



MINDFUL MOTHERHOOD: A NARRATIVE RESEARCH OF A MOTHER RAISING A SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD

Chararinchon Satian, Himapan Ruktaengam*

Contemplative Education Center, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

*Corresponding author E-mail: himapan.ruk@mahidol.ac.th

Received 31 December 2023; Revised 8 February 2024; Accepted 12 February 2024

Abstract

Background and Objective: Human learned the world and all perspectives originally from their parents, and for that parenting impacted their offspring undeniably. On the contrary, raising a child was the path for parents' internal growth as though. The researchers had grown up with a strong intention to be a mother, and found later that being a mother was not a beautiful life as imagined before since her son was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. That resulted in internal and external conflicts in her daily life, which of course, was the sufferings for her. The researchers tried to heal those sufferings by looking for ways of self-inquiry, and then discovered the Master of Arts Program in Contemplative Education, offered by the Contemplative Education Center, Mahidol University. She had many opportunities to explore herself with various processes, which mainly based on mindfulness practice. This research was executed to study the path of personal transformation towards the researchers' self-awareness practices as mindful motherhood.

Methodology: In this qualitative research, the researchers adopted the "First-person research" paradigm by using narrative inquiry as methodology. The data were collected from various documents such as personal journal, written diaries for kids, assignments in the Contemplative Education Program, as well as pictures and poems, which could have related to some memories. The data were examined consciously by the researchers' observer eyes, as the only key informant in this first-person research. Context comprehensive was employed as data analysis. Mindful and contemplative practices, Satipaṭṭhāna were employed throughout the research process.

Main Results: From this study, the researchers found that her standpoint of being a mother originated from her misconception of being a suffering child in the past. The process of this mindful investigation led to her understanding on the mechanism of how her mind cooked these sufferings, hence she was freed from the identification with thoughts. She acquired a new understanding of her childhood in the past that resulted in a new perspective of her motherhood at present. Having realized this, she was aware of her self-worth which was unnecessary embedding with her motherhood status as before. The result of this mindful investigation process made the researchers capable to accept the situations, either positive or



negative experiences, with non-judgmental and non-striving manners. It also transformed her from exaggerated egoism to faith in living life congruently, both internally and among relationships with others. She had more comprehensive understanding on living in here and now, which helped disentangle sufferings from running back and forth (In the past and the future) as before.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This research article was involved in Applied Buddhism and categorized within "Buddhism and the Development of Wisdom and Morality with Buddhism" by applying Satipaṭṭhāna practices, both in formal daily practice and in daily routine activities throughout the day of a mother who was suffering from difficulties in raising her child. For Satipaṭṭhāna formal practicing, the researchers engaged in Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna (Contemplation of the body). For Satipaṭṭhāna in daily routine practicing, the researchers feasibly executed Kāyānupassanā (Contemplation of the body), Vedānupassanā (Contemplation of the feelings), Cittānupassanā (Contemplation of the mind), and Dhammānupassanā (Contemplation of mind objects) in daily life.

Conclusions: Along the path of mindful motherhood, practicing Satipaṭṭhāna encouraged the researchers to perceive her life experiences firmly without fluctuation to those positive and negative sensations. This brought in the non-intellectually developed wisdom that the researchers gained a new comprehensive understanding on the basis of minimizing exaggerated egoism, hence establishing faith in living with trust in Dhammas.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Satipaṭṭhāna, Motherhood, Narrative Research, Contemplative Practice

Introduction

In Pali Canon, parents' role had been compared to Brahma, who not only gives birth but also creates the whole world to their child (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), 2009). This research was done to review the researchers' motherhood as spiritual path, using autobiographical research and narrative inquiry as the first-person methodology. To answer that, the researchers employed "I" statement as the narrator to present this research throughout. I was born as the third generation, with my grandparents having migrated from China to Thailand. Males gained more attention than females in Chinese families. They were expected to inherit not only the family business but also hand down the family name and wealth to the next generation. I had only one older brother and he carried this expectation. However, my father's beliefs were modern, especially in terms of the education for females. Luckily, I was always good at studying, so no doubt that I was a loved one for my father. While I had a closed relationship with dad, my brother was closer to mom. Mom, in the eyes of a little girl who needed strong love, was almighty and so strict all the time. I wondered how I could have gained the admiration or even some sweet words from her. She liked telling old stories of how she dealt with many people, especially those in my dad's family. I, at that time, felt uncomfortable listening to them because I perceived that she had negative attitudes toward those who did not meet her expectations.



Since a teenager, I had a strong desire to be a mother. As a little girl, my aspiration was not being a beauty queen, a flight attendant or even a doctor; instead, it was to have a lovely family with kids of my own. After getting married, we moved to live as a single family; however, once pregnant I had extremely bad morning sicknesses and we decided to move back to my parent's home. I had two boys; my first one was born in 2002, and the second one in 2005. During the first three years of my first son's life, even though I lavished him with my time and energy and put all my firmness of purpose on taking good care of him, I found difficulties to connect with him, and hardly understood what he really needed. The conflicts between my mom and I occurred alongside these situations. I tried to exercise the knowledge learned from the science of child psychology, to hold and hug him for a better connection. My mother favored punishment to mold the desired behavior, she said "It's not the way. He is stubborn and must be punished." This was just one example representing our conflicts.

Following the birth of my younger son, the older one was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder at three and a half years old. I was very determined to deal with the situation. I learnt new approaches and adopted them to solve my son's issues, also trying not to neglect my younger son. I also got a good offer from the company to work from home, responsible for special projects and created self-managed task force teams to support company's strategy. While things seemed to get better, I found myself reaching burnout. Without awareness at that time, I put high expectations on myself, in both work and life, and on others, especially my husband. I ended each day exhausted, fatigued as if I had no energy left. I was struggling. Wondering if I put more efforts, things would have got better; but if not, how I could have helped my son climbing up his developmental stage. My choice, at that time, was limited to this either/or dilemma. Starting to realize a need to change, I questioned what to change and how. I was an ordinary working person who strived for success in professional life. Unconscious and unaware, I also imagined myself a brilliant working mom who was able to manage both personal and professional lives successfully.

I took several meditation courses during the year of 2010-2011 but found that I could not have brought the practices to daily life. Yes, I learnt to relax and attain a peaceful mind when I was in the course, but in normal life, I behaved as aggressively as I did before. My question at that time was "Why can't I manage to live consciously in everyday life?". I realized later, at the age of forty-two, that I did not really know and understand myself. I, then, made a critical decision to take course in a master's degree program in Contemplative Education (CE). In the CE program, I gradually learnt and understood myself through various mindfulness-based processes. I did a thesis titled "The inner growth through the path of my motherhood", using narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2006) under the first-person research paradigm, which gave me vast opportunities for continuous self-reflection and transformation. Narrative inquiry was a methodology for studying experience to generate a new relation between a human being and the world, so that human had a new way of dealing with them (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquiry could have been done with the research participant (Smit, 2017); (Yi, 2014), or self-research.



However, using narrative inquiry in self-study required intensive mindful self-observation. Across this research, for Satipaṭṭhāna formal practicing, I engaged in Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna; contemplation or mindfulness of the body every day, and for Satipaṭṭhāna daily routine practicing, I executed Kāyānupassanā, Vedanānupassanā; contemplation of the feelings, Cittānupassanā; contemplation of the mind, and Dhammānupassanā; contemplation of the Dhammas as much as possible in daily life. I practiced Kāyānupassanā, mainly Iriyapatha Pabba and Sampajanna Pabba. For formal practice with Kāyānupassanā, I paid awareness attention on my walking, especially on the moving legs and how they touched on the floor. Moreover, during the day I paid awareness attention on the bodily actions; the hands movements, the body movement, or when my body was bending or stretching.

Objective

This research aimed to study the path of personal transformation towards the researchers' self-awareness practices as mindful motherhood.

Methodology

This research held the first-person research paradigm by employing the methodology of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006), with an autobiographical approach (Abrahao, 2012). This methodology allowed the researchers to investigate the inner experiences in the context of motherhood and the others related. There were three continuous and interrelated phases in executing this research: Data collection, data analysis, and data presentation.

1. Data collection: Data was collected from various sources, which included:

1.1 Written diaries for each son that demonstrated activities of the researchers with them, as well as the researchers' mindset behind (172 pages).

1.2 Personal journal, including all written self-reflection assignments that the researchers wrote every day during the study in the Contemplative Education program (324 pages). Self-reflection was a crucial process that integrated mindful self-observation. As a consequence of every day contemplating, this personal journal was a rich data for studying researchers' mindset, feelings, perceptions, as well as behaviors either in the present and reflected back to the past. This was an autobiographical piece of data.

1.3 Posts in social media that informed the current situations and how the researchers dealt with them (38 pages).

1.4 The other sources such as personal items, photographs, poems written in the past, as well as the researchers' memories. Memories were integrated as an important element in the autobiographical research (Abrahao, 2012).

Considering the timeline, these data were categorized into three periods:

1. The challenge period: Starting by the time the researchers delivered the first son and faced difficulties in dealing with him, as well as her mother.



2. The investigation period: When the researchers started to turn the camera back to mindfully investigate her own mind and gradually found some patterns that drove to her sufferings.

3. The old memories period: Along the path of inner investigation, it was the opportunity that the researchers looked back to some of her childhood experiences that conveyed some impacts to the present time.

2. Data analysis: This research employed context comprehensive analysis (Abraham, 2012) because it allowed the researchers to consider not only the data itself, but the deep meaning of such data and how it was obtained. Significant actions in this phase included:

2.1 The researchers implemented contemplative reading throughout the collected data.

2.2 After reading each day, the researchers narrated some points that precipitated her feelings and thoughts. In many times, extended stories were found out from such phenomena during this step. It also brought out some memories to be highlighted.

2.3 Every new narrated sheet from step 2.2 was collected systematically. They were reviewed and read repeatedly alongside the research process and the researchers might have generated new narratives again. This repetitive writing was the key action for narrative inquiry work. Please also note that all these steps required the quality of contemplation.

2.4 The researchers and her advisor possessed the conversations periodically to review the researchers' inquiring progress. This step provided a significant impact to the quality of the inquiry. Both researchers and the advisor also carried out mindful listening (Hanh, 1988); (Hanh, 2011) and together, we contemplated along these advising hours.

2.5 The researchers came back to read, reviewed, and worked on contemplative reading and writing (Step 2.1-2.4) as a repetitive process, until the data saturation requirement of the qualitative research was met (Saunders et al., 2018).

3. Data presentation: Writing narrative research was generally the process of inquiring knowledge (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Moreover, writing about own self was not only self-awareness, it rather was the meditative practice (Hanh, 2001). The research results were presented after data saturation was met. The final report was written with the intention to answer research objective.

Trustworthiness:

According to Lincoln & Guba (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), trustworthiness in this research was identified. Credibility to establish the credible and believable of results was achieved through the collection of adequacy materials and debriefing with research advisor. Confirmability to extend the confidence of the results was done by triangulation of several data sources and reflexive dialogue with research advisor. Data were collected and analyzed until data saturation was acquired. This research was under exemption review from Mahidol University Central IRB (MU-CIRB).



Confidentiality in autobiographical research:

In dealing with autobiographical research, it was undeniable to present the stories that involved the researchers' family members. The content presented had no intention to blame anyone. In contrary, it demonstrated the researchers' phenomenon inside. Along the research process, one critical learning was that those negative worldview derived from the researchers' misperception instead of the others' behaviors.

Research limitations:

This research reported two important limitations:

1. Technical difficulties: Data acquired and memories obtained might not have been fully collected. However, the researchers focused more on investigating the events and memories that obstructed the researchers' inner growth and to deal with it by contemplating along the process.

2. Defense mechanism: It was necessary to declare that the researchers were not always capable to avoid bias, fear, and hesitation along the investigation throughout this research. Mindfulness practice provided a crucial role that the researchers could have stood firm while the mind was running wild.

Mindfulness practices:

The researchers adopted dynamic mediation (Luangpor Teean Jittasupho, 2005) that aligned with Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna as formal mindfulness practice every day for at least 30 minutes. Moreover, along the process of data collection, data analysis, and data presentation, the researchers did it with contemplative quality on all four foundations of Satipaṭṭhāna (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), 2012); (Phra Debvedi (P.A. Payutto), 1988), either personally or during the conversations with the advisor.

Results and Discussion

Along the path of personal transformation toward self-awareness practice as mindful motherhood, there were three main themes arose as the results of this research; 1) Transformed daughterhood and motherhood; 2) The path to be free from the maze of the past and the future; and 3) Trust in living life and the faith in Dhamma. Next section explained more details of the results by using "I" statement to narrate them. Discussion of each theme was mentioned within.

Theme I: Transformed daughterhood and motherhood

Along my childhood while I had a closed relationship with my dad, I always perceived that mom did not give me enough love. Looking to her from the eyes of a little girl, I was always fearful; did not know how and what to do to satisfy her. She usually compared me with my older brother that he was calm, smart, and generous. I tried to do all the best in everything, either in the study or extra curriculum activities at school. I got so much admirations from the teachers and friends but not even some sweet words at home, especially from my mom. Since



a teenager, I had a strong desire to be a mother; having children of my own, and then, I would have raised them with all my love to bring all happiness to them.

The conflicts between me and my mother was blown out when I had my first child. My son was very sensitive to sounds, touches, and many circumstances. While he was agitated and distracted, we barely understood him. The best way to calm him was my hug; or carrying him around. However, what I dealt with my son were always not satisfactory to my mother. We had more and more conflicts in raising my child upon his growing up.

Reason for being a mother always related to childhood's experience. Bigner (1979) mentioned four basic reasons; 1) Existence; 2) Altruism; 3) Narcissistic; and 4) Instrumental. Initially, I believed that my reason was altruism. However, I learnt during the research process that I just would have liked to give signals to my mother that I could have been a better mother than her, to proof myself in the role of motherhood, and to ask for her approval. However, once I learnt that my mother went through a grief of losing her mother (My grandmother) at a very young age and this was why she had a tough personality. This realization released me from the old misperception and I could have felt fully loved from my mother since then.

Indeed, I did not really want my mom to understand me. I just only wanted to understand myself. When I really learned what happened to me as the little girl, it helped me realized my anger (In that moment) and I could have let it go.

My transformed childhood led to my motherhood transformation as well. I could have let go the egoism that I held the role of being a mother tightly. Hence, the tension from determination to deal with all situations had been untied. I could have stayed with my children in easier way, more comfort, and less expectation to them and to myself. This reflected the Buddha's words of "By helping oneself one helped others" (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P.A. Payutto), 2012); (Phra Debvedi (P.A. Payutto), 1990).

Theme II: The path to be free from the maze of the past and the future

Due to my hefty desire to be a mother, when my first child was born, I dedicated my time and energy raising him. However, I found difficulties in connecting and dealing with him. I really did not understand his reactions, his emotions, including what he needed. When he was diagnosed with autism at three and a half years old, some part of me felt relieved because this explained the sufferings I encountered. However, I was also anxious; worrying about the future of his entire life. In addition, my mind went back in the past and tried to work out what was wrong I made to him. Throughout those days, hence, my mind usually ran back and forth repeatedly.

I started practicing Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna according to Luangpor Teean Jittasubho's guideline at Somphanas Forest Temple in 2012, under the administration of Luangta Suriya Mahapanno. I repeated to practice in the program time by time and had applied it at home since then. The course of this practice was very helpful that I learnt to understand myself inside; what I felt, how I thought, why I did, along with others. Practicing Kāyānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna along the day also augmented the awareness level that my mind had grounded with the body,



hence, it flew back and forth less and less. In other words, I felt less trapped in those identified thoughts of anxiety and worry regarding the past and the future. Gradually, I felt more secured.

Raising children with developmental disabilities, especially autistic spectrum disorder, could have resulted in depression, stress, anxiety, and other negative impacts (Sukmak & Sangsuk, 2018). Being more in the present from Satipaṭṭhāna practice bolstered up my capabilities in dealing with the challenges. The observed pattern of my mind was flying to the future. Whenever my autistic child did something weird, my mind flew to imagine his faulty future and that made me so mad, hence I tried hard to correct everything he did. When I was free from the trapping pattern of thoughts, I had less judgment to his behaviors, had fewer stress, be calmer, less fear, and be much more welcome to any circumstance although the coming times were still uncertain. This impact aligned with the recent researches (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2021); (Cachia et al., 2016); (Osborn et al., 2021).

I started to realize that in the past, whenever my son did something awkward, my mind usually flew to the future, and that made me crazy. Now, I learned how to be in the present moment. Yes, I still had shaking and anxious feelings and I could have been aware of them while dealing with him. Feeling more grounded, more stable, although some shake was there in my mind.

When being untrapped, I conveyed a better connection to my son, which resulted in helping him to understand what was going on within his disoriented mind. This improved quality of mine was also extended to the relationship with others in the family as well. Earlier, while the situations of my child were so fearful and my mind was flying, I put the expectations not only to my son, but to my husband. That led to relationship illness among us. Once I was able to let go these expectations by freeing my mind from the identified future thoughts, I accepted the phenomena as it was with non-judgmental and non-striving manner (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). This brought more peace in my mind and the family.

Theme III: Trust in living life and the faith in Dhamma

"What was I born for?", this question arose sometimes since I was a teenager, and I used to answer that I was born to develop myself to be a better version of me. That was why I went here and there to capture the required skills, which I thought I would have been "Someone"; a remarkable, an outstanding, and admired one. In the past, I would have liked to be a memorable, a role model among the area I was in. When I held the motherhood role, I imagined myself as a perfect mother; a warm person full with shining of love who could have managed everything, both personally and professionally, in place. I also expected my children in the same way, to be the masterpieces of my life.

My autistic child came on earth to teach me about the truth of life; Aniccatā, the impermanence of everything. I used to achieve everything I wanted by putting efforts to accomplish it; If I did more, I would have gained more. But I could not have expected that in raising my child. I realized that it was not how much I did with him, it rather was the quality of



my mind to be with him moment by moment. When my eyes were opened to the natural truth of life, although some parts, I was surprised by the positive results I attained during that time.

I used to be so ambitious that, as a mother, I would have been able to raise a high-quality person to the world. I learnt from this research process that it was the idea of egoism; Attavādupādāna. I was clinging to the idea of self (Ajahn Chah, 2011); myself, my son, everything was mine; so, I was able to control everything and made what I needed to happen. Raising my autistic child taught me that although I delivered him on earth, but I was only one component. His life comprised many other factors than me, I was not the owner of his life. This realization peeled the armor of my ego. Although such realization, I had more energy to deal with him; to do what was needed, to do what should have been done at the right time. Even if I did something wrong, I welcomed that mistake and was willing to flow with all situations. I was more trustful to live in accordance to the rhythm of life.

Once I surrendered to the nature of life, my heart had been opened wide. My understanding was transformed from seeing abnormality of my autistic child to the perception that he was what he was. I bared more flexibility mindset, instead of either/or worldview. I laid down my life to the supreme faith, and to follow the Buddha's teaching. This decision made me felt grounded, and it led to the right effort; Sammāvāyāma, that I would have brought to my practice for the entire life.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

This research was executed under narrative inquiring process, of which continuous contemplative reading and writing had significant role. Although it was first-person research, gaining other person's view was helpful along the transformational process. In this sense, working hands in hands with the research advisor was very crucial in providing quality of the contemplation. Recent study illustrated the importance of safe space that involved human neurobiology, as it created the transformative learning atmosphere (Porges, 2022); (Wilson, 2023), and enabling attainability to higher brain function and spirituality (Porges, 2022).

Performing mindfulness practice (Satipaṭṭhāna) alongside, personally and during advising hours, led to the researchers' transformation. The researchers' transformed childhood from autobiographical study had a powerful impact on her transformed motherhood. Instead of clinging to the motherhood role egoism, the researchers learnt to balance herself (Figure 1). She gave a good care to her own inner self and did not allow the dominated motherhood role. Satipaṭṭhāna practices leveraged the researchers' quality of being in the present, so her mind wandered around less. Eventually, the researchers demonstrated trust on life as well as the faith in Buddha's teaching; Dhamma.

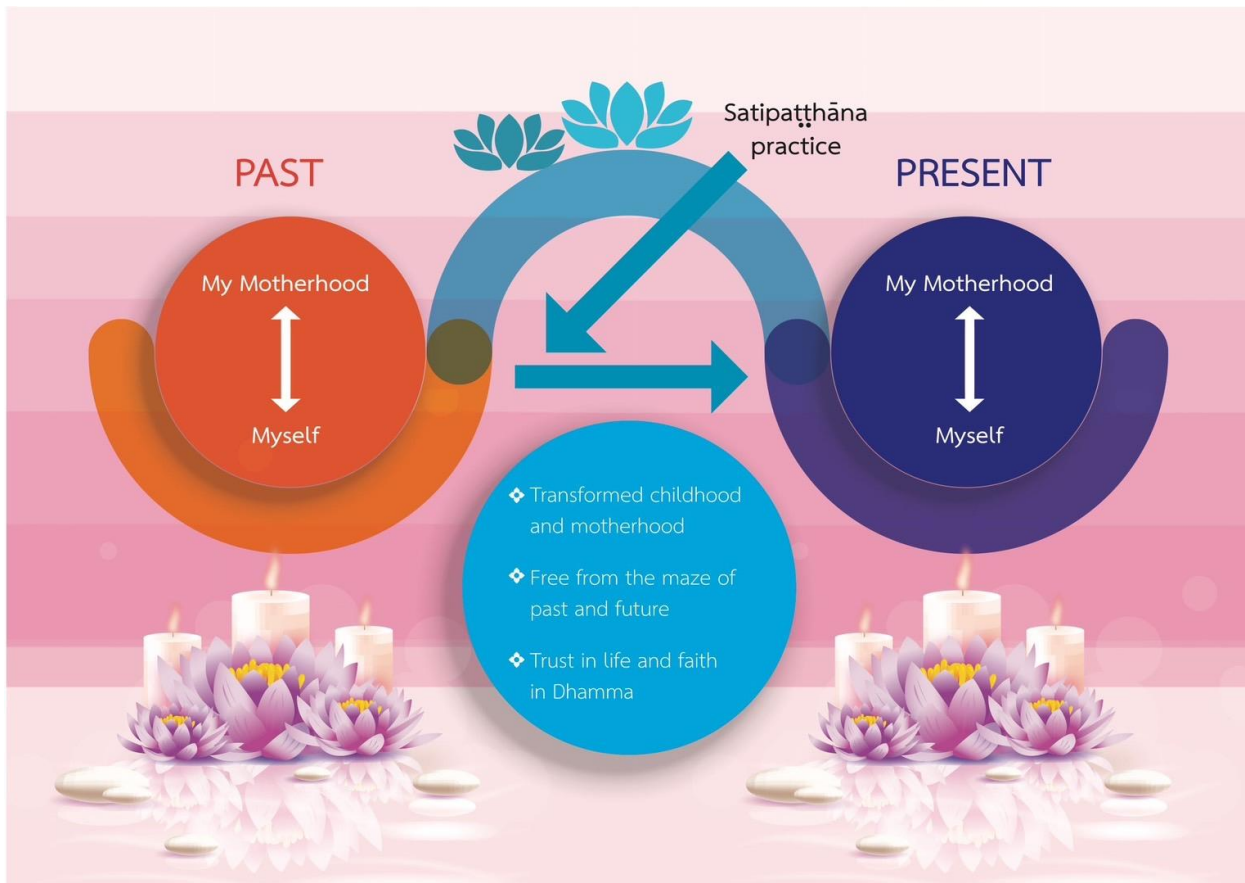


Figure 1 The researchers' inner growth from Satipaṭṭhāna practice

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, practicing Satipaṭṭhāna resulted in the researchers' transformational process. The whole research process gradually uplifted researchers' spiritual learning. The degree of awareness in the body enhanced the awareness of the mind; to realize what feelings and thoughts were going on. Ability of this mind observation helped to mold the behavior of being in the present moment. The researchers could have accepted the situation as it was by not being identified with unnecessary thoughts, thus, resulted in more secured in the midst of uncertain future. The outcome of this research suggested the value of applying Satipaṭṭhāna practices in routine life of a mother who was suffering from difficulties in raising her child. Although the situations remained as they were, one could have been freed from such suffering by leveraging his/her mindfulness practices. In other words, such suffering was transformed as well. Moreover, as recent studies revealed the involvement of safe space with neurobiology of higher brain functions and its importance in transformative learning those who played role in human development such as parents, teachers, or other professions should have been sensible to provide safe environment to their counterparts. Practicing mindfulness offered feeling of secured and could have been considered a prime strategy.



Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to thank the co-author, Dr. Himapan Ruktaengam, who contributed as the mentor throughout the research process, and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Chatchawan Silpakit, who insisted on the quality of mindfulness and suggested the linkage of safe space.

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