buddhist tradition. The knowledge of medicine and ecological practices were part of the education, reflecting the emphasis on sustainable living. These ancient universities set the groundwork for integrating mindfulness and sustainability into education, demonstrating their timeless relevance in addressing contemporary challenges.

6. Modern scholars' views on the significance of mindfulness and sustainability

The need for mindfulness has been felt by various erudite and renowned institutions. The rising frustration, tension and academic pressure have compelled academic institutions to revisit their curriculum. The American Psychological Association (APA) has stated that mindfulness is a moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment. The eminent scholars of the world have emphasized its significance and Jon Kabat-Zinn is one of them. He is called the father of modern mindfulness. His famous book is *Full Catastrophe Living, Wherever You Go, There You Are* Kabat-Zinn introduced the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in the 1970s. His work helped in bringing mindfulness into mainstream medical and psychological practice. The book avers its health benefits for stress reduction and mental health. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, is one of the most influential voices in bringing mindfulness and Buddhist practices to the West. His book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness, Peace is Every Step*, emphasizes mindfulness as a tool for social and personal transformation. Ellen Langer's book, *The Power of Mindful Learning* Hachette, a Harvard psychologist, focuses on mindfulness from a cognitive perspective, emphasizing active engagement and

flexibility in thinking. Her approach differs slightly from traditional mindfulness by highlighting a state of awareness and openness rather than meditation alone.

Mark Williams and John Teasdale, along with Zindel Segal, developed techniques of Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in their book, *Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*, which combines mindfulness practices to prevent relapse in depression. Jack Kornfield's book, *A Path with Heart*, introduced mindfulness and insight meditation (Vipassana) in the U.S. Tara Refuge's book *Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart* voices the significance of mindfulness. These scholars have made significant contributions to the application of mindfulness in psychology, medicine, and education, which in turn has impacted the mental resilience, emotional regulation, and overall well-being of students.

7. Techniques of mindfulness

From ancient times there are many mindfulness techniques and the most popular have been Yoga practices. Yoga as a discipline introduced many techniques out of which some majorly recognized are- ashtanga yoga, hath yoga, raja yoga, karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, tantra yoga, mantra yoga, kundalini yoga, nada yoga, and swara yoga. Three modern mindfulness techniques have been well recognized. These techniques are as follows

- **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction:**

This technique has been introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn. MBSR is a complete eight-week program which includes various other techniques, such as walking, meditation, breathing, body scan and many more.

- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy:**

This technique was first introduced by Marsha

Linehan. DBT also works on the clinical population. It has some primary goals, which are as follows:

- Reduce suicidal and self-harming behaviors.
- Reduce behaviors that interfere with therapy.
- Minimize behavior that reduces the quality of life.
- Teach behavioral skills like core mindfulness, self-management and so on.
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy:

The concept of MBCT was introduced by Segal, Williams and Teasdale. This technique evolved from the idea of the above two techniques of mindfulness. It includes very easy and valuable techniques commonly called "three minutes breathing space" which enables an individual to mindfully think and respond rather than unmindfully react towards anything. Yoga and mindfulness are not only an effective technique for the clinical population but also subclinical population can practice them and prevent themselves from various mental issues.

8. Evaluation of a mindfulness intervention.

Several quantitative and qualitative studies have been done on these complementary techniques which proves that these techniques are an effective intervention psychotherapy which works well in various mental disorders like stress, depression, addiction, suicidal and self-harming behavior, ADHD and many more. Various Schools and universities across

India have started incorporating mindfulness programs to enhance students' emotional resilience, focus, and mental well-being. Below are some notable case studies and examples: The Bluebells School International, New Delhi, Riverside School, Ahmedabad the Heritage School, Gurgaon, Delhi University, The SNDT Women's University, Mumbai has implemented a comprehensive mindfulness program in collaboration with The Mindful Life Project and Mindful Schools. The school conducted regular mindfulness sessions for students, teachers, and staff, emphasizing breathing exercises, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. Many students reported feeling more relaxed, focused, and better equipped to handle stress and academic pressures. Yoga and meditation practices were to help children focus better and reduce behavioral issues. The outcome is positive as the teachers' reported improvements in students' ability to concentrate, reduced anxiety, and a more positive classroom environment. Faculty members also noted increased classroom engagement and participation. Across these case studies, several common outcomes highlight the positive impact of mindfulness in Indian educational settings. It has helped students in improving their focus and attention, reduction in stress and anxiety, enhancing emotional regulation, adaptable to better social dynamics, and in increasing academic dynamics.

9. India's new Education Policy of 2020 and mindfulness

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 incorporates several features of mindfulness and sustainability inspired by ancient Buddhist and Sanatan Dharma traditions. These principles are embedded in the policy which emphasizes on holistic, values-based education for a balanced mind and body, through practices like yoga, meditation and Pranayama. The policies aligned with the Buddhist concept of Right Living and the Sanatan Dharma's harmony with nature. The NEP Proposes environmental education from an early age which will promote practices like waste management, water conservation, and sustainable development projects. There is promotion of the study of Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit, languages which will enable students to have access to rich Buddhist and Sanatan texts on mindfulness, philosophy, and science. The NEP is Inspired by Nalanda and Takshashila models and it has advocated for an interconnected and multidisciplinary approach to education, mirroring the Buddhist centers of learning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2023 offers a prospect to reimagine and revitalize the educational landscape. It aims to transform education in India by promoting holistic development, multidisciplinary learning, and global engagement. These elements of NEP 2020 will be a blend of ancient wisdom and modern educational needs, aiming to nurture mindful, value-oriented, and sustainable development among future generations. Various States in India have implemented NEP since its inception. Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Assam have implemented it. The incorporation of mindfulness and sustainability in Indian curricula under the National Education Policy (NEP) reflects the policy makers. vision for a more holistic, future-oriented, and culturally rooted education system. The reason is mental health and emotional well-being. The rising stress levels among students due to academic pressures, social expectations, and competitive environments have highlighted the need for practices like mindfulness. It is

scientifically proven to enhance emotional resilience, reduce anxiety, and improve focus, which are essential for both academic success and personal growth. NEP recognizes the role of emotional well-being in holistic development, ensuring that students are equipped with skills to manage stress and cultivate self-awareness. It was felt by educational policy makers of India that there should be alignment of education with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) so that Indian education sustainability should align with global priorities, particularly the United Nations' SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). India, as a signatory to these goals, aims to integrate sustainability into education to prepare future generations to tackle environmental challenges. The curriculum aims to develop ecological consciousness and responsible citizenship among students, fostering sustainable practices and innovation. The NEP emphasizes reconnecting with India's rich heritage by promoting Indian knowledge system while making education relevant to contemporary challenges. More than that mindfulness allows for a culturally resonant approach to education that simultaneously addresses modern psychological needs. It was also felt that integration of mindfulness and sustainability would make them globally acceptable. Such rich education equips students with the knowledge and skills to address complex global challenges, such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequities. It will cultivate qualities like empathy, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making, which are crucial in an interconnected world.

Mindfulness and sustainability foster a balance between personal well-being, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. In summary, mindfulness and sustainability are integral to the NEP's vision of creating a forward-looking education system that prepares students to lead meaningful, ethical, and environmentally responsible lives while staying connected to India's cultural roots. The education system in India has evolved significantly over time, reflecting the influence of ancient Gurukul systems, Islamic education during the medieval period, and the introduction of English-medium education during the colonial era. Post-independence, the Indian government has focused on expanding access to education, ensuring free and compulsory education, and addressing educational disparities. While progress has been made, challenges remain in terms of quality, equity, and relevance. Efforts to improve the education system include promoting holistic education, integrating technology, emphasizing research and innovation, strengthening teacher-student relationships, and fostering global exchange and collaboration. The goal is to create a modern education system that combines the best aspects of India's rich educational heritage with contemporary needs, enabling students to thrive and contribute to society. Continued commitment to educational reforms, stakeholder engagement, and investment in infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development are essential for realizing the vision of an inclusive, high-quality, and globally competitive education system in India. By learning from the past and incorporating best practices, India can strive towards meeting the standards set by esteemed centers of learning like Nalanda and Takshashila while catering to the needs of a rapidly evolving world.

10. Conclusion

Mindfulness is a powerful tool that supports not only academic success but also emotional and social development. By fostering resilience, empathy, and focused attention, mindfulness enriches the educational experience and prepares students for the demands of the 21st century. The University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMass), University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Stanford University, Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE) and Harvard University have conducted numerous studies comparing mindfulness practitioners and non-practitioners showing that mindfulness practitioners exhibit enhanced emotional regulation and social connectivity compared to those who do not practice. Mindfulness is not a luxury but a necessity for Indian students in the 21st century. Promoting mindfulness through schools, colleges, and public campaigns can significantly improve the mental and emotional well-being of India's youth, paving the way for a healthier, more balanced generation.

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