



Harnessing Meditation for Workplace Well-Being: Advancing UN Sustainable Development Goal 8

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to develop an integrated understanding of how meditation can enhance employee well-being, particularly in the context of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 8 of decent work. This paper aims to develop an integrated understanding of how meditation can enhance employee well-being, particularly in the context of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 8 of decent work. The research findings generate an integrated conceptual model illustrating how meditation reduces stress and positively impacts performance, relationships, and well-being in the workplace. The study highlights the relevance of meditation for promoting safe and healthy working environments. This study is among the first to link the practice of meditation directly to the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, specifically focusing on decent work. The implications for incorporating meditation into educational curricula and workplace policies are also discussed.

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Introduction

In 2015, 193 nations came together to set sustainability goals targeted for achievement by 2030. The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) are recognized as interrelated. UN SDG 17 is considered an umbrella goal and calls for partnerships for the goals, including international partnerships. Such international partnerships can be a cradle for stress caused by intercultural differences in values (Yorozu, 2023). In addition, UN SDG 8 calls for decent work, which includes a call for safe working environments, i.e., the promotion of the well-being of de-stressed workers.

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The practice of meditation reduces stress (Marques, 2010; Roeser et al., 2013). Meanwhile, well-being refers to "the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work" (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007). Researchers have long established a link between meditation and employee well-being by suggesting that individuals' stress reduction contributes to well-being (Frew, 1974). To advance an understanding of the usefulness of meditation requires a careful definition of meditation. Komjathy (2020) explains: "The English term 'meditation,' which derives from the Latin *meditation* ('to think over'/'to consider), is generally used as a comparative category to designate seated techniques that facilitate transformations of consciousness." Even within this broad guideline, a rich diversity is observed in what meditators do when they meditate (Matko, Ott, & Sedlmeier, 2021). In their paper, Matko et al. identify 50 basic meditation techniques through examples, scanning the body, observing how body sensations arise, and singing mantras, and thus, we can understand that "meditation" can be an umbrella label for a wide variety of contemplative techniques. In their analysis, Matko et al. classify these 50 techniques into Hindu, Buddhist, and Common. Given the origin of Buddhist thought in India and the identification of the Vedic-Buddhist cultural cluster in management research (Ashta, 2021), meditation techniques can be thought of as predominantly Vedic-Buddhist in origin, while nevertheless acknowledging contemplative practices in other religions such as Christianity (Gargiulo, 2023; Stoeber & Lee, 2020).

Within the human resource development domain of business and management studies, there is a growing awareness of the usefulness of meditation for employee well-being (Hafenbrack, 2017; Mahindroo & Srivastava, 2022). La Forge (1997) has elucidated how meditation can help advance ethical behaviors. By way of another concrete example, identify the usefulness of meditation for combatting workaholism by relaxing and facilitating an understanding of how external factors, such as the work environment, can control the employee. Other research shows that the practice of meditation can influence happiness at work (Fisher, 2010). Recent research conducted with employees of two large UK companies by (Bostock, Crosswell, Prather, & Steptoe, 2019) found that meditation practice, even using modern-day smartphone applications (apps), could help manage stress reduction.

Meanwhile, findings from research conducted in Australia suggest that meditation "can be an effective, efficient and low-cost inclusion within an organization's health promotion repertoire to help increase mental health among staff" (Vella & McIver, 2019). Therefore, a scholarly understanding of meditation experiences has the potential to provide fresh insights into managing employee well-being. Taken as a whole, such burgeoning research has generated important insights into meditation's usefulness for human-centered endeavors, a point of rising importance as the world turns its attention towards human-centric approaches, such as the creation of Society 5.0 (Unesco, 2023).

Meditation is also linked to the emerging scholarship on mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2011), where mindfulness is "defined in basic terms as present-centered attention and awareness" (Good et al., 2016). Through their review, Good et al. (2016) develop a framework that identifies how mindfulness influences attention and impacts the workplace, including performance, relations, and well-being. These

impacts help reduce stress in human resource management scholarship (Monzani, Escartín, Ceja, & Bakker, 2021). As with Kabat-Zinn, Good et al., too, recognize the Buddhist tradition's emphasis on such mindfulness training for centuries. Although more research is required, it can thus be seen that the meditation techniques of the Vedic-Buddhist tradition are helpful for business and management practice, as shown in Figure 1. The reduced stress contributes to safer work environments envisioned in UN SDG 8 (pertaining to decent work); hence, the reviewed literature points to the urgency of the current research purpose.

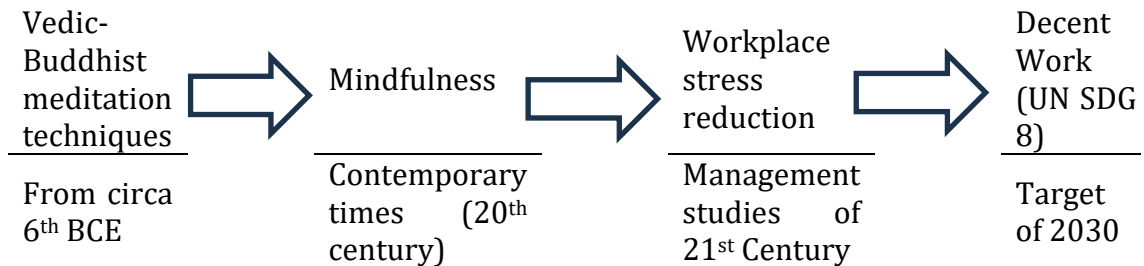


Figure 1. Visualizing the recognition of traditional meditation for achieving UN SDGs

However, even though many of these insights are based on empirical evidence, how meditation's benefits are *experienced* regarding well-being is difficult to ascertain. Meditation can be read to be useful, but beyond the notional level, how do outcomes manifest at the workplace level? In other words, practitioners' accounts of the fruits of the meditation effort for business and management are limited. This is unfortunate because we miss out on strengthening the compulsion for meditation in the modern world. Good et al. (2016) presented an integrative review of the broader mindfulness literature, focusing on three essential workplace elements: performance, relationships, and well-being. Identifying the nascent nature of management research, they also point out some valuable threads. In terms of performance, they inform impact on jobs and tasks. For relationships, Good et al. mention the improvement in communication and leadership, and in terms of well-being, they mention psychological and behavioral impacts, among others. Thus, while prior research points to these three vectors, there remains a gap in understanding how these are experienced. In particular, qualitative research sometimes remains limited to reporting themes (Vella & McIver, 2019). As a result, a qualitative problematization concerning meditation's usefulness lurks (Dane, 2021). In this context, scholars increasingly call for greater attention to reporting lived experiences to make research human-centric as opposed to theory-centric (de Rond, Lok, & Marrison, 2022; Tihanyi, Howard-Grenville, & DeCelles, 2022), a call this novel research aims to address.

Therefore, the purpose of the current research is to present lived experience accounts of meditators (regular practitioners of meditation) that shed light on benefits in their current everyday work life, and thus more relevant to a modern business world less fettered by aims of salvation, the traditional rationale for advocating meditation practice (Kurita, 2020). Such accounts are in no way meant to detract from meditation's soteriological merits (Saunders, 1971), which might well outweigh current life experiences. Nevertheless, such present-day experience

accounts can help other employees and their leaders understand one way (not necessarily the only way) of enhancing the human element of the business equation.

Method

This research aims to enhance understanding of how meditators found meditation beneficial at their workplaces. Therefore, the research was designed using qualitative methods. The current research deployed mixed methods comprising four principal elements within the qualitative repertoire. First, primary data were collected through interviews with meditators conducted by the author. Following generally accepted research ethics, the identity of the participants and their organizations has been kept anonymous. Second, these data were examined as *lived experience* accounts, where lived experience analysis facilitates a deeper and richer understanding of how individuals make sense of events so that we can identify human weaknesses and triumphs—in that sense, it is a human-centric research method (P Stokes, 2011). Third, the lived experience analysis used *constructivist thematic analysis*, meaning that the subjectivity informed the researcher's interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourth, to facilitate an informed subjectivity, ethnographic study a preferred method for scholarly study of meditation (Bevilaqua, 2020) was undertaken in the manner of participation observation. Such diverse meditation traditions were observed in Japan, Singapore, and India.

The above four elements were brought together on an underlying fabric of *autoethnography*, a method where the self and the field merge (Humphreys & Learmonth, 2012) and the author himself practiced meditation regularly as a daily practice. Such autoethnographic understanding helped with the triangulation of the data content because, as (Adams & Herrmann, 2020) explains, autoethnography is a method where personal experience (*auto*) facilitates the interpretation and representation (*graph*) of the practices of a group (*ethno*, in the current research the meditators). Thus, the four elements lying on a bed of autoethnography heighten research robustness in line with the academic idea of methodological fit (Howard-Grenville, Nelson, Vough, & Zilber, 2021).

Findings

Conceptual Model for the Usefulness of Meditation for Employee Well-Being

Business and management studies often consider two critical dimensions: profit and employees. The employees form the human element and are essential because organizations, by definition, exist through the coming together of people for a common purpose. More recently, however, globalization has been changing the nature of people coming together, for example, through people of different cultural value systems working together (Ashta & Stokes, 2023b). Such value differences can cause stress. However, aligning traditional spiritual values can also be a lubricant for working together and creating vibrant workplaces (Ashta & Stokes, 2023a). Hints of the value of meditation training surfaced through autoethnographic participant observation (Ashta, 2023) 2023, and prior research by (Good et al., 2016) indicated three key outcomes: performance, relationships, and well-being. Taking the Good et al. research as a departure point, the empirical data collected through the current research is therefore thematically analyzed and informed by the

prior research the interpretive analysis of the data points to how meditators experienced alleviated stress.

To start with the analytical process, first consider data about suffering, which aligns with the first Noble Truth of Buddhism. Naomi (name changed for anonymization) shared her work experience as follows:

When I started working in sales consulting as a new graduate, I had a turning point in my life. I was suddenly put in charge of dealing with overseas customers because I graduated from the Faculty of International Management. However, I could not speak English at all at that point, although I was somewhat proficient in English for exams. The result was a disaster. (Naomi, interview by Ashok, July 5th, 2023)

In the above datum, notice the use of the words "the result was a disaster". This statement points to an abject *performance* (result). Note also that the respondent refers to speaking in English, and since language is about communicating in the context of *relationships*, it lends to an interpretation that the abject performance was due to impaired relationships. The "suddenly put in charge" statement has a ring of not being mentally ready, a psychological state related to *well-being*. Analyzed along all three factors—performance, relationships, and well-being- the tone of experience connotes a stressful situation, and in this case, it also relates to globalized work.

The above analysis leads to the construction of the following model, as shown in Figure 2, for the potential role of meditation in de-stressing and facilitating performance, relationships, and well-being.

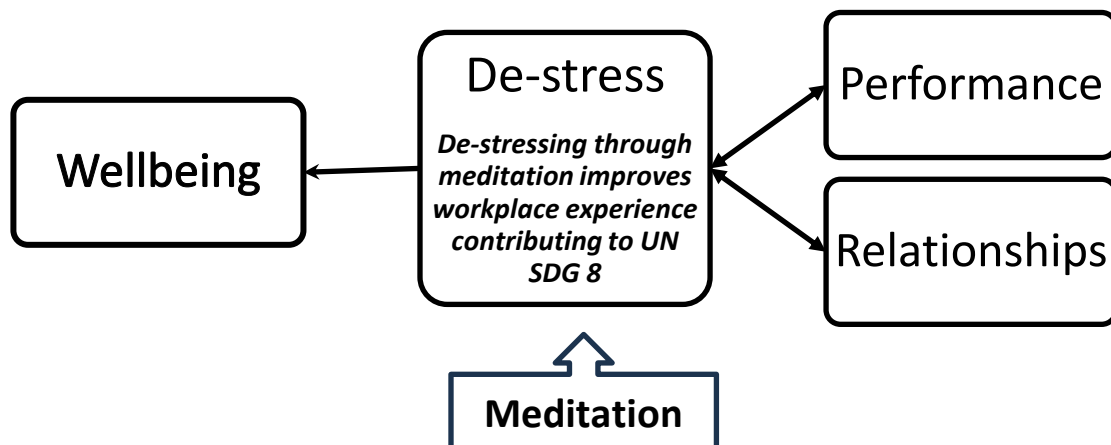


Figure 2. The usefulness of meditation for employee well-being (Conceptual framework developed based on literature review supported by empirical data)

It should be noted here that the conceptual model developed above is not asserted to be the only way of imagining the role of meditation. However, within the

constructivist research paradigm adopted by the current research it is a plausible framework supported by initial empirical data.

Empirical data support for the conceptual model

Further empirical data support for this constructed conceptualization follows below.

I am an independent service provider for big international companies, such as Toyota and IBM (company names changed and mentioned here only to evoke a sense of the kind of clients Rajiv served). I started regular meditation over 30 years ago. Prior to that, I led a life of smoking and drinking. However, meditation has helped a lot. I am more introspective, resulting in unique experiences in my business life. For example, in the service industry, it is common for the service provider to entertain clients by lubricating the wheels for more orders. Nevertheless, in my case, clients take me out rather than me taking them out for lunch or dinner (Rajiv, interview by Ashok, Feb 1st, 2023).

Rajiv's business performance is doing well in the above datum, for he notes his clients take him out for entertainment. Note that Rajiv mentions his smoking and drinking, which he left due to his meditation practice (Hart, 2011). That Rajiv recalls his smoking and drinking times even 30 years ago and chooses to narrate about those times in the current-day interview suggests that was a stressful part of his life and that the switch to meditation practice has helped de-stress to that extent. It is recognized here that many in the world quit smoking and drinking without taking up meditation. However, the purpose of the current research is not to establish causality but rather to understand the lived experience of meditators. In the current example, Rajiv's lived experience supports the above-conceptualized model. Meditation leads to de-stressing and improved performance. Note that improved performance is a two-way arrow because the resulting de-stress also leads to growth in terms of job satisfaction ("clients take me out"), which (Good et al., 2016) aligns with well-being.

I was working in international banking for several years. I could feel it was a stressful environment. I had to work long hours, but the money was good. On the other hand, we always chased performance targets. I almost gave up my job. I was initially a Christian, but now I practice Buddhist meditation. This has helped me manage my relations at work better. Meditation has helped me continue my work (Fiona, interview by Ashok, June 12th, 2023).

In the above datum, the respondent attributes her improved workplace relationships to meditation practice. The words "helped me" point to an appreciative state of mind, which the current research interprets as a de-stressed state. Thus, it could be interpreted that meditation served as a two-way process: a) it helped improve relations, and then b) the resulting de-stress helped improve well-being because of the resilience to continue work (Good et al., 2016).

I am an accounting specialist. Regular meditation is beneficial not only in my mind but also in my life, including business and investment. When I decide to buy and sell in the market, it strongly influences my mind, especially in terms of

patience and discipline in bull and bear markets (Toshi, interview by Ashok, Aug 5th, 2023).

Datum for Toshi reveals that as a result of meditation, Toshi experiences patience and discipline, which are indicators of a de-stressed being. His words "very useful... in my work" point towards positive emotions in line with employee well-being (Good et al., 2016).

The above three experiences, in combination with the literature reviewed earlier, have provided empirical support to the conceptual model shown in Figure 2. Other experiences abound, such as the statement by another respondent: "Meditation trains me to be equanimous to outcomes. As a result, I am no longer afraid of failing, and even simple requests to colleagues, such as 'Can I have a receipt for that donation,' are now possible". Thus, this exploratory research *illustrates* how meditation de-stresses employees, resulting in improved performance, relationships, and well-being outcomes. The illustrative experiences data brings the previous theory to life in this paper's integrated setting.

Theoretical contributions of the findings

Recent research by (Chowmas, Adi W Gunawan, and Sutikyanto, 2021) published in this journal linked meditation to reducing stress among students. Thus, this study joins and extends that conversation by elucidating the usefulness of meditation to workplace situations. The research paper has generated several advances toward enhancing understanding of the usefulness of meditation in the workplace.

First, it brings together lived experience accounts in an integrated manner. Previous research by (Good et al., 2016) provided a theoretical basis for this framework along the vectors of performance, relationships, and well-being. This article has shed light on how this happens by sharing the lived experiences of various respondents from different locations.

Second, previous research by (Good et al., 2016) presented the trilogy of performance, relationships, and well-being impacts as disjointed. The current exploratory research presents an inter-impacting integrated framework. In the conceptual model presented in Figure 2, meditation results in de-stressing that positively impacts performance, relationships, and well-being. Further, notice the two-way arrows on the performance and relationship vectors. This research advances the notion that performance and relationships loop back to de-stress and, thus, in the process model, positively influence well-being, too.

Third, meditation is often associated with spiritual activity linked to religion (Husgafvel, 2020). Moreover, there is a tendency to occlude spirituality and religion from the public sphere, including workplaces, especially in the West (Peter Stokes, Baker, & Lichy, 2016). By sharing lived experience data, the current research advances the case for rebalancing towards an integrated spiritual and work life, stating that our spiritual values need not be forgotten when entering the workplace (Chakraborty, 1991).

As found in Naomi's lived experience (see above), globalization has increased stress in the workplace in terms of performance, relationships, and well-being. Further, as shown in Figure 2, stress, performance, and relationships loop back to

impact employee well-being. Meanwhile, 193 nations have jointly called for decent work conditions, including safe environments and mental health. The lived experience accounts and the developed conceptual model presented in this paper reinforce the notion that meditation can be a helpful coping strategy to build a sustainable world. The empirical research reported in this paper is among the first that links meditation directly to realizing the UN SDGs.

The current exploratory research did not distinguish between the 50 meditation techniques (Matko et al., 2021) reported. It is hoped that future research can delve deeper into whether specific meditation techniques, such as observing breath versus mantra meditation, influence different aspects of workplace experience differently. Also, the empirical data of the current research was generated in Asia only. However, as noted, the West has different attitudes towards spiritual-related practices. It would, therefore, be interesting for future research to widen the investigation to the lived experience of meditators in Europe and America. The current research provides the rationale for further, deeper, and broader study.

Conclusion

The most significant findings of this research reveal that meditation has a profound impact on employee well-being by reducing stress and enhancing performance, relationships, and overall workplace satisfaction. The lived experience accounts of meditators illustrate how meditation facilitates mental clarity, emotional stability, and resilience, leading to a more harmonious and productive work environment. Furthermore, the study establishes a direct link between meditation practices and the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 8, which emphasizes decent work and economic growth through safe and healthy working conditions.

This research makes a valuable contribution by providing an integrated conceptual model that demonstrates how meditation can be leveraged to improve workplace dynamics. It extends the current understanding of meditation's role in business and management contexts by highlighting its potential to enhance employee well-being and organizational performance. Additionally, the study's findings support the inclusion of meditation practices in educational curricula and workplace wellness programs, promoting a holistic approach to employee health and productivity. This research underscores the importance of integrating spiritual practices into modern management strategies to foster a human-centric workplace aligned with the goals of Society 5.0.

Despite its insightful findings, this study has certain limitations. The research primarily draws on qualitative data from meditators in Asia, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other cultural contexts. Future research could benefit from a broader geographical scope, including meditators from diverse backgrounds in Europe and America. Additionally, while this study focuses on general meditation practices, further research could explore the specific impacts of different meditation techniques on workplace outcomes. Future studies should also consider longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effects of meditation on employee well-being and organizational performance. By addressing these limitations, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of

the role of meditation in achieving sustainable development goals and improving workplace well-being globally.

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