

The Effects of Mindfulness Practice on Happiness^{*}

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to examine the effects of mindfulness practice on happiness. Participants (N=39) were Chiang Mai University students, recruited from Mental Health Course: 15 were assigned to be in experiment group and 24 in control group by the purposive sampling method.

Instruments used in this study were 1) Mindfulness Practice Program based on Plum Village approach and 2) Subjective Happiness Scale for Thais, which was tested for content validity, concurrent validity, and index of item-objective congruence by experts (at the level 1.0) and for the whole test reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .70$). In addition, the qualitative data were collected with the participants' self-observation form. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, paired *t*-test, and one-way Repeated Measure ANOVA, together with the analysis of the qualitative data, to compare the effects of mindfulness practice on happiness of the students in the experiment group, before, after the practice, and during the follow-up period.

Results revealed that after the mindfulness practice, happiness of the participants in the experiment and control groups were significantly different ($p = .001$). The level of happiness of the students in the experiment group after participating in mindfulness was significantly higher than that before the practice ($p = .001$). Accordingly, it can be concluded that the mindfulness practice had an effect on the happiness level.

Keywords: Mindfulness practice, Plum village, Happiness, Subjective Happiness Scale for Thais, Chiang Mai University students

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INTRODUCTION

In Buddhism, happiness is derived from living as one with the world, cultivating a balance mind, developing wisdom and compassion, being freed from sadness and suffering, and developing creativity. Mindfulness is very important here as it helps to keep the mind balance, resulting in happiness. What mindfulness does is to keep the mind stable from what comes in contact with the 6 senses (Ayatana): eyes, ears, tongue, nose, skin and mind. Both Buddhism (Venerable Phra Dhammapitaka, 2003) and Western psychology (Smith et al., 2003) are in agreement on how happiness and suffering arise; that is, cognition leads to emotion or feelings related to happiness or suffering. In other words, when there is a stimulus contacting bodily senses or mind, a man would recognize it through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin and mind. If the recognition is strong enough, it becomes perception. The man would think, form, and translate the stimulus according to former experiences, learning, or memories, which results in feeling content, indifferent, or discontent. Consequently, the man would feel happiness or suffering. When a pleasant feeling or happiness arises, one would repeatedly crave that particular stimulus that causes it. In contrast, if a stimulus gives unpleasant feelings or suffering, one would want to avoid the stimulus. The two different consequences from feeling happy and unhappy cause one's mind unstable and anxious. Based on this process, it can be concluded that an ability to know the emerging emotions, commiserations, and thoughts will help ones not to be driven by or lost in states of happiness and suffering. A way to attain such ability is the mindfulness practice, which can help ones to attain true happiness.

Recently, the psychology field has been studying and bringing the mindfulness practice to use extensively as a treatment for depression and mental breakdown patients, especially in U.S.A. and European countries. Such treatment, called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), has become the third wave in the psychotherapy field (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) and increasingly popular because of its effectiveness in healing patients, the same as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Many research reviews have found that studies still focus on the mindfulness practice on patients or counselees with mental or well-being disorders (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Greeson, 2009; Weick & Putnam, 2006).

One of the distinct characters of mindfulness practice in the tradition of Plum Village is the application of Buddhist mindfulness practice to contemporary life context

which is fit young people's interest so called "Wake-up"community for these groups. (Plum Village, 2015). Wake Up is an active global community of young mindfulness practitioners, aged 18-35, inspired by the teachings of Zen Master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. Young people come together to practice mindfulness in order to take care of themselves, nourish happiness and contribute to building a healthier and a more compassionate society. The practice is based on cultivating awareness of the breath and living deeply in the present moment, aware of what is happening within oneself and around them. This practice helps them to release the tension in their bodies and feelings, to live life deeply and more happily, and to use compassionate listening and loving speech to help restore communication and reconcile with others. They practice by sitting and walking meditation, listening to a teaching, practicing total relaxation, listening deeply to one another, and reciting the Five Mindfulness Trainings. The researchers consider that the tradition of Plum Village suits the lifestyles of young people who are energetic and full of fun because it provides numbers of interesting activities such as music evenings, meditation flash mobs, picnics, hikes and other special events or actions. They certainly can apply these activities to mindfulness practice.

A few previous studies have demonstrated positive results of mindfulness practicing among students. One has shown that mindfulness meditation improves cognition. The evidence came from a brief mental training among 63 students from University of North Carolina-Charlotte who had been trained in a sitting meditation session (Zeiden, et al, 2010) to be aware of feelings in parts of the body and to listen mindfully in groups. The study found that mindfulness and meditation practice enhanced positive emotions, visual perception, and memory as well as reducing exhaustion and stress.

Furthermore, Weinstein et al (2009) conducted a multi-method examination of the effects of mindfulness on stress attribution, coping, and emotional well-being. The participants were 65 university students. It was found that the participants who were trained in a mindfulness practice had lower stress level and did not tend to avoid stress.

There are 2 studies performed in Thai student subjects as follow;

Taweesub and Thongboonchu (2011) explored the effect of Buddhist mindfulness meditation practice to mental well-being among 30 nurse students of the Thai Red Cross College of Nursing using 1 month program of Buddhist mindfulness meditation. This study employed Thai General Questionnaire 28 (Thai GHQ-28) for

assessing well-being. Results showed that level of Somatic Symptoms, Anxiety and insomnia and Social dysfunction were significantly lowered than that before the experiment ($p = .05$).

Nuibandan, Noopetch, Damkliang, and Promtape (2009) examined the effect of mindfulness by hand movement on stress and sati level of nurse students of Prince of Songkla University. 64 nursing students volunteered to participate in this study. All experimental group ($n=34$) participated in the 40 minutes of mindfulness practice with a technique of hand moving program for 10 days. Subjects in a control group ($n=31$) had regular activities. This study employed Stress Questionnaires on day 1, day 5, and day 10. The results showed that there are no significant difference of stress level between group after participated in this mindfulness practice ($p=.92$). However, there was a significant difference of sati level in experimental group after this mindfulness practice ($p=.002$) This finding suggests that mindfulness practice with a technique of hand moving need longer practice time and the participants need to have more physical fitness to reduce stress level.

It is apparent that Mindfulness training among university students requires more than 10 days up to one month to finish so that the practice was shaped as habits and then influence mental health. This is consistent to a study of Taweesub and Thongboonchu (2011).

As a result, the researchers were interested in studying the effects of mindfulness practice on happiness in students and hope that the research results will be useful to people who share the same interest in this field and benefit Thai students in certain ways.

METHODOLOGY

Experimental Design

This study is a two-group pretest-posttest design. The experiment group was tested with Happiness in Life Test before being trained in the mindfulness practice. Right after the mindfulness practice, they were tested again. Six weeks later, the group was followed up with the same test.

A researcher and assistant who are committees of Thai Plum Village Foundation proceeded the mindfulness practice program on Mondays and Thursdays from 4 – 6 PM for 6 weeks. This program focuses on practicing mindfulness in many

ways, such as sitting meditation, mindful walking, mindful eating, listening to the sound or the bell, total relaxation practicing, Dharma discussion, etc. (Nhat Hanh, 2003, 2007).

After the training, the self-observation form was handed to the experiment group. For a week, the experiment group observed themselves, reported in the form, and handed back the form the next time the training was held.

Self-observation form consisted of 6 open ended questions about mindfulness practice in daily life including problems and barriers in practicing which would have been used as discussion issues in the next training.

Instrument

Subjective Happiness Test was developed by the researchers. In this study, happiness was at first defined based on different approaches, facts, and past research. Then, various definitions showing Thai people's happiness or unhappiness were collected from 300 undergraduates and were processed to find the content validity. After that, a questionnaire of six items was created based on the collected definitions and Subjective Happiness Scale adapted from a scale by Lyubomirsky and Lepper, (1999) as the definitions of happiness in both sources were quite similar.

The definition of happiness in this research was the state of being content, being able to let go of negative feeling or unsatisfactory situations without attachment to pleasure or desirable ones, and being free from any kind of grief or suffering.

This five-point rating-scale Subjective Happiness Test was computed to find the content validity again under the supervision of three specialists, who concluded that the questions in the test conformed to the content and the specified definitions. The conclusion scores were figured with the item objective congruence (IOC). The test was tried out with a sample group of 300 students of Chiang Mai University which were different from the group being assessed for content validity. The scores from the tryout were analyzed to find the Cronbach's alpha coefficient; the reliability of the test was at .70.

Sample

With the purposive sampling method, samples in the experiment group were recruited, consisting of 15 volunteered students from Chiang Mai University, while the control group was composed of 24 students who were not included in experiment setting and were not assigned into any kind of treatment.

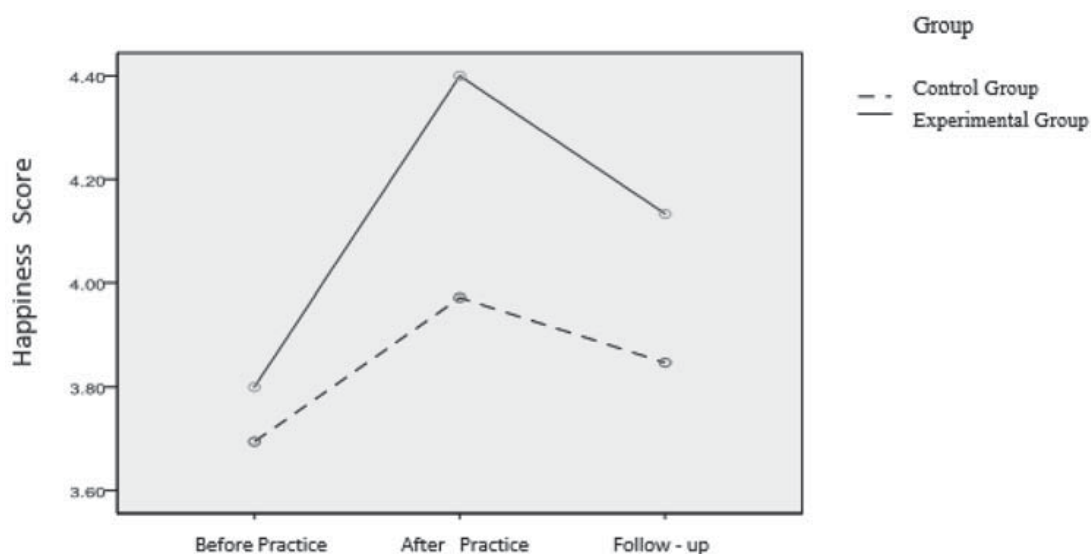
RESULTS

Table 1 shows that, before the practice, the experiment group and the control group's happiness mean scores were not different. After the practice, the happiness mean scores of the two groups were significantly different at .001. The follow-up, six weeks after finishing the experiments, showed no difference between the experiment group and the control group's happiness mean scores.

Table 1: Comparison of the mean scores of happiness points before mindfulness practice, after mindfulness practice and at follow-up period between the experiment group and the control group

Period	Group	Mean Score	S.D.	Differential	Sig. (2-tailed)
Before Practice	Experiment	3.80	.40	-.11	.431
	Control	3.69	.40		
After Practice	Experiment	4.40	.36	-.43	.001***
	Control	3.97	.33		
Follow-Up	Experiment	4.13	.49	-.29	.072
	Control	3.84	.41		

***p ≤ .001



Picture 1: Happiness mean scores of the experiment group and the control group before and after the mindfulness practice and at the follow-up period.

Table 2 indicates that happiness score before practice, after practice and follow up period in experiment group and control group were significantly different at .05. Researchers also conduct Paired *t*-test as shown in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3 shows the happiness mean scores of the experiment group compared in Paired *t*-test. The results were different: the first pair, before – after the mindfulness practice, was significantly different at the level of .001;

The second pair, after mindfulness practice – follow-up period, was significantly different at the level of .05; and the third pair, before the mindfulness practice – follow-up period, was significantly different at the level of .01.

Table 4 shows the happiness mean scores of control group compared in Paired *t*-test yielded the following results: the first pair, before – after the mindfulness practices and the second pair, after the mindfulness practice – follow-up period, were not different; but the third pair, before the mindfulness practice – follow-up period, was significantly different at the level of .01.

RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Having chances to following breaths, to walk mindfully, to eat mindfully, and to practice Total Relaxation in the laboratory brought about the understanding of the practice and enhanced the practice outside the laboratory. Having several opportunities

Table 2: Result from one way repeated measure ANOVA of happiness score

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Intercept	1749.815	1	1749.815	5429.478	.000
group	2.066	1	2.066	6.411	.016*

*p ≤.05

Table 3: Paired *t*-test comparison of the happiness mean scores before and after mindfulness practice and at the follow-up period in the experiment group

Paired Comparison	Mean Score Differential	S.D.	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
Before (3.80) – After(4.40)	-.60	.40	-7.73	.000***
After (4.40) – Follow-up(4.13)	.36	.30	2.57	.022*
Before(3.80) –Follow-up (4.13)	-.33	.36	-3.57	.003**

*p ≤.05 ** p ≤.01 *** p ≤.001

Table 4: Paired *t*-test comparison of the happiness mean scores before and after mindfulness practice and at the follow-up period in the control group

Paired Comparison	Mean Score Differential	S.D.	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
Before (3.69) – After(3.97)	-.27	.34	-4.01	.139
After (3.97) – Follow-up(3.84)	.13	.39	1.58	.128
Before(3.69) –Follow-up (3.84)	-.15	.49	-1.53	.003**

** $p \leq .01$

to practice mindfulness and to consciously report what they experienced, the participants of the experimental group were deliberately familiar to the state of being mindful and able to have self-awareness in each moment of daily life. Because mindfulness is the power of full awareness in the present moment and is the deep looking at every moment in daily life (Nhat Hanh, 2009), the experimental participants who were exposed frequently to the practice felt peace of mind. Such peace of mind comes from learning to be with oneself and noticing movements in the mind and outside as reflected from the report of some participants below. Codes were used for identifying participants. First digit referred to participants I.D. Second digit referred to ordinal number of report.

“...made me calmer. Normally, I am hotheaded, speak fast and do things hurriedly. But after I practiced by following my breaths through the past two weeks, my mind have become cooler and more stable. Nothing can touch my mind easily. I feel happy and calm every time after practicing.” 02/2

Feeling peace of mind and comfort, the experiment group developed their ways of thinking to be more mindful and calmer as shown by the following quotation.

“...have more positive thinking and concentration. Before, I was a worrywart, fantasized aimlessly and thought and did things repeatedly. Sometimes, I spoke thoughtlessly or too directly. After practicing the activities, I feel more mindful. I tend to stop and think before doing anything, and don't worry about trivialities.” 11/1

In addition, mindfulness practice resulted in more efficient daily life activities, for instance eating and walking.

“Eating mindfully, I neither choke, nor bite my tongue or lips. I practice this when I have snacks because it is such a long time. There is not any other factor causing me to be hurried. This practice helps me to feel full faster and to feel the tastes

of the food more clearly.” 14/2

“It feels like walking is less tiresome than before. I am aware of where I am walking towards, able to remember paths, and feeling like walking is more fun.” 02/2

Phenomena happening in mind and to body brought about happiness as shown in the statement from some participants.

“I feel glad and happy to live my daily life. There is no need to hurry. Everything goes deliberately. Do things mindfully. I feel calm and not serious. I don't think of downhearted things. I understand effects of actions I take in daily life. This is what bring about happiness.” 03/2

In brief, the happiness happening to the experimental participants didn't depend on particular objects, people, or external factors; it was happiness from within and a state of being free from suffering (Venerable Phra Dhammapitaka, 2003). The experimental participants reflected on many benefits of practicing mindfulness on daily life in the self-report. The first benefit is self-control: the participants were aware of each of their own emotions and better at controlling negative emotions as shown in the following self-report.

“These days, I don't feel angry at anything and do see the world more positively. Usually, when talking on the phone with my parents, I sometimes got angry as they tried to scold me. But, after practicing, I am better at controlling myself. My words are of emotions that are restrained from anger. When they teach or scold me, I calmly listen for a while. Then, I reply. I listen more rationally. Normally, I would fire back right the way.” 15/2

The self-control that the participants developed not only made them happier, but also resulted in better relationships with people around. Therefore, mindfulness is a force that is important to relationships. Mindfulness makes practitioners be more open to the potential of true understanding or the bright wisdom. According to Nhat Hanh (2011), in relationships, we need to learn how to use the mindfulness power in order to be aware of the suffering inside us. To truly understand or to gain wisdom in handling the suffering, we are to let go of that suffering and look deeply in to the nature of emotions and feelings. If we really understand, we will be free from painful feelings and emotions, such as anger, jealousy and depression.

A further benefit from practicing mindfulness on living daily life is the efficacy of working and doing other activities in life, such as car driving, as shown in the report of a participant.

"While driving a car, I am aware that I am stepping on the accelerator or pulling over. It makes me a calmer driver.09/4"

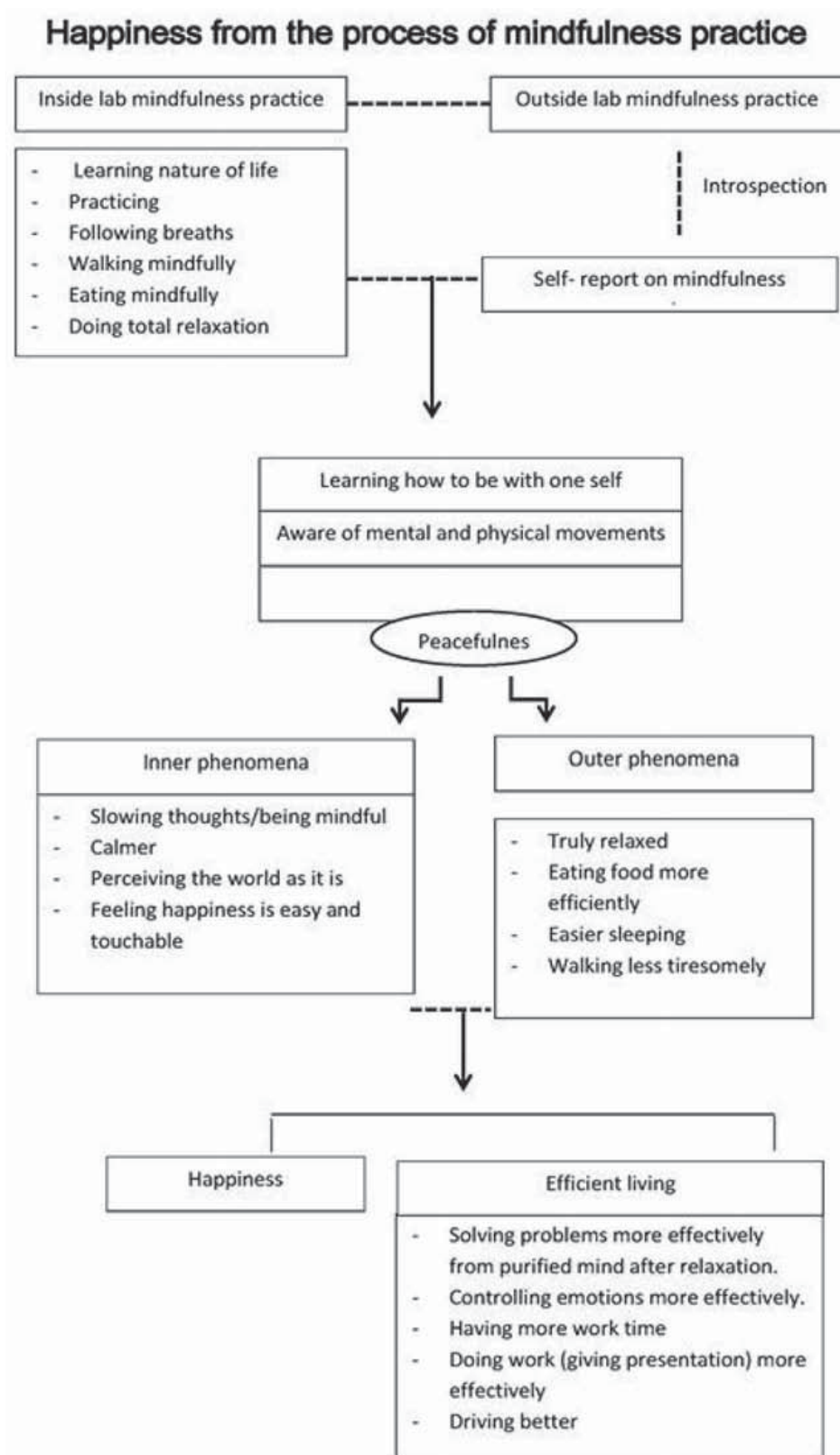
In conclusion, the mindfulness practice that the experimental participants had been exposed to both inside and outside the laboratory, including introspection and the regular self-report made changes in the participants. The changes included learning to be with oneself harmoniously and to be aware of mental and physical movements. Such changes lead to peace and happiness. Moreover, the practice gives benefits daily life in term of self-control, better relationships, and more effectiveness in work and personal life. The process could be demonstrated in Picture 2.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTION

The research yielded the following results. The participants in the experiment group, who had exposed to the mindfulness practice, had significantly higher mean scores on happiness than the control group participants, who had not received the practice, at the level .001. The comparison between the happiness mean scores before and after the mindfulness practice showed that the experiment group had significantly higher mean score at the level .001. In accordance with the research hypothesis, the mindfulness practice resulted in the students' greater happiness in life. The findings from this research on the effects of mindfulness practice concurred with those of the researches related to mindfulness practices and happiness in life.

Howell et al (2011) studied connection between happiness and mindfulness in undergraduate students and found a significant relationship between happiness and mindfulness. Furthermore, Taylor et al (2011) studied the impacts of mindfulness on the responses to emotional pictures in ten beginner meditators and twelve experienced meditators who had practiced more than 1,000hours. The experiment group got to see positively, negatively, and neutrally emotional pictures. The findings showed that long-term mindfulness meditation led to more stable emotions by helping meditators to accept arising emotions and be aware of present moments instead of controlling themselves.

So far, it is not yet found from the review that there is any research result in discord with this study. That the mindfulness practice results in happiness in life can be explained by the following process from Buddhism's viewpoint holding that mindfulness is very important.



Picture 2: Happiness from process of mindfulness practice

Mindfulness make mental balance, resulting in happiness by keeping the mind secured from what comes in contact with the six senses (Ayatana): eyes, ears, tongue, nose, skin and mind. In Suttanta-pitaka, it is stated about the six senses that one without practice, protection, carefulness and repose will be in great suffering. Even though the feeling is ecstatic, one would not be infatuated. Once the feeling is miserable, one would not be shaken. One should not be overjoyed or distressed (Piyapongwiwat, 2012).

In this study, the participants in the experiment group were trained in mindfulness practice in the tradition of Plum Village that gives importance to daily life activities, enabling ordinary people with worldly obligations and responsibilities to master it. Mindfulness practice can empower awareness and deep looking in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to truly live at present time with everything around including with every action one is taking. Mindfulness is a power that keeps concentration within. In the same way, concentration keeps the power of wisdom inside. Hence, concentration leads to wisdom. Wisdom is an action that helps free or release a person. In Buddhism, one will be free by using wisdom, so one should start cultivating the power of mindfulness to bring about concentration, which will lead to the power of wisdom. These are three powers in Buddhism which one can cultivate (Nhat Hanh, 2011). This suggests that the mindfulness practice is an important device instigating an increase in the level of happiness in life.

Anyhow, the mindfulness practice in the tradition of Plum Village in this study would help practitioners to have more lasting happiness if practitioners of the same interest gather together and practice as a group or a community. The practice becomes more powerful because the practitioners in the group will be like role models and encourage one another to practice.

It is recommended for the future research to study happiness from mindfulness practice in students from different branches of study as each branch encounters different mental and physical stress and pressure from requirements in their fields. Comparing the results gained from different fields could confirm the reliability of the mindfulness practice in enhancing students' mental quality and happiness with what they are studying. If this is the case, the results can be presented to Student Affairs so that the practice can be officially put in the curriculum of mental quality development. Moreover, research on mindfulness practice in other groups is interesting as well, such as patients with stress or depression or people from other field of

occupations. The study can also shed the different lights from comparison the different techniques of mindfulness practices so as to clearly compare the effectiveness and suitability of each technique to each particular population. Besides, the research period could be longer as the participants coming back together frequently from time to time could be a good practice booster. Again, results can also be compared between the participants with this booster and without booster.

Limitation of this research was the purposive sampling which might not represent the population. Future research should employ probability sampling to minimize the limitation.

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