

## Yoga & Meditation: A Study on Influence of Mindfulness-Based Practices on Empathy and Self-Transcendence among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Yoga and Meditation are the mindful practices people have been gaining benefits from ancient times and believed to heal us through awareness, knowledge and wisdom. Modern day yoga and meditation practice centres around holistic healing, exploring the mind-body connection and embracing our body as the source of enlightenment of our body through asanas, breathwork and deep relaxation techniques. Empathy is a state of being mindful of others' experiences, thoughts and emotions. Both Empathy and mindfulness succour the development of self-transcendence as it is an eventual shift of awareness from entirely on self to others. The present study intends to assess the effect of Mindfulness-based practices like yoga and meditation on the levels of Empathy and Self-transcendence of Yoga/Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners. The study was conducted on 50 Yoga/Meditation Practitioners and 50 Non-practitioners. Standardised measures of Mindfulness, Empathy and Self-Transcendence were administered on the participants. The results concluded a significant difference in the level of mindfulness, empathy and self-transcendence among yoga/meditation practitioners and non-practitioners. Further research on what other mindfulness-based practices can lead to deeper insight as much work is needed to understand the relation between mindfulness and self-transcendence & empathy and self-transcendence.

**Keywords:** *Yoga, Meditation, Mindfulness, Empathy, Self-transcendence*

*“Breath: to pause, to make space, to collect your thoughts, to remember, to face the next moment, to choose & to feel free.” – Dido Owl nute*

Yoga & meditation are commonly known mindfulness-based practices, around 5000-10,000 years old, that have been believed to heal us through awareness, knowledge and wisdom. The earliest mention of the term “yoga” has been sketched in the oldest Hindu consecrated text- the Rig Veda. The knowledge as presented in Rig Veda was further enhanced and developed by seers in another sacred text- the Upanishads. These mentions of mindful practices in these religious texts were centred around sacrifice of ego

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Received: March 18, 2021; Revision Received: April 12, 2021; Accepted: May 03, 2021

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with 3 basic elements of yoga/meditation practice: Self-knowledge or awareness, action or practice of this awareness in the daily life and wisdom to allow this awareness resonate with others.

The classical yoga/meditation practice was focused on spiritual enlightenment as an outcome of merging ritualistic beliefs & techniques. Modern day yoga however, centres around holistic healing exploring what we now know as mind-body connection (the then spiritual-physical connection) and embracing our body as the source of enlightenment of our body through asanas, breathwork and deep relaxation used in both yoga and meditation. Yoga is a form of activity that encompasses mind-body fitness along with strength training indulging in through and mindful focus on breathing, attending to or/and slowing down the pace of constant thoughts in the mind and energy called life we feel with every beat of our heart (Woodyard, 2011). All these together lead to experiencing stillness, being present in the moment, letting go of all that no longer serves us, and ultimately searching for ways to enhance wellbeing and spiritual wisdom.

Salzberg in the year 2015 quoted “Mindfulness isn’t just about knowing that you’re hearing something, seeing something, or even observing that you’re having a particular feeling. It’s about doing so in a certain way-with balance and equanimity, and without judgement.” Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention in a way that creates space for insight. The origin of Mindfulness is rooted in all majorly two religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, which encompass wisdom of yoga, Vedic practices, dharma, dhyana. The western lookout of mindfulness is however, a mixture of western science and these Vedic practices cultivating mindfulness from yoga or meditation. (Kabat-Zinn, 2016) Based on the teachings of famous Buddhist Monk Thera, Kabat-Zinn identified 3 major objectives of mindfulness when practiced within the realms of yoga or meditation of both:

1. The starting point of knowing the mind,
2. The focal point of shaping/training the mind &
3. The cultivating point of freeing the mind from preoccupied thoughts, beliefs or even experiences. (Fronsdal, 2006)

Mindfulness is thus, intended towards perpetuated awareness of every moment as it passes by, detaching oneself from strong attachment to whatever beliefs, thoughts, or emotions, one has been carrying. Through this practice of letting go, it is possible to experience a better sense of balance, emotional stability and well-being- physical and emotional. Kabat-Zinn has efficiently developed a healing and stress- reduction programme using techniques of mindfulness widely known as MBSR (Mindfulness based Stress Reduction), which further led to develop of a therapeutic program- MBCT (Mindfulness based Cognitive therapy). These 2 techniques have known to significantly affect how individuals perceive pain, stress, their coping abilities, quality of life & well-being.

According to Langer et al., (2005) there are 2 kinds of mindfulness:

1. Meditative – the kind that is inclusive of being present in the current moment without any judgement or control.
2. Socio-cognitive – the kind that is inclusive of being aware of present moment along with the thoughts, feelings which vary according to the sensitivity of the current scenario.

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### ***Empathy***

Kohut in the year 1984 quoted “Empathy is the capacity to feel and think oneself into the inner life of another person.” Titchener introduced, rather translated the notion of empathy as a replica of Lipp’s oeuvre on the theory of “*einfuhlung*” – the German origin of the word Mindfulness (Montag et al., 2008). Empathy is a feeling of value as it helps us understand and actually feel what another human being is living through for us to be adept to help and support them in all honesty. Batson (1991) has linked this act of help to empathy in his widely known work on the Altruism-empathy hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, empathy leads us towards developing a goal of working towards welfare, wellbeing and betterment of individuals around us, suffering of any physical ailment, social unrest or of emotional grief, it is an individual’s emotional response to another’s affliction.

According to David (1983), there are 2 components within empathy-Cognitive & Affective. The cognitive aspect comprehends as the adeptness to figure out another’s emotion or emotional state with or without putting it into words to be capable of resonating with the person, whilst the affective components embrace the skill to adeptly exhibit behaviours that show the resonating empathetic virtue. Empathy is thus feeling another’s experiences and being a source of strength at the same time.

Empathy can also be defined as to being mindful of others- emotions, thoughts, feelings and experiences (Rogers, 1975). According to Brensilver (2016), empathy has a connection with mindfulness because of its connection to stress. The more stressed a person is, the less empathetic he feels for other beings. Mindfulness has been widely practiced to relieve people from stress and its physiological and psychological effects. Thus, higher the person falls in the category of mindfulness, more likely it is for him to feel inclined towards other human beings and feel connected to their hopes, fear and emotions. Empathy skills coincide with those of mindfulness in 2 conducts: one who is empathetic towards another needs to be attentive to the emotions, thoughts and feelings of the person as well as flexible pertaining to these feelings, thoughts and emotions while thinking of them as one’s own (Trent et al, 2015). In a study by Kingsbury (2009) on relationship amongst mindfulness, self-compassion, and empathy; strong correlation was identified between elements of mindfulness namely, non-judgement and non-reactivity with two out of 3 elements of empathy- perspective taking and personal distress as experienced surrounding experiences of others.

Though, empathy is highly linked with genetic factors, parental influences and childhood attachment. Mulla & Krishnan (2008), confirmed in their research that a specific form of yoga (karma yoga) can however, lead to enhanced empathy as experienced by the one in practice. Yoga and meditation have been a core measure to develop or strengthen mindfulness, awareness, balance of body and mind. Longer durations of practice each day have resulted in increased ability to feel a connection or inclination with others’ emotions and thus enhance altruistic behaviours as the motivation to perform them significantly heightens.

### ***Self-Transcendence***

According to Maslow (1971), Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species to nature, and to the cosmos. Therefore, to understand the concept of self-transcendence, we need to well

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versed with Maslow's Need of Hierarchy theory (1943). It structures basic to complex human needs in a hierarchy, starting from – Physiological needs (hunger, sleep, body homeostasis, or similar bodily needs that aid in survival), Safety (protection and shelter), Love and belongingness (parental attachment, social connections, a constant indemnity of belonging to something or something specific), Self-Esteem needs (Confidence in one's abilities, lifestyle and work as well as a need to be valued by others) and Self-Actualization (the meridian of this hierarchy wherein a person attains his full potential). Self-transcendence has been a later addition to the hierarchy. It serves a spiritual meaning as constructed by Frankl (1985). According to research, three levels of self-transcendence have been ascertained:

1. To seek the ultimate supreme meaning – it can mean different to people based on the spiritual beliefs and insight they carry forward. For those seeking ultimate spiritual truth, it may refer to just that. For others, it may be translated as seeking their own definitive archetypes of virtues they dedicatedly believe in.
2. To seek situational meaning – it refers to an ability to connect higher than what already exists on the physical plane. To move beyond thought patterns and impediments of the physical or rather material existence. The concept of letting go mindfully of all that restrains a being fits right here. The eventual goal of seeking situational meaning and rising above the physicality of things, may lead to enhanced compassion and open-mindedness to for self and others.
3. To seek one's ultimate pursuit – seeking a higher purpose for betterment of the world around. We may relate this to Maslow's need hierarchy, where the concept of self-transcendence drives in after seeking the once known as the peak of the hierarchy-self-actualization. (Wong, 2016)

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of the study is to assess the effect of Mindfulness-based practices like yoga and meditation on the levels of Empathy and Self-transcendence of Yoga/Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners.

### ***Hypothesis***

1. There will be significant positive correlation between Mindfulness and Empathy among Yoga & Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners.
2. There will be a significant positive correlation between Mindfulness and Self-transcendence of Yoga & Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners.
3. The Yoga & Meditation Practitioners will be higher on Mindfulness as compared to Non-Practitioners.
4. The Yoga & Meditation Practitioners will be higher on Empathy as compared to Non-Practitioners.
5. The Yoga & Meditation Practitioners will be higher on Self-Transcendence as compared to Non-Practitioners.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Sample***

A total of 100 young adults (50 Yoga/Meditation practitioners and 50 non-Yoga/Meditation practitioners) from across Bhopal, Haryana and Uttarakhand participated in the study. The age range of participants was 20-40 years.

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### Measure

- **15 item Five-facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ-15):** Developed by Baer et al. (2008), FFMQ-15 is a short form of five facet mindfulness questionnaire developed by Baer et al. (2006). The respondents were asked to rate each item on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (never or very rarely true) to 5 (very often or always true).
- **Empathy Formative Questionnaire:** Developed by Erickson et al. (2015), it is a 15-item questionnaire attending to 2 aspects of empathy – Understand others (8 items) and Communicate Understanding (7 items). The respondents were asked to rate each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1(not very like me) to 5 (very like me).
- **Self-Transcendence Scale (STS):** Developed by Reed (1987), STS consists 15-items design to asses expansion of boundaries of self. The respondents were asked to rate each item on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much). The total score ranging from 15-60 is obtained by summing scores obtained by respondents on each item. Higher the score, higher the self-transcendence.

### Procedure

The participants were informed the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms. Participants were assured confidentiality and thanked for their cooperation. Standardized tests were administered to participants.

## RESULTS

The responses of the participants were analysed using T-test to assess difference in mindfulness, empathy and self-transcendence of those who practice yoga or meditation and those who do not. Mean and Standard Deviation is depicted in Table 1. Table 2 shows the significant difference in facets of mindfulness, empathy and self-transcendence among the sample. Table 3 shows correlations between mindfulness, empathy and self-transcendence.

**Table 1: Showing N, Mean and Standard Deviation**

	Mindfulness	Observing	Describing	Acting	Non- with Awareness	Non- judging of inner experiences	Non- reactivity to inner experiences	Empathy	Under -stand others	Communicate Understanding	Self- transcende nce
N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	52.2	10.8	10.0	11.0	10.0	10.3	57.8	31.4	26.8	49.0	
SD	9.49	2.77	2.93	2.51	2.25	2.50	9.16	4.97	4.95	8.11	

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*Table 2: showing T-test for all variables.*

	<b>Group</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Statistics</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
<b>Mindfulness</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	44.70	6.36	-12.81	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	59.6	5.25			
<b>Observing</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	8.96	2.28	-9.26	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	12.7	1.75			
<b>Describing</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	8.34	2.91	-6.91	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	11.7	1.79			
<b>Acting with Awareness</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	9.68	2.56	-6.05	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	12.3	1.64			
<b>Non-Judging of inner experience</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	8.84	2.20	-7.26	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	11.8	1.83			
<b>Non-Reactivity to inner experience</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	8.88	2.01	-5.91	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	11.2	1.88			
<b>Empathy</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	52.62	9.18	-6.78	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	62.9	5.59			
<b>Understand Others</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	29.06	4.98	-5.26	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	33.7	3.77			
<b>Communicate Understanding</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	24.16	4.96	-6.12	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	29.3	3.36			
<b>Self-transcendence</b>	Non-Practitioners	50	43.46	7.61	-9.25	98.0	<.001
	Yoga/Meditation Practitioners	50	54.5	3.62			

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**Table 3: showing correlations of all variables**

	Mindfulness	Observing	Describing	Acting with Awareness	Non-judging of inner experiences	Non-reactivity to inner experiences	Empathy	Understand others	Communicate Understanding	Self-transcendence
Mindfulness	—									
Observing	0.812***	—								
Describing	0.710***	0.487***	—							
Acting with Awareness	0.760***	0.467***	0.404***	—						
Non-judging of inner experiences	0.749***	0.493***	0.365***	0.606***	—					
Non-reactivity to inner experiences	0.615***	0.492***	0.238*	0.317**	0.291**	—				
Empathy	0.563***	0.609***	0.488***	0.273**	0.287**	0.369***	—			
Understand Others	0.481***	0.541***	0.453***	0.262**	0.175	0.288**	0.857***	—		
Communicate Understanding	0.581***	0.604***	0.399***	0.334***	0.363***	0.413***	0.843***	0.544***	—	
Self-transcendence	0.686***	0.594***	0.542***	0.462***	0.466***	0.424***	0.581***	0.491***	0.632***	—

Note. \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001

### DISCUSSION

The results found out that there is a positive correlation between Mindfulness and Empathy ( $r=0.563$ ,  $p<.001$ ), the five facets of mindfulness viz., Observing, Describing, Acting with Awareness, Non-judging of inner experiences and Non-reactivity to inner experiences also correlate positively with empathy and its 2 facets i.e., Understand others & Communicate Understanding as depicted in Table 2. However, the element of mindfulness - Non-judging of inner experiences and element of empathy - Understand others do not correlate significantly. According to Shapiro (2013), an increase in mindfulness in turn results an increase in compassion towards self. When we feel compassionate towards self, we related in the same manner to others. Based on her experience as a mentor, she states that although it is a less researched fact on how exactly mindfulness-based practices lead to enhance compassion and empathy, it has an association of how mindfulness helps us cope with stressors, negative thought pattern, and gives insight towards learning how we along belong to the same universe.

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The results also found out a positive correlation between Mindfulness and Self-transcendence ( $r=0.686$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and a positive correlation between Empathy and Self-transcendence ( $r=0.581$ ,  $p<.001$ ) as well. Apart from this, all facets of both mindfulness and empathy scales correlate positively at ( $p<.001$ ) with Self-transcendence. In a study by Whitehead et al (2020), Mindfulness and Self-Transcendence had the strongest correlation. The research concluded that mindfulness leads to a practice of non-attachment, it helps let go of fixated attachment to self or anything that weighs the awareness and insight within down and thus stretches the focus past self and more towards connecting with a higher goal or purpose. Mindfulness when coalesced with behaviours that incline with self-transcendence, lead to beneficial upshots like a stronger sense of self and improved emotional well-being. (Verhaeghen, 2018)

The results found out that Yoga/Meditation practitioners are higher on Mindfulness as compared to non-practitioners ( $t= - 12.81$ ). We also found that Yoga/Meditation practitioners were higher on empathy ( $t= - 6.78$ ) as well as higher on Self-Transcendence ( $t=-9.25$ ) as compared to Non-practitioners. Thus, all the three mentioned hypotheses stating that there will be significant positive correlation between Mindfulness and Empathy among Yoga & Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners, there will be a significant positive correlation between Mindfulness and Self-transcendence of Yoga & Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners and that there will be a significant difference in the level of Mindfulness of Yoga & Meditation Practitioners and Non-Practitioners have been accepted. In a study by Fiori et al (2014), a link between specific form of yoga (ashtanga yoga) and self-transcendence was confirmed. Their results found that self-transcendence was higher in the participants who practiced yoga for approximately 6 months or more, than those who did not or were novice in terms of yoga practice. According to Kang (2018), meditation practices can develop social skills that shift the focus that has been fixated towards oneself to social or emotional needs of others and a pursuit to do something worthy to help others sustain and flourish in whichever aspects the individual thrives for.

### **CONCLUSION**

Yoga and meditation practices have been ancient in India and have been used for as long as they have been into existence to heal the mind, body and spirit together. Though, having a spiritual orientation, much scientific research has taken place to confirm the benefits of mindfulness-based practices to heal and ease outcomes of stress, anxiousness, enhance mood, increase motivation and improve overall well-being, not just psychological, of individuals. The purpose of this study was to confirm if mindfulness-based practices, specifically yoga and meditation can yield results the researches have claimed. It has been confirmed in the present study that Yoga, meditation and similar mindful practices like breathwork can increase altruistic constructs of human beings like empathy and self-transcendence. It can be said that increased mindfulness may change our perspectives on our needs. It tends to slow down our actions that crave materialism and physicality and lead us to a slow-paced, peaceful life, and increased thought of being in congruence to others as being the part of same universe. This gives a person enough time to dive deeper into empathetic understanding of self which resonates with what we may understanding about understand about others. Our connections, social relationships, goals and life pursuits are often a representation of thoughts and feelings we contain about ourselves as mindfulness have been proven in multiple researches to tend towards positive thoughts about self and the world. Further, the present study shows significant positive correlation of all 5 facets of mindfulness- observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judgement of inner



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experiences and non-reactivity to inner experiences with empathy as well as self-transcendence. All the three hypotheses have been accepted. Further, more research on what other mindfulness-based practices can lead to similar results. Much work is needed to understand the relation between mindfulness and self-transcendence considering the innumerable amount of work to comprehend the link between mindfulness, empathy and compassion.

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### **Acknowledgement**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Sarathe M. (2021). Yoga & Meditation: A Study on Influence of Mindfulness-Based Practices on Empathy and Self-Transcendence Among Young Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *9*(2), 398-407. DIP:18.01.041.20210902, DOI:10.25215.0902.041