

When People Sing a Different Tune about Contemplative Education: The Introduction of Mindfulness Practices into Faculties of Mahidol University, Thailand

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Abstract

Amongst such misconception towards mindfulness practices using contemplation- based learning process that has been commonly perceived by people in Mahidol University, Thailand at large, this article came up with the question of how we can change the people's attitude towards mindfulness practices using contemplation- based learning process. The objective of this article is to study the attitudes and personal transformation of those who have participated in the project of "Grounding Contemplative Education for Wellbeing in Society, year 1" conducted by Contemplative Education Center, Mahidol University, Thailand. The methodology of this article was documentary research and the main data obtained from Grounding Contemplative Education for Wellbeing in Society, year 1 Report were then analyzed qualitatively. As there were two main types of learning process, namely a short-term process, and a long-term process, all the results correspondingly indicated changes in many positive ways. The result of this article found that Contemplation-based learning processes could obviously bring about new understandings and experiences regarding mindfulness practices, i.e. on the surface level they could trigger the right attitude regarding mindfulness in participants realizing that it can be done in nontraditional ways easily adaptable for all styles of modern life, and in the deeper level they could provide participants essential skills, like deep listening, to improve their relationship and also to make them ready for the next steps of spiritual advancement by gaining trust and opening up their own vulnerability.

Keywords: Contemplative Education, Learning Process, Mindfulness, Sook Sanjorn Program

Introduction

The word "contemplative" comes from the Latin root, contemplation, refers to the marking out of space for the cultivation of attentiveness to the fullness of life including oneself, other people, socio-cultural and natural worlds (Zajonc, 2016). While "education" comes from the Latin root, educare, refers to the drawing forth of children's intrinsic potentials including emotional, cognitive, somatic, imaginative, attentional in natural and the guiding of these qualities towards fruitful personal and societal ends (Dewey, 1990). We may conclude that Contemplative education focused on draw forth and cultivate human's intrinsic self regulatory skills and emotional intelligence through mindful practices, deep listening, pondering, wisdom walks, body focusing, concentrated language, and freely writing (Miller, 2015: 5; Roeser, et al., 2014: 223). Contemplative education arose into Thai educational context about eleven years ago, with the intent of getting over the positivist crises (Asdornnithee, 2011). Contemplative Education Center was founded in 2006 as a part of the

Office of the President in Mahidol University. The center aims to introduce transformative learning into education and human development which pivot on the cultivation of mindfulness. Since day one, the center has been working with the “Contemplative Practitioners Network”, scholars, practitioners, activists, and those interested nationally and internationally to promote contemplative education and its practices to society at large. Despite the good recognition and result, the operations were passive and mainly responded to the occasional needs of agencies in and outside of the university. Meanwhile, one of the university strategies, contemplative and transformative learning process, has not been effectively put into practice yet (Contemplative Education Center, 2017: 2). People in general, including academic staff and employees think that such learning is all about something which is done in Buddhist temples like dharma practice or chanting and it is none of their business at all. And according to university’s annual happiness surveys, the majority kept saying they were unhappy due to stress at work. (Subhadrabandhu, 2017). As all these phenomena become more obvious, Contemplative Education Center realizes that it has to make some change in strategies so that its operations are more direct and active. One of the initiatives is to establish the idea of “Mindfulness University”, by introducing mindfulness and contemplative practices into people’s livelihood through a three year long project called “Grounding Contemplative Education for Wellbeing in Society” By doing so, contemplative education will gradually take root in Mahidol community, and the sustainable spiritual wellbeing in both personal and organizational levels can then be expected as its fruit (Contemplative Education Center, 2017: 2-3). Therefore, the objective of this article is to study the attitudes and personal transformation of those who have participated in the project of “Grounding Contemplative Education for Wellbeing in Society, year 1” conducted by Contemplative Education Center, Mahidol University.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks used in this work are Contemplative education, Gross National Happiness (GNH), and Buddhist spiritual health, while the learning processes are facilitated using the 7 C’s principle.

Contemplative education provides the learners the learning processes where inner entities, including heartfelt perception play an important role. Inner practices like meditation, deep listening, and many ways of mind preparation to have right attitudes are mastered to cultivate loving kindness, compassion, and awareness regarding oneself, others, and greater nature. This will lead to the understanding of one’s own life in a more authentic and holistic way and bring back to humanity the wisdom of peace and freedom. What counts as the essence of contemplative education are as follow: Mindfulness, Right investigation, Commitment to practice, Delightful relaxation, and Neutral and equanimous mind (Asdornnithee, 2009). However, Mindfulness Training is the heart of Contemplative Education as a practical approach (Roeser, et al., 2014, p.223). It refers to secularized teaching approaches and practices aimed at cultivating focused attention and a calm, clear and non-reactive/non-judgmental awareness of what is occurring moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Gross National Happiness or GNH was first introduced by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth king of Bhutan (GNH Centre Bhutan, n.d.). It is the country’s developing philosophy, index for growth measurement, policy screening tool, as well as the transformative mindset paradigm. For both personal and social levels, GNH emphasizes in true abiding happiness and not the fleeting “feel-good” moments. Its principle and practices are relevant to those of contemplative education, insisting that the inner qualities like mindfulness, compassion, and social-emotional intelligence have to be earnestly developed alongside with the conducive outer environments where political, economic, social, and environmental responsibilities are created. Ultimately, GNH provides the “happiness skills”

to make a shift in consciousness from Ego to Eco awareness, allowing people to attain a new worldview so that the more sustainably happy society and planet become realistic (Tho, 2016).

Buddhist spiritual health is another framework used in this project. It gives a right point of view for ones to live their lives free of suffering. In other words, the authentic happiness can be attained through wisdom which allows ones to be discreet, reasonable, and bias-free, to persevere, to let go of material pleasure, and to serve and do good to others. Then with such viewpoint and realization, ones can act right, can solve problems wisely, and can finally attain happiness and freedom. The way we cultivate it is through moral education, mindfulness practice, and the learning to let go of one's own ego (Phra Paisal Visalo, 2009).

As all frameworks mentioned above were employed in the project and mindfulness and other contemplative practices became the main learning tools, we carried it out in the experiential way in the form of learning processes which contained all essential attributes. Framed under the humanistic and holistic concepts, the learning process facilitation is made up of the seven key attributes which are contemplation, compassion, connectedness, confronting reality, continuity, commitment, and community, or in short, the 7 C's (Nilchaikovit & Jantarasuk, 2009). Whenever a learning process is designed, the 7 C's are well considered to ensure that they are intertwined to build up a process appropriate to each group of the learners. The final aims of the project are to instill spiritual wellbeing and the contemplation-based learning skills into participants individually so that each of them could implement happiness skills and mindfulness practices in their everyday life, and also to advance the happy individuals to happy organizations where the qualities needed for long-lasting spiritual wellbeing are properly embodied.

The Design of Learning Processes

All learning processes carried out in this work were designed to consist of four main components, i.e. Mindfulness, Self-awareness & Reflection, Social and Emotional Learning, and Experiential Learning. Contemplative education places value on Mindfulness as the most fundamental quality of mind where all the learning begins. Mindfulness also allows practitioners to be able to look deeply inside to work upon their own patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions, and prejudice, and worldview. In other words, as the learning continues, Self-reflection is an indispensable capability that every learner has to critically carry out to bring about awareness and transformation. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) contributes to most part of the learning contents to enhance happiness and the ability to cope with conflicts. Meditation, deep listening, and dialogue are some of the activities that can be periodically practiced throughout the process. Lastly, all learning which can count for much in long-run success usually comes through direct experiences. Therefore, the idea of Experiential Learning is crucial whenever a learning process is designed.

To make them realistic, there were two main types, the short-term process (one day “Sook Sanjorn, ສູກສ້າງຈົນ” program), and the long-term process (three module program). All related activities were weaved together using the principle of 7 C's. Because of the time constraint, the one day “Sook Sanjorn” program emphasized in clearness and immediate effects that each group of the participants may gain after the sessions. So facilitators put more highlight on connectedness to real life as the strategy and invited participants to contemplate and share their words as they together joined in the group process. Meanwhile, the three module program was designed to contain three days plus one extra day of follow-up for each module, and altogether extend within 6 month span. The whole program allowed participants to gradually immerse themselves in contemplation-based learning skills before ending up integrating their lesson learnt into daily life and forming a community of practice to continue

the learning in long-run. Overall, this process put more emphasis in continuity, as well as confronting reality aiming for transformation as the main attributes of facilitation.

The contents and activities used in the short-term and long-term processes are summarized in Table 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1 Example of the one day “Sook Sanjorn” program.

Time	Contents	Activities
09:00-09:30	Registration, Welcome and Opening remarks	
09:30-10:30	Icebreaker, Mindfulness and Awareness	Sociometrics, Games, Dialogue, Presentation
10:45-12:00	Mindfulness and Awareness	Games, Video clip, Q&A, Plenary sharing
13:00-13:45	Mindfulness and Awareness	Total relaxation, Yoga
14:00-15:30	Self-awareness, Social awareness, In-depth personality and relationship	Celtic wheel, Dialogue
15:30-16:00	Closing circle	Plenary sharing

Table 2 Summary of contents and activities used in the three module program.

Module	Contents	Activities
1 st	Frameworks of Happiness and Organizational wellbeing, Happiness Skills, Mindfulness, Sensing, Self-awareness, Group cohesion, Relationship skills	Dialogue, Deep listening, Non-violent communication, Meditation, Yoga, Total relaxation, Games, Presentation, Video clip, Group sharing, Plenary sharing
2 nd	Presencing, Self-awareness, Social awareness, In-depth personality and relationship, Social and Emotional Learning, Communication skill, Rank and Power, Community of Practice (CoP)	Dialogue, Deep listening, Games, Total relaxation, Meditation, Celtic wheel, Presentation, Video clip, Movie, Thematic listening, Paraphrasing, Group sharing, Plenary sharing, Community of Practice’s Action plan
3 rd	Implementing, Prototype of Happy life / Happy community, Institutional plan, Communication skill, Conclusion	Field trip, Dialogue, Deep listening, Prototyping strategic plans, Meditation, Total relaxation, Photo exhibition, Non-violent communication, Appreciation, Group sharing, Plenary sharing

For the one day “Sook Sanjorn” program, we conducted altogether 26 times, reaching out to 17 different faculties, institutes, colleges, and centers (approximately one fourth of the total number), and serving up to 1,130 participants. Meanwhile, the intensive three module program was designed specifically for people in Kanchanaburi campus, serving one batch of 34 participants (Contemplative Education Center, 2017).

Methodology

1164 participants were academic staff and employees from different faculties, institutes, colleges, and centers in Salaya, Bangkok Noi, Phayathai, and Kanchanaburi campuses. The methodology of this article was documentary research and the main data obtained from Grounding Contemplative Education for Wellbeing in Society, year 1 Report were then analyzed and interpreted qualitatively by using content analysis method. (Creswell, 2007) All

the data qualitatively collected from participants, as well as facilitators were analyzed and interpreted to obtain the phenomena of participants' inner experiences, including their attitudes towards Mindfulness and contemplative practices. This article focused mainly what participants perceived as their first impression, reactions, and meaning making.

Results

Many of the participants had a notions before join in the Grounding Contemplative Education for well being in society, year 1 conducted by contemplative Education Center, Mahidol University, Thailand perceiving mindfulness practices using contemplation-based learning process as being a difficult task to practice and is something not of their ability when they hear that they would have to participate in the activities of Contemplative Education Center, many of the participants would begin to be stressed and thinks of themselves wearing white robe, practicing the walk meditations, meditations and being in the strict religious order, as some of the participants reverted that (Contemplative Education Center, 2017: 527)

"Before I used to think that practicing mindfulness can bring me a kind of adverse effect! I didn't like it. Only hearing the name of Contemplative Education could give me the stressful idea of wearing white robe and sitting meditatively. I just denied it in the first place."

"I used to believe that I cannot meditate. This is not my thing."

"Before coming, I was in great worry that contemplative learning might be something about strictly sitting and praying or keeping the precepts."

For this reason the activities were created in a way objectively to correct the participants attitude towards mindfulness practices using contemplations- based learning process, because having the right attitude is an important in the sense that it is the beginning necessary for practitioners to be able to move on in their learning path seriously and earnestly, by this researcher would like to present the results of the attitudes and personal transformation of those who have participated in the project of "grounding contemplative Education for Wellbeing in society, year 1" conducted by Contemplative Education Center, Mahidol University, Thailand by explaining the content of the learning process which are the short seminars, The one day,"Sook Sanjorn " program, long terms, The three module program in Kanjanaburi campus and together with the changes towards attitude and personal transformation after having participated in the activities accordingly, furthermore the results which would be presented would be the overall information that had not been categorized or define for each individual.

The one day "Sook Sanjorn" program

As Self-awareness was the backbone of the whole story, during the sessions facilitators always elaborated on the way we do it in daily life situations. This is simply possible when we equip ourselves with Mindfulness and use it to barely observe thoughts or feelings as soon as they arise. What we really need to do is just to observe and nothing else. No judgment, no control, or no action needed. Facilitators put participants into wide awake and enthusiastic mood by using experiential activities and group sharing to further clarify and demonstrate what Self-awareness is all about.

"Be aware of what is happening in the present moment; breathing in, breathing out. Be aware of feelings and emotions that arise; fear, excitement, boredom, fun, worry, etc. Practice so that we can become aware in any activity that we are doing; taking a bath, brushing teeth, driving a car. If drifting, just come back and be conscious of yourself. Come back often and do it in a relaxing and joyful way..."

Although things like Meditation, Mindfulness, or Self-awareness sounded religious at first, the learning process tried to secularize them and turn them into something that could be easily grasped and done right here and right now. At the end, facilitators usually encouraged participants to cheer up, be joyful, and avoid two extremes: infatuation and repression. Our

mind deserves to be calm, irritation-free, and normal. Therefore, coming back to take good care of one's own mind so that it becomes steady is the priority.

After joining one whole day program, many participants similarly gave feedback about their attitudes regarding Mindfulness practices in a helpful way. In addition, those messages reflected that, as the merits of deep listening, relationships at work could also be improved.

“Today, I came here just to give myself a try, and, if any, to find faults in the processes. After I have passed through all activities, I realized that I had it all wrong. Mindfulness can happen anywhere. Just give yourself a sit down and gently watch your breath. That’s a good mindfulness itself. Simply be still and happiness is close at hand.”

“I used to think that happiness is something from outside. Now I know that if I don’t follow my desire too much. Like before I shop, if I think twice and see carefully whether it is necessary or not. Then I’ll be able to just stop, and only then my happiness easily happens.”

“Only if there is somebody to sit down and listen to me, I can feel happiness already. I like it when I really have somebody to speak to. And I am also happy when I see my friend becomes happy being listened. I never thought that deep listening can make us happy and be meditative, as well. I intend to bring this into my work place.”

“It’s great when my boss listened to me! Normally, we never did like that. I can speak out and my boss seems to understand me more. Importantly, I realized that I was suffered just because of my own thoughts. I over thought. When I deeply listen, I can be aware that I am really listening or my mind’s just wandering around. It’s like you are practicing Mindfulness, too. Once you notice it, your awareness comes.”

“I admit that I am usually absent-minded. To practice mindfulness is actually easy; however, I hardly do it. I worry too much just because I am not aware of my own thoughts. But when I slow down and stop for a moment, I find it’s good. Simply accept it, and then happiness arises.”

“After I’ve participated in this program, I now understand that I can practice Mindfulness everywhere, when brushing teeth, taking a bath, or even driving a car. If it’s like this, I can do it. It’s not so difficult as I used to think.”

The reactions were mainly positive and some faculties (Tropical Medicine, Veterinary Science, National Institute for Child and Family Development, and Golden Jubilee Medical Center) even showed their clear interest to further implement this learning in their own context for the sake of their organizational wellbeing in long-run (Contemplative Education Center, 2017: 522-527).

The three module program in Kanchanaburi campus

The three module program was designed to contain three days plus one extra day of follow-up for each module, and altogether extend within 6 month span. The whole program allowed participants to gradually immerse themselves in contemplation-based learning skills before ending up integrating their lesson learnt into daily life and forming a community of practice to continue the learning in long-run. One big purpose was to restore wellbeing as well as the happiness in everyday basis to their own workplace and organization at large. After the completion, the whole learning process was looked back and analyzed, then come up with three different phases according to the characteristics of its outcomes (Contemplative Education Center, 2017: 539-567).

1. Preparatory phase It started at day one of the first module when all participants and facilitators came to meet each other for the first time. It was the time to lay the foundation by elaborating the concepts of happiness, happiness skills, and also what contemplative learning is all about. Apart from the concepts, the practice of basic exercises like Meditation, Reflection, and Deep listening was also actively introduced. As a result, participants started to adapt oneself into the process, open up their mind to find whatever is now interesting, and particularly to gain a new realization that Mindfulness is not something boring or things only

of religious persons, but rather a useful skill that can make sense in their contemporary life. Although most of them did not put Meditation into their daily practice, they regarded Mindfulness as a warning of negative emotions and behaviors. Many of them admitted that in difficult situations they can now be calmer, have better self-control, and listen to their partners more deeply and truly. The program has so far provided them good moments to spend together, fun games to play together, and touching conversations to share together. So far, it was a good impression for most participants and they said they would like to come back again in the next modules. Also they asked if their colleague could join in as well, hoping that the conflict in their workplace would be resolved. However, since many felt new to each other and working hierarchy was still more or less there, discreet conversations and some isolation were inevitably noticed. Many were not ready yet to pour out wholeheartedly, especially those concerning their own workplace.

“I now find contemplative learning is interesting, not boring at all, and actually it’s a life skill that can be used with others, too.”

“After the first module, I tried to be mindful during my conversation. I tried to talk more slowly and nicely. I could not be mindful all the times anyway. Once I realize that I forgot I will immediately remember it.”

“I have applied deep listening with my colleague, students, and also family members. I pause, listen more, and wait until my partner finishes first. All of these help improve my relationship. I can understand them more, get their feelings, get their problems, and people like to come to speak with me more!”

“I try to be more positive, try to listen more. But sometimes I forgot depending on my mood.”

“I try to come back to reflect about myself to deal with my stress.”

2. Group empowerment phase This phase brought participants to come even closer to each other and gave them qualities necessary for their inner work to come. Since the group did well resonate with physical movement, games and group activities were sufficiently introduced in order to empower group cohesion as well as individual. Further, facilitators also introduced learning processes and practices regarding different communication skills, rank and power, and in-depth personality to promote even more about relationship and mutual understanding. Closeness, unity, and trust among the group were expected so that each of them should finally be able to feel comfortable and have somebody to confide in. This is important to create safe and friendly atmosphere in workplaces. And this is particularly important when ones proceed into their inner journey aiming for self-transformation. In that case, reflection and sharing from deep down within are essential that ones have to do it genuinely, and ones cannot do it without trust of somebody. After participants had passed through this phase, many felt closer together, and gained more trust among the group, and particularly the acceptance for who they really are regarding both oneself and others. Many said they learnt many good things benefiting their relationship. Although they felt good company among their own group of people, many of them still showed lack of trust what they wanted to connect with people outside the group through these skills, and some chose to be silent. Moreover, another obstacle observed during the learning process was the group’s own culture of “Power over”. Because of the strong root in the bureaucratic society, many actions of participants were obviously decided out of fear. Therefore, to disintegrate the Power over by creating more of safe space, and encouraging participation in a more intimate and delicate way can be the next task.

“I’d like to thank everybody concerning the program. I gain a lot from it. I now know who I am, and who my friends are. I hope that other people can join in, too, so that real empathy will arise.”

“... I saw some change in myself. I noticed capabilities in many people. If this kind of learning could reach out to more people, students, and staff and employees, then our campus will become a nicer place for sure.”

“All was fun. But it’s still difficult to use with other people who have never joined this workshop because they will never really listen. I shall practice with myself first because it allows me to at least cool down...”

“This kind of learning doesn’t work for those who have negative thinking. They will always offend us even though we remain quiet.”

3. Learning phase This came at the right time when enough trust had been restored and the inspiration to move forth was put in place. During this phase, facilitators decided to split apart participants of those who were executive from those who were staff and employees to solve the problem of Power over, allowing true learning to naturally emerge from each group. By doing so, safety and freedom of speech were clearly noticed and each group then came up with their own lessons. The group of executive proposed an inspiring strategic plan with great hope to change the campus into a nice and healthy place to work in. Meanwhile, the group of staff and employees also enjoyed sharing their hearts and speaking their minds of how they wanted to see about their own life and their own future in this campus. One of whom just spoke about her own pain when she struggled oppression from her boss. And many showed longing to bring back the old dear days when sisterhood and brotherhood were all around. As the learning came to the conclusion, the majority of participants felt positive towards the whole program. They admitted that although they were not willing to join it at the first place, they found out later that all was worth learning even being forced to do so. What they benefited most for themselves was the way they apply Mindfulness to their self-management and how to deal with the difficult situations. Other things included the relational skill of deep listening, empathic communication, and the mindful awareness of one’s own emotions. The program also leaves behind in many participants the aspirations of having a happy workplace in long-term. And for some participants, the program has just inspired them to pursue as a change agent for their organization.

“This program helps me a lot to become conscious when I speak and listen. It allows me to be aware of my own speech, and to know beforehand that what I should do and what I should not do.”

“Mindfulness practice for me is to come back to reflect upon myself. To be with myself and carefully review what has happened. It’s like sitting quietly listening to nature.”

“I learn to let go, and become less moody.”

“I see myself doing things more slowly. I’ve got less of judgment. I listen to people more, allowing me to understand and empathize with them much more.....”

“Before, I didn’t know a bit about contemplative education. But after the training, with my own point of view, I realize that contemplative education is to make one’s mind become wiser. In other words, I’ve changed from the state of not able to manage my emotions to the state that I can be aware of them more.”

“... Now after someone speaks to me, I’ll follow, as well as express my own feelings, too. I can be more of myself and they seem to like it.”

“After joining the program, I find myself more open. I open my heart for my friends, resulting in better communication, and better works.”

“The more I join the activities, the better I feel for my job. Contemplative learning allows me to change my perspective regarding the students. Now I am happy to help them. When I get appreciated, it makes me even happier!”

Conclusion

The learning processes, both short-term and long-term, can give rise to the outcomes

(learner's inner changes) in a similar way, although different in profundity. The immediate outcome was the change in attitude regarding Mindfulness, where participants realized that Mindfulness was non-religious, simple, easy to practice right here right now and applicable in daily life. Mindfulness, together with contemplative practices can also be taught in a fun and up-to-date manner, while the learners can find it connected to their real life with possibilities for problem-solving. And when the learning processes continued on, participants' inner journey went deeper from head level to heart level. From the right attitude and understanding regarding the benefits of Mindfulness, participants could now develop the group cohesion by feeling the intimacy and trust of the group before they actively created the learning space sharing deeper things from their hearts. In other words, these respective phenomena, adapting, having right attitude → growing in unity and intimacy → gaining trust, mind / heart opening, happened as a result of the ongoing process of contemplative practices carried out throughout the program. It also implied that individual who developed such phenomena was prepared and moved somewhat closer to his / her own spiritual transformation. The characteristics of each learning phase and the corresponding inner changes of learners are summarized in Figure 1 below.

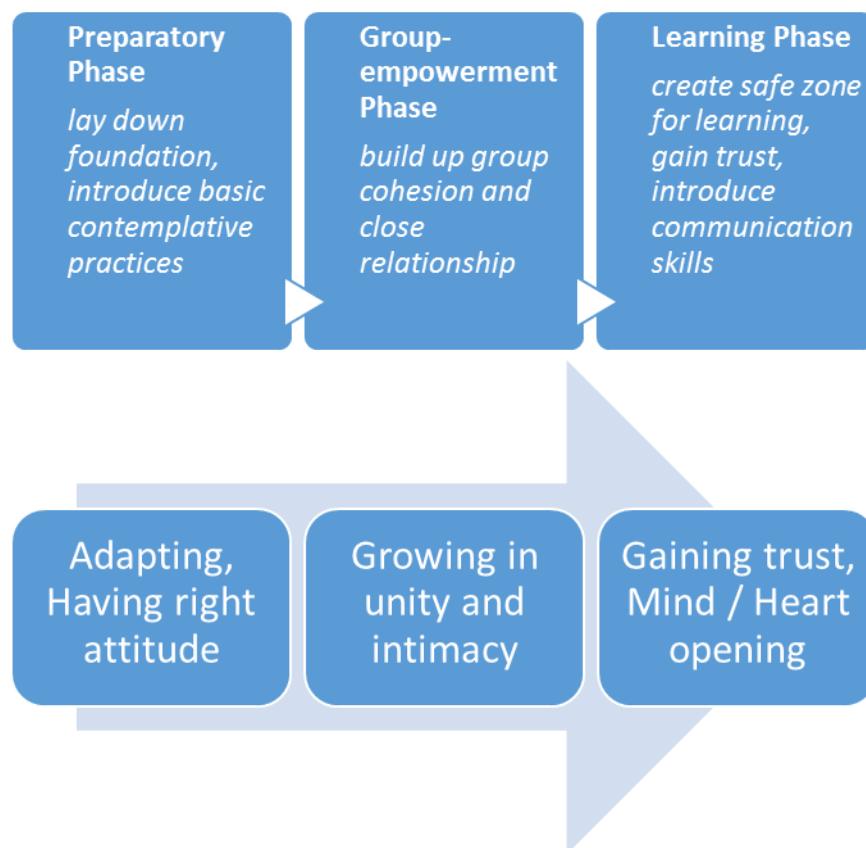


Figure 1 Three learning phases with the corresponding inner changes

In short, Mindfulness, as well as contemplative practices, is now perceived by people in Mahidol communities in two applicable meanings:

1. Mindfulness as for self-management and being aware of one's own emotions.
2. Mindfulness as for deep-listening and empathic communication to promote social awareness and interpersonal relationships.

The majority who has participated in the learning likes their experiences and now shows positivity towards the further development of happiness and spiritual wellbeing in

organization hereafter.

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