



# The model of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans

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## Article Info

### Article history:

Received 5 August 2018

Revised 30 November 2018

Accepted 12 December 2018

Available online 13 March 2020

### Keywords:

Americans,  
meditation,  
sociocultural

## Abstract

The objectives of this research were 1) to analyse sociocultural background of Americans 2) to analyse current American meditation practices and 3) to form the model of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans. By nature, Americans are adaptable and open to new traditions and ideas. There are four widespread meditation schools in the United States, which are Goenka, Plum Village, Shambhala and TM. According to the results of analysis based on the concept of Sappāya 4 or Four Favorable Conditions, which are place, meal, personnel and meditation practice; the researcher synthesized the meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans thus; 1) Place (Meditation Center): Americans generally live hasty lives, and as such, they tend to use an easy location for daily meditation and choose a peaceful place for long retreat. 2) Meal: provision of two or three healthy vegetarian or non-vegetarian meals a day for long retreats. 3) Personnel: both meditation teachers and mentors should be local people who are systematically trained to the same standard and certified. 4) Meditation: focus on teaching meditation techniques, avoid religious instruction and sensitive issues.

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## Introduction

The United States nowadays is highly competitive and people have a lot of stress from living (Shea, 2017). Few people know how they can attain a peaceful mind from within. This knowledge exists in the East, in Buddhism, where the emphasis is on training one's own mind with meditation. The Meditation known in the United States was started by Anagarika Dharmapala of Ceylon who represented Buddhism at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, and at the same time, the first Japanese Buddhist Mission arrived in San Francisco and commenced activities in the United States (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1987, p. 127). As for Thai Theravada Buddhism, Buddhādāsa, Thai Bhikkhu, has stimulated a growing interest in Buddhism, his oral teaching having been published in the United States (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1987, p. 133). This was the introduction

of Buddhism to the United States. In time, meditation became the most appealing aspect of Buddhism and now attracts many people in the USA. During the last few decades, we have seen the publication of books on Buddhist meditation has continued to rise. Meditation is also becoming popular among famous people in American society.

It is worth studying what kinds of meditation practice are widespread in the United States and how meditation which mostly came from the Eastern world is applied to Americans in order to bring the valuable knowledge of meditation to Americans effectively.

### Objectives

1. To analyse the sociocultural background of Americans.
2. To analyse current American meditation practices.
3. To develop the model of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans.

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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

## Literature Review

Hongsa (2007) mentioned in the book *History of Buddhism* that the arrival of Buddhism in the Western world began in the 18th and 19th centuries. When Buddhism began to be known, Sir Edwin Arnold composed the book *The Light of Asia*. It allowed westerners to learn more about Buddhism, and it was accepted gradually into the academic world later.

Tongkanaraksa (2011) researched *The meditation practice of foreigners in Thailand*. The results found that the practice of Theravada Buddhism, both of Samatha and Vipassanā, through all support factors of meditation practice affect the practitioners. In addition, the suitable form of meditation for foreigners in Thailand should be organized by a group of practitioners, such as the introduction class, fundamental meditation, advance meditation, etc.

Shaw (2006) mentioned in the book *Buddhist Meditation, An anthology of texts from the Pali canon* about meditation covering various topics, such as Nāvarana (five hindrances), Samathabhāvanā (concentrating development) and Vipassanābhāvanā (insight development), Jhāna (a state of serene contemplation attained by meditation), Ariyamagga (the Noble (Eightfold) Path), Bodhi (Enlightenment), etc. This is the overall picture of meditation practice in Buddhism from beginning to end in terms of westerner studying meditation, which is very clear and systematic.

McMahan (2008) wrote the book *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* about perspective of meditation in the conservative way, following the guidelines of the East. When meditation came into the western world along with Buddhism, westerners perceived Buddhism and meditation through a view of scientific proof by ignoring the religious identity. Modern meditation is viewed as a universal thing that everyone can practice to instill mindfulness, concentration, and gain more potential in life. Furthermore, meditation was linked with Post Modern philosophy in that meditation would become a trend in the modern world.

Based on this preliminary study, there has been no research directly studying about the method of a meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans. Therefore, this study will deepen our understanding of the culture and the orientation of the meditation practice of Americans.

## Methodology

This study is a qualitative research that focuses on an analysis and theoretical development of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans. The methodology of this research is both documentary research (from primary data and secondary data), and field research by observation, participant observation and in-depth interview. The researcher spent 3 months in the United State of America (from January 15, 2016 to April 15, 2016) as an observer in 14 states, which were California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, Minnesota, Washington and Oregon, and also conducted in-depth interviews with local people about meditation course based on the Four Favorable Conditions concept in 8 states, which were California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Virginia, Texas, Colorado and Washington. Moreover, the researcher had participant observations both in Thailand and the United State

of America for 19 months (January, 2016 to July, 2017) to get the most correct and accurate information.

Research started with a study of the history, geography, society, culture, and beliefs etc. of Americans, in order to get acquainted with their sociocultural basis. After that, the meditation courses that are widespread in the United States presently, Goenka, Plum Village, Shambhala and TM (Transcendental Meditation), were studied using the research methodology as mentioned above. Finally, the information was analyzed based on the concept of *Sappāya 4* or *Four Favorable Conditions*, things favorable to mental development. The main reason for selecting of Sappāya 4 in this research is due to it being the important Dharma principle of supporting meditation, which includes suitable abode, suitable persons, suitable food and suitable practice. This was done in order to deduce the common characteristics and theoretical development of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans.

## Results and Discussion

### *An Analysis of the Sociocultural Background of Americans*

#### *The races, cultures and regions of Americans*

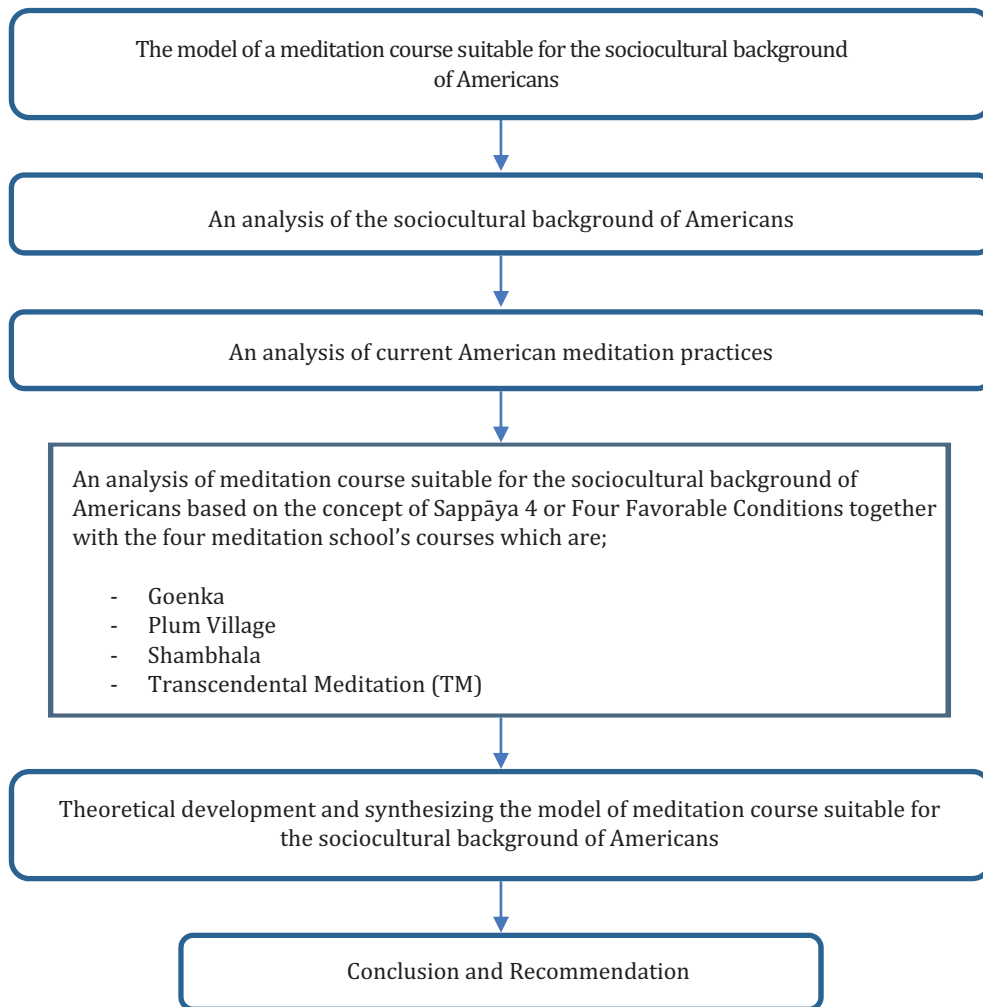
History of The United States of America shows that it was a British colony. Once the land was discovered, people from Europe started to emigrate there, so the core of American culture was founded by the traditions of various European immigrants (Tindall & Shi, 1999, Preface). American culture has also been influenced by other sources such as the traditions brought by slaves from Africa, and migration from Asia and especially from Latin America (Duncan & Goddard, 2005, pp. 68–71). This makes the United States a country with diverse cultures and lifestyles. As a result, people from all over the world poured in to live. Each district has different traditions, cultures and lifestyles according to the climate and residents. The English accent varies across each region.

#### *Americans food*

Americans eat large amounts of processed, convenient, and fast food. It is estimated that 60 percent of Americans are obese. However, gourmet, regional, and alternative styles of eating are highly influential. Rapid development of food industry has led to various health problems (World Culture Encyclopedia, n.d.).

#### *The Americans character*

Americans are characterized by strong ethics in work and competition. The commonly held principle, *The American Dream*, emphasizes liberty, equality, private property, democracy and the rule of law (Duncan & Goddard, 2005, pp. 3–4). The United States is populated by people from many regions of the world. Multiculturalism has resulted in racial segregation in society. Although the United States is a de jure classless society, there are significant differences between the various social classes of the country. Most Americans believe that the opportunities of a better life are more important than being in a society where everyone is equal (Duncan & Goddard, 2005, pp. 130–132). This makes the nature of Americans adaptable and open for something new, and to accept the opinions of others even if it is different from their own. They are independent, honest, and open.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework of the study

#### *Religions in the United State of America*

The overwhelming majority of the people are Christian. Catholicism is the largest single denomination, but Protestants of all denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and others) outnumber Catholics. Judaism is the largest non-Christian faith, followed by Islam (United State Census Bureau, 2017). Another trend is the growth in New Age religions, which blend elements of Eastern religions and practices, such as Buddhism, with meditation, yoga and astrology (World Culture Encyclopedia, n.d.).

On learning these basics, we can create a picture of the implementation of meditation into the United States clearly. We can infer that Americans are open to meditation practices that do not affect their religion. Due to the fundamentals of recognizing cultural differences and having civil liberties that ensure their freedom of action is a personal right, meditation is a universal practice that can be performed without limitation in terms of race and religion. American are interested in meditating for the immediate outcome as opposed to metaphysical outcomes.

#### *An Analysis of Current American Meditation Practices*

Buddhism in the United States began in 1905 with Mahayana Buddhism from China and Japan. Americans have been known to practice Zen meditation for more than 100 years (Kashima, 1977, pp. 4–5), which is a meditation practice originally influenced by Japanese culture (Oldmeadow, 2001). In 1961 Tibetan Buddhism and the exiled Dalai Lama brought about a new wave of interest in Buddhism (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1997, pp. 161–178). This acquainted Americans with Vajrayāna Buddhism and the corresponding meditation practice. Thai monks built the first Thai temple, *Wat Thai of Los Angeles* in the United States in 1970. Meditation practice following Theravada Buddhism methods began a few decades ago. The meditation teaching has a touch of the original culture as well (Phra Rajavaramuni, 1987, p. 153).

Meditation had gained a lot of popularity over the past ten years. Many places in the US, such as New York, have new meditation centers. Students, lawyers, businessmen and workers meditate regularly at their workplace. Movie stars,

politicians, writers and so on meditate because it helps to relax body and mind. The people who practice will be happier and healthier even though they are not Buddhist. In 1967, Professor Herbert Benson of the Faculty of Medicine, Harvard University determined, using brain scans, that the brain has a system of stopping thoughts. This makes the limbic system, which controls the mood and memory, function better. In turn, this keeps your heart rate, breath and metabolism normal, and even helps the body build more immunity and cure some chronic disease (Stein, 2003). TIME Magazine posted an article online on March 9th, 2016 under a headline “How Meditation Went Mainstream”, and asked the interesting question about “why the ancient practice might still get trendier”. Loro Rinzier, writer and spiritual master of a studio in Manhattan said that today we can travel around a neighborhood, especially in the New York City area; anyone can meditate in the way that suits their interest within one hour (Ashley, 2016).

It can be seen that in the past twenty years this meditation flow has spread throughout the United States. Among people who are non-Buddhist and believe in science, one thing that makes it widely accepted is the research, using scientific principles to prove the advantages of meditation. It is seen that the goal of Americans is to meditate in order to have good health and mental health. Most of them do not want to change their religion.

#### *An Analysis and Theoretical Development of Meditation Course Suitable for the Sociocultural Background of Americans*

This topic is an analysis of how the sociocultural background of Americans interacts with four meditation schools based on the Four Favorable Conditions of meditation course, thus;

##### *Analysis of place (Meditation Center)*

###### *1. Sociocultural background of Americans:*

For the location and accommodation of meditation practice, there are two types, which are the places for discrete sessions of meditation (less than one day) and the places for meditation retreats (more than one day). The study found that many Americans live in the city with a fast paced lifestyle. Therefore, in order to practice for less than one day, they tend to use locations that are easily travelled to and easily accessible. And for long-term meditation retreats, they need a place far away from the people and close to nature in order to relax and be isolated from stress, for full benefit.

###### *2. Comparison of the four schools:*

Goenka: Has 312 branches in 107 countries worldwide. There are 19 branches in the United States. The venue is designed to handle one-day and long period meditation training courses. It is a place that emphasizes peace being far from the city.

Plum Village: Has 9 branches in 6 countries worldwide. There are 3 branches in the United States, which are meditation practicing venues co-located with monasteries. These places are used for holding both short and long meditation courses. The locations emphasize peace and being far from the city.

Shambhala: Has 221 branches in 34 countries worldwide. The United States has most of these branches, totaling 89 branches of which 83 are located in the metropolitan areas

for the purpose of one-day courses. The other 6 branches are located in natural and peaceful places, far away from the city and are reserved for the purpose of long meditation retreats. Shambhala has in total 13 branches for long meditation retreats worldwide.

TM: Has 994 branches in 109 countries worldwide. There are 378 branches in the United States. Places utilized for less than a day at a time are in the form of small offices located in the main cities of every state in the United States. They also have 30 places worldwide, 20 of which are places in the United States, with natural environments far away from chaos, to hold meditation retreats.

The current study shows that TM and Shambhala's arrangement of places is similar. The places where people can easily access day-meditation are separate from the places for meditation retreats in order to suit the American way of life. Goenka and Plum Village are more focused on long period meditation courses, so they do not have separate places for short term practice. This makes it harder for people to reach them.

##### *Analysis of meals*

###### *1. Sociocultural background of Americans:*

Americans usually have 3 meals a day. Although normal Americans consume instant meals and fast food, at the same time, healthy meals and eating fresh fruits and vegetables are gaining popularity as well. Americans have become concerned with their health. Healthy foods are what they want. In this case, we analyzed only the food preparation in long-term meditation retreat.

###### *2. Comparison of the four schools:*

Goenka: Prepare 2 vegetarian meals a day with evening soft drinks.

Plum Village: Prepare vegetarian food for long course practitioners, 3 meals a day.

Shambhala: Prepare non-vegetarian food for long course practitioners, 3 meals a day.

TM: Prepare vegetarian food for long course practitioners, 3 meals a day.

Only Goenka limits food intake to two vegetarian meals per day and soft drinks in the evening, as it is a Theravada Buddhist practice tradition of holding 8 precepts during practice. As for the others, they are more flexible, providing three healthy meals a day so that the practitioners do not feel they have to over-adapt, which might affect their practice.

##### *Analysis of personnel*

###### *1. Sociocultural background of Americans:*

Because Americans love freedom, are open and self-expressive, dislike racism, like equality, and respect individual beliefs, both teachers and mentors should understand these characteristics of the American people. Also, staff must be careful in teaching about Dharma or meditation so as not to infringe upon their religious beliefs. Teachers should be certified by their school and be a person who has kindness, patience, is understanding of people and is a self-practitioner. Such teachers will understand the problems of beginners and can give them suitable advice.

## 2. Comparison of the four schools:

Goenka: The meditation teachers have to pass all the courses that are held. The committee will choose who becomes meditation teachers. Mentors, called *Dharma Service*, have to undergo training in a course of 10 days 2-3 times.

Plum Village: Meditation instructors are monks and nuns who have trained themselves for a long time and they can start teaching only when they get approval from their community. There are also volunteers who have been trained to a certain degree to help with meditation courses.

Shambhala: The meditation teachers must be participant in various training sessions and also pass a teacher training course. When they get the specifications set by the Board of Trustees, they are able to become a Certified Teacher. Mentors will be required to train in accordance with the Shambhala Path. When the committee deems it appropriate, volunteers can also assist.

TM: A certified teachers must be participant in advanced level training and must have passed all courses to become a certified teacher of TM. Mentors need to practice TM until some certain point. When the board deems they are suitable, volunteers are assigned.

The TM and Shambhala personnel have similar characteristics. They have standardized meditation teacher training so that they will be taught with the correct principles. Both organizations have local people as meditation teachers. This dissolves barriers in terms of language and culture. For the teachers of Goenka, the committees will choose a qualified person from those who practice enough as meditators. They also recruit local people as meditation teachers. Plum Village is more unique in that the teacher is a monk or a nun, who is usually Vietnamese. Since the teaching method is flexible and focuses on mindfulness practice, there is no problem with religious beliefs.

## Analysis of meditation

### 1. Sociocultural background of Americans:

Meditation should not be taught religiously or for the purpose of changing their religion. Initially, the American perspective toward meditation has always been to develop physically and mentally. Talking about meditation for religious purposes may make Americans misunderstand and reject such meditation practice. Therefore, teach meditation according to their perspective.

### 2. Comparison of the four schools:

Goenka: There is a ritual to observe eight precepts and teachings about the principles of attaining Buddhist doctrine. They have a way to explain things in terms of universal truth so it does not conflict with any beliefs. Their way of meditation training is observing sensations throughout the body, understanding their nature, and developing equanimity.

Plum Village: The Sangha (monastic community) has a ritual but it is not mandatory. They explain in terms of being thankful for nature and being grateful for all things we have got. They teach about Buddhism in daily life. Their way to practice meditation is mindfulness, the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment and bring the body and mind into harmony.

Shambhala: No ritual, religious instruction, or any beliefs are put forward. There is some sense of Buddhist Vajrayāna rituals. But it is explained in a respectful way by the teacher. They train mindfulness, focusing on the breath to practice consciousness by opening both eyes, avoiding sleepiness. It provides a way to train our mind to discover the basic goodness of our natural mind.

TM: TM has no religious ritual, or any belief teaching and it is mainly focused on scientific research. The method is to meditate and pay attention to the sound of a Mantra, to recite in the mind, letting the mind settle down into an extremely calm state of rest.

All four schools have a meditation method and a way to explain things in their own way which does not conflict with any religious beliefs. There is no problem with American personal beliefs. Although their methods are different, they have the same goal, which is their good intention for trainees, wanting meditators to get benefits for themselves, especially to live a happy life and increase their physical and mental potential.

Based on the study of the sociocultural background of Americans and the meditation courses of four schools in the United States, *researcher summarized the properties and theoretical development or model of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans* according to the four favorable conditions as thus:

### 1. Place of meditation center

If the practice is for less than one day, and focuses on learning meditation in the initial levels, the place should be easily accessible and easy to travel to.

If it is a place for a long-term meditation retreat, it should be a peaceful place. It should be far away from big cities and be close to nature.

### 2. Personnel

Meditation teachers or certified teachers need to have been trained to a standardized level so each venue has the same standard and format of meditation teaching.

Mentors should also have completed several meditation courses and be qualified by the committees, so that they have enough understanding of the way of practice. Moreover, both meditation teachers and mentors should have good knowledge of sociocultural background of Americans, which can be applied for teaching meditation.

### 3. Meal

If the practice is not more than a day, the preparation of a small snack or soft drinks is appropriate.

In the case of long-term meditation retreats that require overnight stays, prepared foods should be healthy foods or vegetarian foods. Choose only soft drinks that are good for health.

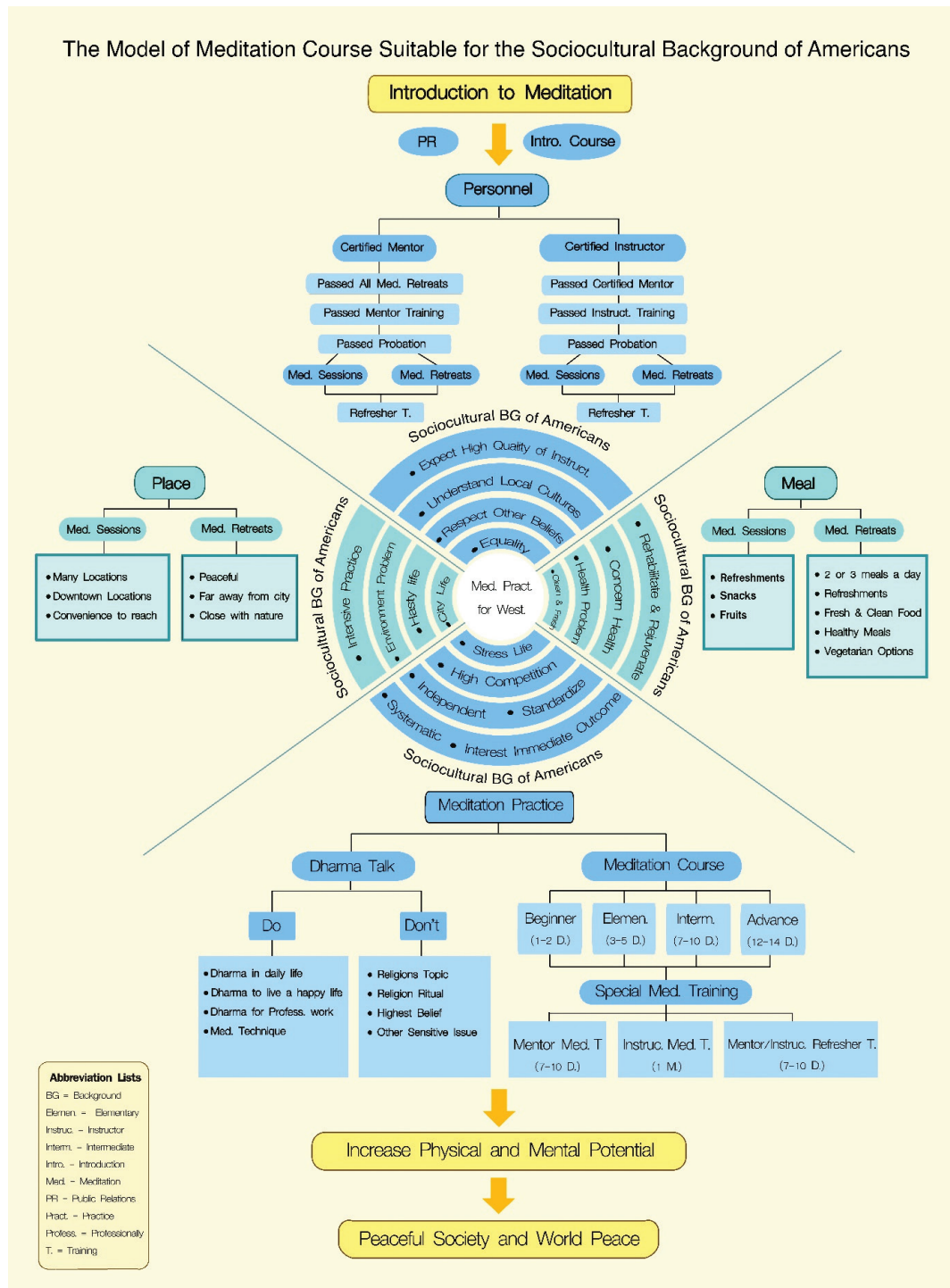
### 4. Meditation

Dharma talk should concentrate on meditation practice and the principles that apply to everyday life, which can improve the performance of participants' jobs, and enable them to live with happiness, and should avoid mentioning the conflicting beliefs or religious sensitive issues.



The meditation course should provide many courses for different backgrounds of practitioners, from beginner to advanced levels. Also, special meditation training for mentors and meditation teachers is very important, so they can maintain the standard of their schools.

Based on the properties of meditation course suitable for sociocultural background of Americans that we have summarized, we developed a model as follows:



**Figure 2** The Model of a Meditation Course Suitable for the Sociocultural Background of Americans

## Conclusion and Recommendation

This research aimed to analyze the properties and theoretical development or a model of meditation course suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans based on the concept of “Sappāya 4” or “Four Favorable Conditions”, which are namely, suitable meditation place, personnel, meal and meditation practice. In this study, we found that the four meditation schools mostly aligned with the four favorable conditions suitable for the sociocultural background of Americans. We considered all these suitable properties from the four schools as guidelines in developing a model based on the main factor, which is the sociocultural background of Americans. The model developed from this research is a unique model for all meditation schools that would like to teach meditation to Americans. Schools can apply this model with their own meditation techniques and use it as their own complete model in the future.

This research studied just four meditation schools in the United States. However, there are many more interesting meditation schools that should be studied as well. And meditation in other Western countries is suggested to be a study topic in the future.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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