

Eroding Mental Proliferation with the Buddhist Mindfulness Curriculum in Adult Education: The Ethnography of Interfaith Meditation

Fuji Riang Prastowo¹

Sociology and Inter-religious Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
fujiriangprastowo@ugm.ac.id

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Abstract

The stressful adult phase in life encourages the emergence of mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. From the Buddhist perspective, the root of depression in adulthood is due to Papancha or mental proliferation, which comes from three bases, namely Tanha (craving), Mana (Conceit), and Ditthi (wrong view). This article uses ethnography from the researcher's reflection notes as a meditation teacher who reconstructs the Buddhist mindfulness curriculum for interfaith meditators. The data collection technique uses contemplative stages with meditation practice, mapping of mind disturbances during meditation, and reflecting on overcoming Papancha with Abhidhamma. This article concludes that first, the differences in Western education are cognitively based in Neoliberalism, while meditation as a universal method is based on the inners. Second, mental proliferation in adulthood is due to the difficulty of living mindfully "here and now," so images of the past and future create anxiety. Third, alienation due to mental proliferation can be overcome with contemplative adult education a emotional intelligence approach.

INTRODUCTION

Meditation, one of the foundations of the Dharma religions from India, has been recognized internationally as a universal interfaith method of overcoming mental problems. From the point of view of Eastern educational philosophy, meditation is a technique for self-study through the inner or soul level, which is inversely proportional to Western education, which is based on the cognitive level, so it can be said that education through meditation works on the emotional level or *Batin*. "*Batin*," which comes from Arabic, can be interpreted literally as "inner" which is against what appears physically or is called *Zahir*. The Western and Eastern worlds once put inners education as the primary goal of adult education during the Ancient Greek era; the emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote a remarkable memoir about "meditation" in 180 AD; Sufis in Arabia since the 10th century believed that every individual has inners as the main essence of human beings, as well as the Dharmic religion of Indians since around 1500 BCE see the mind as an essential element in the doctrine of rebirth.

This article is in line with several studies that see meditation as a universal curriculum that is not affiliated with religious doctrine, especially in the digital era, when meditation is now easily accessible and applied in therapies related to mental health [1] [2]. From here, it became known as "digital dharma," which commodifies meditation in a secular sphere, side by side with "white spirituality" lifestyle trends such as yoga and vegetarianism [3]. The secularization of meditation in the Western world had long occurred when postcolonial knowledge emerged at the end of the 19th century, which encouraged intentions to reconstruct Eastern philosophical knowledge, which is more concerned with the wisdom of life rather than purely cognitive achievements [4].

In the era of neoliberalism, adult education attached to the university system only offers cognitive studies or work-ready skills, which are essential for education to prepare people for the

job market. This fact causes mental illnesses due to competition in cognitive-based Western education. The birth of atheists or agnostics in the United Kingdom then tries to revive the essence of human life at the most basic level, namely about "finding happiness" that comes from within the inners, meaning that humans can be happy without having to obsess over achievement. What drives a climate "positive towards Buddhism," which has an adult education curriculum that is contemplative and useful for mental health problems [5]. A similar study was also conducted in Australia, where several atheist youths studied meditation because the "here and now" principle or attachment to the mindfulness curriculum was considered far more relevant for facing global competition due to neoliberalism [6]. As a result, meditation in the Western world impacts the circulation of mental health understanding worldwide due to the influence of Western hegemony in many aspects [7] [5]. At an advanced level, claims or conversions to become Buddhists are very popular in Western circles as a reconstruction of human life, looking for the essence of happiness in the simple things that they have in the inners of each human being [8].

In line with the studies above, this article places mental health awareness as a driving factor for the movement's birth to commodify meditation as an adult education highly relevant to current needs due to risk competition in the neoliberalism era. From an ethnographic point of view, this article reflects anxiety about the emergence of various mental health problems in this increasingly massive digital era. With an ethnographic approach, the research was carried out experimentally with two approaches: Firstly, the researcher is a Sociology lecturer at UGM and a meditation teacher trying to reconstruct a 2567-year-old curriculum originating from Abhidhamma, which is Gautama Buddha's teachings for interfaith students. Secondly, the researcher uses a contemplative approach by making meditation practice of recognizing mind disorders that are manifestations of anxiety in everyday life, as well as efforts to understand the tendency of mental proliferation in stressful adulthood. Thirdly, the intrapersonal experience in compiling the meditation curriculum is the foundation for understanding the interpersonal experiences of meditators, which is a reflection to build a critical narrative of adult education that counters the concept of neoliberalism.



Figure 1. Photo of Interfaith Meditation Participants with minimum light for one hour in the Karangdjati Monastery
(Source: Researcher Documentation, 2023)

This study was conducted at the Karangdjati Monastery, a melting pot of interfaith followers learning meditation, in June-July 2023. The Karangdjati Monastery, built in 1965, is the oldest temple in the Special Province of Yogyakarta, founded by a Theosophy group with a Kejawen background from the aristocracy. The initial concept of the monastery was built based on the spirit of decolonization when Western education only prepared humans in a work industry based on neoliberalism, and the possessions and material achievements of each human being measured happiness. Historically, in 1958, Bhante Jinaputa, who is a monk from Sri Lanka, once conducted

a Vassa or Rains Retreat for three months at the forerunner of The Karandgjati Monastery, which was a cowshed in the Dutch colonial era—during this period, led by the founder of The Karandgjati Monastery, namely Rama Among Pradjarto, a community of Buddhist reformers was formed to preserve meditation education for "*kebatinan*," which can be translated as inner learners based on Javanese and Buddhist culture. Using an Abhidhamma point of view, this study was deliberately conducted at The Karandgjati Monastery, which is well known as an interfaith melting pot that gathers every Friday night to study meditation. For the record, since May 2023, researchers have been allowed to become meditation teachers who then support this study to be carried out in more depth to understand the characteristics of the mental proliferation of each student.

METHOD

The method used in this study is ethnography, which encourages reflection from participant observation of the researcher's experience with the informants studied whose application in the world of education is intended to understand the social, cultural, and interaction context in the teaching and learning experience [9]. The technique for collecting this method is based on the researcher's personal experience as a meditation teacher for a group of Interfaith students using the teaching-learning method data collection technique, commonly used in educational contexts. The dominant principle of participation in observation is practicing mindfulness by observing during the meditation process which can also be applied in everyday life [10]. The data collection process occurred in May-July 2023 by observing the practice of the curriculum on Mental Proliferation, which was adapted from the Abhidhamma Book in the Tipitaka of Buddhism in the Theravada Tradition. Primary data comes from a question-and-answer process from teacher to student as per the Theravada meditation learning tradition; apart from that, it also comes from students' notes after meditating regarding thought and emotional disturbances that interfere with meditation concentration. The data analysis process is based on reflections on the researcher's experiences, which are constructed to create ideal adult education for interreligious groups based on what is taught in the meditation.

RESULTS

Countering Cognitive Western Education with a Mindfulness Curriculum

In line with Max Weber's concept of 'the calling,' the human spiritual journey depends on the process of life experiences since every human has a subjective view of a problem [9]. The human journey in the era of capitalism to compete with materialism standards causes adulthood to be attached to feelings of loneliness and emptiness. People who are tired of the cycle of capitalism then put up a fight by deconstructing the meaning of what is called success and happiness [10]. Not only are people in the West starting to enjoy meditation as a lifestyle against greed offered by capitalism, but in Buddhist-majority countries such as South Korea and Japan, the process of redefining life with the Zen ethos is also carried out to replay the concept of life to be more contemplative and straightforward. Some well-known Buddhist figures who brought reforms to meditation in the secular realm are Thich Nhat Anh and the Dalai Lama.

Based on the facts above, this study also tries to build a curriculum contrary to Western education principles, which emphasizes only cognitive achievement—fundamental differences obtained from Western and eastern education during the reconstruction of meditation for interfaith meditators. The concept of humans from the perspective of Buddhism emphasizes the doctrine of non-self teaching, which is different from the concept of Western education, which emphasizes the absolute concept of 'self' as the basis for achieving life. In Buddhism, a person is defined as an aggregate consisting of *Nama* (non-physical state) and *Rupa* (physical state), which is only a collection of the *Pañcakkhanda* namely *Rūpakkhanda* (physical aggregate), *Vedanākkhanda* (feeling aggregate), *Saṅkhārakkhanda* (mental formation aggregate), *Saññākkhanda* (the perception aggregate), *Viññānakkhanda* (consciousness aggregate).

TABLE 1. The Concept of Human and Education in Buddhism
 (Source : Reseacher, 2023)

The Concept of Human	<i>Anicca</i> (Impermanence)	<i>Dukkha</i> (suffering)	<i>Anatta</i> (Non-Self)
1. <i>Rupa</i> (Physical)	x	x	x
2. <i>Nama</i> (Combination of Consciousness/ <i>Citta + Cetasika</i> Mental Factor)	x	x	x

The highest essence of education in Buddhism is understanding the highest reality, namely about *Anicca* (impermanence), *Dukkha* (suffering), and *Anatta* (non-self). To realize this, humans need to understand that within themselves consists of two combined elements, namely appearance or physical conditions, and non-physical conditions, namely awareness and mental factors.

“I studied in Scandinavia, initially I felt that the essence of success is getting whatever we dream of as a cognitive achievement. In fact, I often encounter emptiness, loneliness, and solitude. I just realized that everything is constantly changing, including myself, and I am closer to the teachings of Buddhism which teach detachment from the world” (Meditation Student, Female, 37 years).

“As Indonesians, let alone Javanese men, it is as if we are destined to live in the entanglement of the constructions of success as men. If you have everything, will life be happy? Happiness is relative, and only our minds know it; I think there is something wrong with the aim of this education (Meditation Student, nonbinary, 27 years old).

From the two quotes above, some meditation students who attend this class experience fatigue in pursuing cognitive achievements. Hence they seek to renounce the world by understanding the ascetic education offered in Buddhism. In fighting against the Western curriculum, below is a series of curricula used to teach mindfulness, which is the researchers' design based on the tendency of mental health disorders in adulthood.

TABLE 1. Meditation Curriculum on *Papañcasaññāsāṅkha* (Mental Proliferation)

(Source : Researcher, 2023)

Meditation Session	Topics
I	<i>Papancha</i> (mental proliferation)
II	<i>Papancha</i> I : <i>Tanha</i> (craving)
III	<i>Papancha</i> II : <i>Mana</i> (conceit or pride)
IV	<i>Papancha</i> III : <i>Ditthi</i> (wrong view)
V	<i>Papancha</i> observations on Yogi families: a day of <i>vipassana</i> practice using the <i>Kasina</i> according to one's inner character in crowded places



Figure 2. Meditation Poster at the First Meeting (Source : Researcher, 2023)

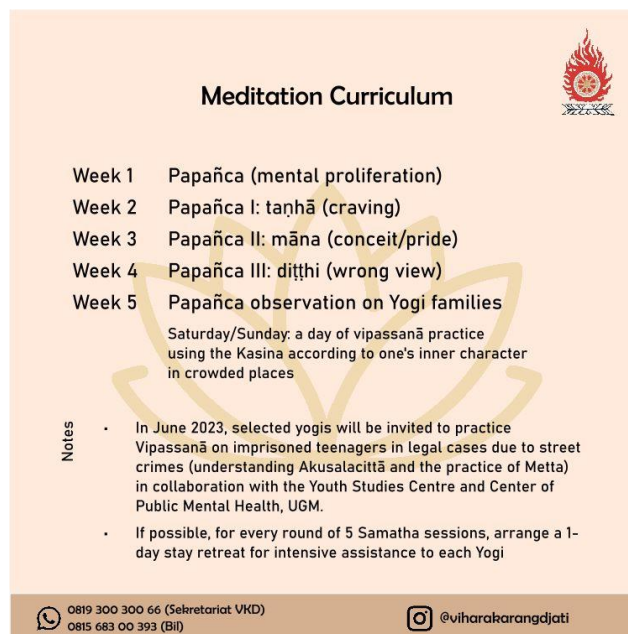


Figure 2. Meditation Curriculum Poster (Source : Researcher, 2023)

Mapping on Mental Proliferation in Adulthood.

The findings in this study of the types of mental proliferation carried out by 35 meditation students at the Karangdjati monastery who are cross-faith show several similar patterns, namely anxiety because of the future and sadness because of the past. This data was obtained from post-meditation journaling and group reflections carried out after one hour of post-meditation without instructions and without light every Tuesday night for five sessions.

TABLE 1. Types of *Papañcasaññāsāṅkha* (Mental Proliferation) from Meditation Students

(Source : Researcher, 2023)

Mental Proliferation	Topics
Past Worries	Trauma, revenge, regret, feelings of abandonment, violence experienced, heartbreak, loss, nostalgia, loneliness, grief.
Present Worries	Feelings of wanting to live by perfection, procrastination, rumination, overthinking.
Future Worries	Future failure, fear of failure, illness, death.

The past is a determinant of human thought in the present life. From the point of view of modern psychology, this concept is often attached to what is called trauma which results from the imperfection of painful experience and is still inherent in the thought processes of adult humans. Meanwhile, in the present, they are overthinking by imagining a perfect life. In the future, they are filled with fears about the reality of the mysteries of life.

"I live as an adult human who lives with the shadow of a past traumatic trauma, now I am diagnosed with a bipolar condition and depression because of my inability to let go of the shadow of that past trauma" (Meditation Student, Female, 22 years old).

"What I'm most afraid of as a student is about my future career, what will I become in the future, and will I be successful, that's why I'm currently experiencing anxiety disorder" (meditation student, male, 25 years).

The grounded concepts above are forms of manifestation of mental proliferation that come from the three roots in the *Papancha* concept. First, *Tanha*, or craving, satisfies the senses through pleasant, entertaining, or satisfying objects. Corresponding to the six sense doors, namely eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, there are six kinds of craving craving for visible objects, craving for sounds, craving for smells, craving for tastes, craving for bodily sensations, craving for mind-objects. Second, *Mana* or conceit is a wrong view of self-concept that creates an attachment to a self-concept that feels superior, equal, or inferior. Third, *Ditthi* or wrong views give birth to ownership concepts such as "this is mine, this I am," and this is myself." All of these roots of suffering can be destroyed by various conceptual approaches to meditation, such as understanding the tendencies of thought processes and the concepts of suffering that are born due to the obsession with being perfect from a cognitive process point of view.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that adulthood is a phase full of crises with all the pressures of life. Adult education, which has so far been attached to the university system based on Western education with its neoliberalism concept, only adds anxiety and depression as an adult human being who has to survive all the challenges of life's competition. In this era, the happy narrative is determined by material possessions, whereas not all adult humans can fulfill this vision. This article then places meditation as an alternative curriculum closer to the lives of adult humans who can become a contemplative medium to recognize mental proliferation within themselves so that they know the roots that cause mental problems to occur in their adulthood. In addition, mindfulness is difficult to apply to adult humans attached to suffering because of images of the past and future. At the same time, in the present, they live with worries and anxieties. This article places contemplative ethics as crucial in determining mental health balance in adulthood.

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