

MEDITATION RETREAT TOURISM IN THAILAND: ITS EMERGENCE IN TOURISM AND EFFECTS ON TOURISTS' HEALTH AND WELL- BEING

Manisa Piuchan

Chiang Mai University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Corresponding author:
Manisa Piuchan
manisa.p@cmu.ac.th

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Meditation retreat tourism is quite unique. The challenges in its technique, process and the benefits gained are reported to be worth the effort in reconciling the mind, body and spirit. Accordingly, this study examined the emergence and commodification of meditation retreat tourism and explored the effects on health and well-being of international meditation tourists in Thailand. A literature review and 33 on-site interviews were employed for data collection at international meditation centres. Results confirmed the existence of both direct and indirect establishments of commodifying the meditation retreat: 1) present at wellness and retreat resorts with numerous retreat packages that aided in the work of transmitting meditation as a commodity and 2) a traditional establishment at the monasteries that still embraced meditation far from commodification. Regarding the effects on health and well-being, international tourists perceived that the mind had been developed the most (mental well-being), followed by spiritual and physiological well-being. Results confirmed that the mind remained the key benefits as the focus of practicing meditation. Possessing a mind that is well-cultivated and powerful is believed to allow the individual to deal with any problems they face in everyday life. This proposition can be seen as the mind being reflected in the body and spirit. Further discussion was established to support the results.

Keywords: Tourism; meditation; retreat; health; well-being; wellness

1. INTRODUCTION

Meditation tourism is undoubtedly attached to pilgrimages and religious tourism in history (Conze, 2003; Poria et al., 2003; Vukonic, 1996; Wynne, 2007). Initially, meditation does not seem to be overtly recreational or leisure-like, but it does allude to leisure pursuits. In some sense, it is similar to religious tourism as the latter also offers a variety of artefacts, activities and events in the way tourist attractions are presented to attract tourists without any direct link to religion (Choe et al., 2015; Poria et al., 2003). Even religious tourism, which should embrace strong beliefs and religious components, seems likely to be perceived and acted upon in a secular manner. Meditation tourism today emerges from pilgrimage and religious tourism as it shifts to a secular form (Hecht, 2008; Tseng and Shen, 2014; Vipassana Research Institute, 2010). For instance,

meditation has been demonstrated without regard to any Buddhist scripture, doctrine or ritual which consequently remove other aspects of their religiosity (Britton et al., 2014; Choe et al., 2015; Pelled, 2007; Schedneck, 2013; Sharf, 2015). Tourism becomes a platform that brings out a secular meditation through the international tourists from different cultural backgrounds, and meditation is transformed to match the nature of nonreligious values to match modern value (Betty, 2013; Britton et al., 2014; Einstein, 2008). Meditation tourism has been discussed under various tourism field categories, such as spiritual tourism and health and wellness tourism (Aggarwal et al., 2008; Kelly, 2012; Norman, 2012; Ryan, 2001; Smith and Puczkó, 2009). In short, the current study investigates a meditation practice as a retreat activity and defines meditation retreat tourism as the primary travel activity of tourists to engage in a meditation retreat activity during their holiday or travel to destinations where a meditation retreat is one of their targeted activities during their holiday period.

This study has two objectives. Firstly, it aims to study the emergence and commodification of meditation retreat tourism in Thailand. Accordingly, the author gathered and analysed information from various study fields, mostly from religious articles that discuss the origin of meditation, including Asian studies and tourism studies. Secondly, it aims to explore the effects of a meditation retreat on international tourists' health and well-being in Thailand. The interviews were employed, and the computer software QDA miner 5 was used for a better analysis. With a rising interest from international tourists and few existing studies about meditation retreat tourism, the current study could supplement the information in the tourism field and shed light on meditation retreat as one of the tourism activities in a secular form. This paper is separately presented in two parts via the study objectives.

2. MEDITATION RETREAT TOURISM

The terms 'meditation tourism' and 'meditation retreat tourism' are relatively new in reference to tourism. The use of these terms is inconsistent and lacks a strong structure. An emergent field of research which enables the sketching of provisional boundaries and its association with other spiritual tourism such as yoga tourism, health and wellness tourism and holistic retreat tourism, appears to have an excessive overlapping discussion in its structure and practice (Bone, 2015; Heintzman, 2013; Kelly, 2012; Lehto et al., 2006; Norman, 2012; Smith and Puczkó, 2009; Voigt et al., 2011). Table 1 provides the definitions from a few related studies to meditation retreat tourism.

Table 1: Definitions of Meditation from Different Fields

Author(s)	Definition
Eddy (2012)	A meditation retreat is to spend time apart from everyday life during which outside distractions are minimised in order to intensify one's meditation practice. The primary function of the intensive meditation retreat is to separate the meditators from everyday awareness and facilitate entry into a liminal state.
Kelly (2012)	Retreats in a contemporary, secular, wellness tourism context; however, are usually specific places where visitors can stay to engage with a programme of activities that aim to balance.
Norman and Pokorny (2017)	Meditation retreats are understood as opportunities for individuals to refine their meditation practice and develop habit to promote well-being.
Ryan (2001)	A mentally discursive form of prayer which employs rational thought and imagination.
Tseng and Shen (2014)	Defines meditation tourism as a leisure activity to calm one's mind and body and increase one's strength, both mentally and spiritually.

Throughout the scholarly journals, the particular term 'meditation tourism' initially appeared in 2004 (Santana, 2004), and the word 'meditation tourism' became the main study object in the work of Tseng and Shen (2014). However, the above continued to hold limited reference in exploring meditation retreats in tourism, thereby challenging its denotative and connotative meanings.

Moreover, the difference between 'meditation tourism' and 'meditation retreat tourism' might be distinguished by the practicing period and commitment to meditation practice. Meditation tourism may be broadening and become an umbrella for all types of meditation practices. Meditation tourism can range from meditation session in the hotel meeting room, 1-2 hours training in a yoga studio or a spa, to a more intense meditation for an entire day or week. For the term 'meditation retreats', it emphasises on the specific period

that a person commits him/herself to practice meditation, follows the rules, to be in a scheduled practice and must be in a residential programme with controlled environment and atmosphere. These qualifiers make meditation retreat very intense and are believed to provide enhanced overall well-being results.

Furthermore, several works of Norman (Norman, 2004; 2011; 2012; Norman and Pokorny, 2017) critiqued various spiritual practices including meditation and encouraged scholars to use a term more specifically and directly connected it to its subject/activity/purpose to create a clearer picture of the field of spiritual tourism and distinguish it from the field of religious studies. This proposition might bridge the gap of the divergent conceptions of the terms. Thus, the term 'meditation retreat tourism' seems to be a straightforward description of the subject, and it represents the type of tourism activity tourists engage in. Using this term may create a clear picture for the exploration of the phenomenon and the study of tourist behaviours.

Spiritual, wellness and holistic tourism scholars have advocated the definition through the integration of its relationship among retreats, pilgrimage/religious and health/wellness tourism given that meditation methods were initially rooted in religion, a pathway to fulfil individual belief and wisdom, recently as an activity to preliminarily calm one's mind and later to rejuvenate the overall health of practitioners. Meditation tourism can be explained as travelling and experiencing any form of meditation during a holiday or travelling with a purpose to participate in meditation courses/retreats. Possible multiple purposes are identified in choosing meditation retreats, such as relaxation, self-development or rejuvenation of health and well-being (Kelly, 2012; Norman, 2004; Santana, 2004; Smith and Puczkó, 2009; Tseng and Shen, 2014). The various groups of meditation tourists seek in meditation tourism are cultural, religious or health/wellness tourists (Santana, 2004). They travel for personal discovery, self-reflection and the maintenance of well-being; they tend to seek the atmosphere of isolated places away from the manic cycle and pace of life to practise meditation without distractions (Santana, 2004; Smith, 2013).

According to the above discussions, this study defines 'meditation retreat tourism' as one kind of tourism whereby tourists spend their holidays to stay in the residential places and participate in meditation and make a self-commitment to join organised meditation retreats. Meditation can be the primary or secondary travel activity that tourists have the desires to engage in during the holidays.

3. EMERGENCE OF MEDITATION RETREAT IN TOURISM

The study first aimed to utilise the secondary data by reviewing the literature. The literature traced the origin of meditation from the ancient past; Buddhist meditation was limited to monks whose ultimate goal on the Buddhist path was to attain enlightenment through meditation and was accessible only to those individuals who had been ordained as a Buddhist monk (Altobello, 2009; Baltruschat, 2010; Conze, 2003; Scott, 2009; Thondup, 2014). However, its current decontextualised nature has allowed the laity and non-Buddhists access to Buddhist meditation for self-discovery, relaxation and stress reduction (Choe et al., 2015; Rosch, 2007; Schedneck, 2013). Meditation has been inserted to various new contexts of modernity itself. For example, meditation has been broadly utilised as a useful technique for psychological and clinical therapies and experiments (Galante et al., 2014; Hanley et al., 2014; Jacob et al., 2009; Josefsson et al., 2011; Krygier et al., 2013; Reverend et al., 2013; Van der Riet, 2011; Victorson et al., 2015); it has also grown into becoming a tourism commodity through the continuing and progressive growth of interest for practising meditation and the presence of a considerable discussion on meditation outside the religious context (Choe et al., 2015; Lengyel, 2015; Ryan, 2001; Schedneck, 2012; Smith and Kelly, 2006b; Tseng and Shen, 2014).

In Thailand, both direct and indirect establishments of commodifying the meditation retreat exist. The direct establishment noticeably occurs because of the utilisation of meditation in wellness and retreat programmes through the transition of the health and wellness resorts. Numerous retreat packages aid in the work of transmitting a meditation as a commodity. Today, a wellness traveller's interest evolves far beyond spa and body treatment and moves towards a holistic and transformational experience. The rising stress in modern society also reflects to tourism capturing this niche market. Thailand has witnessed this burgeoning secular meditation market. The well-developed resorts are primarily serving leisure vacationers with added emphasis on rejuvenating health and well-being. With direct establishment, health and wellness resorts demonstrate fully commercialised meditation by including a meditation session in their residential retreat packages to customers interested in the rejuvenating programme.

A meditation retreat in this commercial setting has been disengaged from the religious roots and has become an entirely secular and non-institutionalised activity. Many of the leisure visitors mostly appreciate the way meditation is internationally presented to markets. With an exchange of all convenience facilities and the aesthetic atmosphere, the cost of the residential programme is relatively high. To demonstrate, the 'Natural

Renewal retreat', one of the retreat packages by Chiva-Som Thailand, offers off-peak rate in 2017 for five nights starting from 100,000 Thai Baht (2,920 USD). In return, the guest who typically sets high expectations in any changes on health and well-being scarcely admits disappointment.

The commercial retreat resorts have developed its unique packages to strengthen their brands and become a commodity in the market. The programme is well-established to keep a promise as the outcomes have been reasonably expected in revitalising health and well-being. Moreover, the commitment emphasises on transformation, holistic approach and life balance with the marketing brochures and websites. For most luxury retreats, presenting a meditation is highly personalised by combining it with a variety of alternative health treatments and therapies to reunite the mind, body and spirit in balance. In particular, the well-equipped facilities are included such as Bioelectrical Impedance Analysis (BIA) and consultation with specialists.

Retreat resorts seem to introduce the programmes to enhance mental health and well-being in luxury settings by translating health-oriented behaviours of people into their holiday choices. Tourists have increasing interest in emotional and mental well-being. Attitude towards wellness shifts in various opinions. For example, perfection in life becomes out dated, whereas a balanced life is appreciated given that living well/well-being is perceived essential and realistic for ordinary life. For commercialised meditation providers found in luxury retreats and resorts, a direct monetary exchange is set in exchange for full service and convenient facilities. This exchange is reported differently from the indirect establishment of meditation retreat tourism in Thailand.

Table 2: Examples of Holistic Retreat Resorts in Thailand

Name	Province	Declared Category
Chiva-Som	Hua Hin	Health and wellness resort
Kamalaya	Koh Samui	Health and wellness resort
The Sanctuary	Koh Phangan	Health and wellness resort
Absolute Sanctuary	Koh Samui	Health and wellness resort
Asumi healing	Phuket	Retreat centre
Pavana Chiang Mai resort	Chiang Mai	Health and wellness resort
Tao Garden, Chiang Mai	Chiang Mai	Health and wellness resort
Museflower Retreat	Chiang Rai	Retreat centre
Orion Healing Center	Koh Phangan	Detox centre
Amanpuri resort	Phuket	Upscale luxury resort
Jirung Health Village	Chiang Mai	Health and wellness resort

With indirect establishment in Thailand, meditation is exhibited in light of monastic-based meditation retreat that still embraces meditation far from commodification. A meditation retreat in this setting remains undefined in the process of the fundamental meaning of trade/monetary exchange of commodification because of income being on a donation basis instead of exact fees (Schedneck, 2014; Singh, 2007). This phenomenon might be because meditation is perceived as a traditional non-commercial activity by the places that offer the experience as a gift and do not demand rewards and if they were in place that would diminish the aesthetic pleasure (Ezzy, 2001; Outka, 2008). Ezzy (2001) suggests that skills, knowledge, experience, trust and relationship are the essential parts of non-commercial forms of exchange.

For monastic-based meditation, commodifying meditation and marketing are morally inappropriate ways to be presented as a commercial product to mass market, unless tourists have a particular interest in meditation. Those interested in meditation will exert an effort to approach meditation and the meditation providers. Such tourism marketing may render meditation more approachable or more commercialised than others, but the essence of its aim and practice will be reduced and destroyed. The distinction of secular meditation under the premise of monasteries was not quite as clear cut as that made by the wellness and retreat resorts or private meditation/retreat centres. Location, sculptures and the attendance of priests indicate the ceremonial presence of a monastery even if the division of secular meditation was situated independently. This settlement pattern presented an affiliation of a monastic nature. Therefore, it remained a perceived distinctive form of non-material culture relating to a monastic label.

4. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING BENEFITS FROM MEDITATION RETREATS

4.1 Overview of meditation retreat benefits

The growth of capitalist societies and advances in medical technologies has brought about longevity and an ever increasing absence of disease and has led to a concern for better care of one's emotional and spiritual lives (Smith and Kelly, 2006b). The recent trend for Western tourists (North American and European

markets) is to seek solace in Eastern philosophies and therapies, including Buddhist meditation; additionally, the search for personal renewal, health and well-being maintenance is set to continue increasing (Smith and Kelly, 2006a; The World Tourism Organization, 2011). Unprecedented rapid growth has been observed in the business of spiritual and retreat centres, holistic retreats and alternative therapies, particularly for locations in cultures possessing the original philosophies (Bennett et al., 2004; Kelly, 2012; Smith and Kelly, 2006b). This practice has become an alternative tourist activity and has been turned into various forms of interest for cultivating and relaxing the mind, releasing stress, self-exploration, gaining a better understanding of the nature incidents that occur in life (i.e. dealing with loss, grief, anger) and gaining an ability to cope with those situations with mindfulness and understanding. All these benefits of the meditation practice might be one of the reasons for tourists who travel for meditation as many studies have mentioned (i.e. Choe et al., 2015; Santana, 2004; Schedneck, 2012; Smith and Kelly, 2006a; 2006b; Smith and Puczko, 2009; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2008; Tseng and Shen, 2014).

The mind is the main focus of practicing meditation. Possessing a mind that is well-cultivated and powerful can allow the individual to deal with any problems they face in everyday life. This ability can be seen as the mind being reflected in the body and spirit (Laing and Weiler, 2008; Smith, 2003). With these benefits, meditation is promoted as a form of mental therapy and a corresponding physical behaviour that leads to euphoria (Kelly, 2010; The World Tourism Organization, 2011). Today, meditation tourism has been promoted internationally. It is being advertised to attract tourists by specifying the benefits gained from meditation through media, online sessions, social networks or printed material (Lengyel, 2015; Schedneck, 2012; 2016; Smith, 2003; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2008; 2015). Thailand is one of renowned meditation destinations offering meditation to international tourists (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2008; The World Tourism Organization, 2011).

4.2 Methodology

To answer the second objective of this study, interviews were selected to gather data and the research sites were the international meditation centres located in Thailand. Notably, this study has focused on a secular meditation which had less sense of Buddhist doctrine, and English was the required language of instruction. Therefore, the meditation courses with Buddhist doctrines and requiring the code of belief were excluded from this study. The study disengaged the meditation courses designed for Thai-Buddhists because their purpose for participating in meditation involved the merit for a better life and the belief in religion which differed from foreigners' viewpoints.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (2008) had recommended 13 meditation centres for international tourists to visit. However, the author had contacted all centres in 2016 and found that five centres were deactivated due to the absence of foreign applicants during the time of data collection, and two centres did not allow the author to disturb the meditators. Therefore, only six international meditation centres were included in this study. Table 3 illustrated the study site of meditation retreat tourism in Thailand.

Table 3: Study Sites

Name of Study Site	Province
The International Dharma Hermitage of Wat Suan Mokkh	Suratthani
Chom Thong Insight Meditation Centre	Chiang Mai
Wat Pa Tum Wua	Mae Hong Son
Wat Pananachat	Ubon Ratchathani
Wat Rampoeng	Chiang Mai
Doi Suthep Vipassana Meditation Centre	Chiang Mai

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site from July to September 2016 which in total covered 33 international meditation tourists. Interviews as a qualitative technique have been proven effective in examining meditation experience (Lomas et al., 2015). Interviews enable the researcher to explore richness, depth and understanding in their natural setting (Maxwell, 2013; Veal, 2011) and to access individuals' values at a deeper level than those obtained from formal questionnaires (Saengphueng, 2014). The interview data collection followed the non-probability convenience sampling method and volunteering. This research heeded the suggestion in the spiritual retreat study of Bone (2015). The respondents were selected on the basis of who were at the meditation centres during the time of conducting the fieldwork and their willingness to be interviewed. At the departure point after completing the course, each respondent was asked to participate in the face-to-face interview by the interviewer. The interview was set on the day of departure because the respondents might still be absorbed in the practice. Knox and Burkard (2009) recommended that face-to-face interviews could help observe both the verbal answers given by the interviewees and the non-verbal data such

as gestures and facial expressions. The non-verbal cues might reveal hidden information that could enrich and supplement the spoken words. This interview was conducted on a one-by-one basis. Each interview took approximately 35 min. with English as the interviewing language.

The qualitative analysis software 'QDA Miner version 5' was used to facilitate data analysis and code recognition by visually organising the data through matrices and frequency of occurrences of codes within and across cases. This computer-aided qualitative data analysis could enhance consistency. Regarding the method of interviewing, more than one attribute could be extracted from the interview respondents.

Once the interviews were coded by using the QDA miner software, Arora and Stoner (2009) suggested utilising Jaccard's coefficient of similarity (JCS) to cluster the co-occurrences of various codes. The JCS ranged from zero to one and could be interpreted similar to a correlation coefficient. According to Provalis Research (2009), when clustering codes, several options were available to define the co-occurrence and selected which similarity index should be computed from the observed co-occurrences. The QDA Miner used an average-linkage hierarchical clustering method to create clusters from a similarity matrix. The result was presented in the form of a dendrogram. Codes that tended to appear together were combined at an early stage, whereas those independent from one another or those that did not appear together tended to be combined at the end of the agglomeration process.

4.3 Results

Regarding the profile of the interview respondents, international tourists taking meditation retreat were heterogeneous. The respondents contained 15 nationalities. Other nationalities were the largest group reported at 36.4% and consisted of three Israelis, two Swedes and one of the following: Turkish, Mexican, Lebanese, Hungarian, Brazilian, Swiss and French. For a specific nationality, 27.3% of respondents were Germans. Respondents were predominantly from Europe and North America with a minority from Asian countries. Among them, 60.6% were male and 39.4% were female. The majority of people who have taken the meditation retreat were the early working-age populations, 42.4% indicated their age range from 26-35. As for their civil status, 84.8% of respondents were single. As for their beliefs, 45.5% of the respondents believed in Buddhism, followed by 30.3% who did not identify their personal belief/religions, 12.1% indicated Christianity; others such as atheist, agnostic, spiritual and had their own belief.

Table 4 presented the benefits received from a meditation retreat in this current study. The most popularly perceived benefit by 63.60% of the respondents pertained to emotions and feelings. The second in rank was at 51.50% which pertained to developing concentration, and the third at 48.50% pertained to staying in peace, bodily rest and behavioural changes.

Table 4: Perceived Benefits from Meditation Retreats (Ranked by Percentage of Cases)

Rank	Code	Cases	% Cases	Benefit Category
1	Emotions and feelings	21	63.60%	MWB
2	Developing concentration	17	51.50%	MWB
3	Peaceful/Calm/Patience	16	48.50%	MWB
	Bodily rest and behaviour changes	16	48.50%	PWB
4	Mind purifying	14	42.40%	MWB
	Holistic health approach	14	42.40%	HH
5	Rejuvenating yourself	13	39.40%	HH
6	Relaxation and improving your life	9	27.30%	HH
	Better in mind controls	9	27.30%	MWB
7	Self-discovery/Self-understanding	8	24.20%	SWB
	Understanding and accepting the realities	8	24.20%	MWB
8	Stress reduction	6	18.20%	PWB
	Self-transformation	6	18.20%	SWB
9	Sleep quality	4	12.10%	PWB
10	Healing a physical health condition	3	9.10%	PWB
	Reducing headache	3	9.10%	PWB

Note: 1. Interviewees had multiple responses.

2. MWB = mental well-being/PWB = physiological well-being, SWB = spiritual well-being/HH = holistic health

Later, the initial codes were categorised into three main areas consisting of mental well-being (mind), physiological well-being (body) and spiritual well-being (spirit). However, some concerns were raised about the holistic health from many responses. The author kept them as one of the benefits given that these responses could not be classified into a particular well-being theme. Therefore, the four health and well-being benefits were finalised as shown in Figure 1.

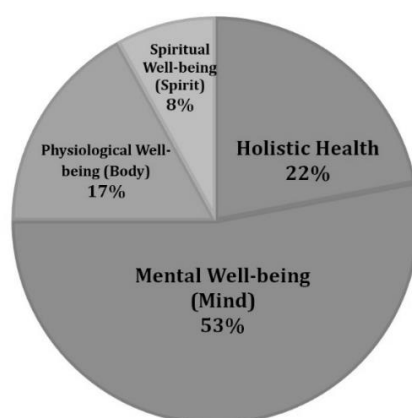


Figure 1: Percentages of Health and Well-being Benefits (Grouped by Distribution of Code Frequency)

Figure 1 indicated that the productive meditation retreat brought great benefits to mental well-being (53%), followed by holistic health (22%), physiological well-being (17%) and spiritual well-being (8%). Under mental well-being, the meditation retreat granted them the technique to improve their emotional stability, become more aware of their reactions, attain mental purification (i.e. non-judgmental attitude, peace, less suffering) and strengthen the mind to be prepared in facing life's difficulties. Respondents described that meditation led them to overcome their fears, worries and negative feelings.

To illustrate, one respondent perceived that meditation helped cleanse the defilement of the mind and unpleasant mental strains.

Definitely good, this helps my mind a lot... I feel my mind is spotlessly clean and I feel the strains that stayed deeper in my thoughts and my consciousness is getting well-managed. I can feel I have more positive insight in my mind... (R26)

With a concentration benefit, respondents perceived that they experienced improvement in various aspects of life. For example, a male Israeli respondent demonstrated that the pursuit of concentration provided a route to a better life improvement such as making fewer mistakes.

I learn to be a person to a closer moment and concentrate on doing and being at the present moment with attention to details. With concentration and focus in presence, this brings a lot of the positive insights to my life, better quality, less confused, less mistakes, less accidents... (R14)

One beauty of meditation is bringing people to understand reality with a state of calm and mindfulness. Instead of focusing on fears and worries, it teaches focus on the present moment and removes some worries. When the mind and emotion reach calmness, the mind would be stable, not tempted and distracted. With a state of calm, those feelings became less powerful and finally less emotionally attached.

For holistic health improvement, numerous answers exhibited that the stress of modern life was the cause of sickness. These issues included work overload, worry and mental strain, anxiety, lack of sleep or other bad habits and smartphone syndrome, to name a few. All had a profound effect on people's holistic health and well-being. People travel for temporary rest and rejuvenation, but some search for further improvement or strengthening of their health and well-being through a more psychological and spiritual approach rather than an exclusively physical focus. To demonstrate, one westerner demonstrated how her life and environment caused sickness in the mind. She began questioning about her life as she drove herself hard to achieve something but was never satisfied. The problem was the mind that caused every unsatisfying existence. Furthermore, a rare opportunity to explore stillness occurred in a routine life, but stillness could be found in meditation as a base of its practice. Other respondent statements were given below as examples.

...I mean in the western culture, we do not have a culture or tradition to focus and calm your mind and please yourself. We are living in a hectic world which becomes a cause of stress. For meditation, it is a very good way to stay with myself, learn how to please myself in a good way. (R02)

It is like a holistically health possession. And it depends on the intellect and attempt to involve them in simple ways. This is how to start the meditation practice. And it is true that meditation benefits myself in all sides, mind, body and spirit. Because when you watch your mind, you pay more attention what is happening inside. Then, it may distress you...lower and lower because the mind is connected with your body. So, your physical health is getting a little better... (R05)

Although the benefits were notably more related to mental health and inner feelings rather than a physical experience, some evidence still mentioned about the physiological benefits of meditation such as relieving muscle tension, sleep quality, comfortable breathing and body system improvement. One common result was an example of mind and body reflection. A worried mind has a related effect on sleep quality. Therefore, considering that the respondents were in retreat, the sleep quality improved. Worry disturbs the peace of mind. If this problem persists, the immediate effect occurs at night when asleep. Consequently, it causes other symptoms and even worse. Moreover, physical exhaustion is typically prolonged by stress and worry.

I think my health is improving a lot. Sleep is smooth all night. I used to have to problem with it. Less stress helps a good sleep...(R08)

...I can say I had migraine before. I put so much attention when I had a headache which actually was more painful and getting worse. But I learned to give up my focus on that pain. If the mind is not focused in the pain, I can continue to live with it. And yes, there was still the physical pain left, but I feel less painful since my mind is not included in the pain. That is why people say your mind is a bigger control than the body itself. (R10)

The last is spiritual well-being. Respondents illustrated that meditation was focused on the self and could be seen as a self-strengthening exercise. The practice helped respondents self-reflect to understand themselves better than before. People spend their time for something they deem important in life, struggle with a hectic life but pay little attention to rejuvenate themselves from the inside. This process diminishes people's inspiration, keep them in low spirit or make them unhappy when encountering hurdles. Some statements from the respondents are provided below as examples.

...I can stay focused, stay calm and I feel like I enjoy my time with my family, my friends and others around me. I feel like I learn to be more open-minded and giving more kindness to other people since I begin to accept the differences which actually make me feel very good. And I think I gain it from taking a retreat here. (R02)

Meditation is like losing the mind and harsh thoughts that I often put myself with, which prevented me from happiness. Meditation was used to practise the mind to accept what is happening in reality. Something happening in life was uncontrollable, people had to admit and understand the realities. If you understand, you will get less suffering. (R14)

5. CONCLUSION

Meditation retreat tourism is developing along with two schools of thoughts; indirect and direct establishment of commodification. However, this study believes that both will continue at their own pace to develop meditation practices in the tourism field. Today, holiday and traditional rituals in all economically advanced nations are new opportunities for corporations to advertise and sell goods and services (Jenkins and Pigram, 2004). Offering meditation retreat courses is becoming more internationally oriented and adopted to the tastes of the tourists (Schedneck, 2013; 2015; 2016). Several existing discussions on the modification of meditation methods decrease the sense of religious orientation, and religious rules have been accommodated to target a secular group of interest (Choe et al., 2015; Schedneck, 2012; 2014). Consumers seem to shape the paths to the commodification of meditation in the nearer future as well as the emergence in tourism.

For the benefits of meditation, when chaotic thoughts and subsequent feelings diminish, the meditators begin to experience stillness inside. This process allows the revelation of the true essence hidden beneath the ego to the meditators. Although the main benefit of a meditation retreat is mental well-being improvement, tourists also have the opportunity for holistic health and well-being rejuvenation. The study of Smith (2003) and Tseng and Shen (2014) similarly indicated that meditation had strengthened peoples' minds, bodies and spirits, which rendered this activity more popular as people appreciated these benefits. The

expansiveness of the uses of meditation has been accepted as a safe way of balancing one's physical, emotional and mental states as well as a way of relaxing from the stress of everyday life (Krygier et al., 2013; Shonin et al., 2014). Furthermore, the benefits of engaging in meditation practice seem to be long-lasting if people keep in practice (Choe et al., 2015; Schedneck, 2014; Tseng and Shen, 2014), whereas most holiday activities enhance well-being merely in the short term (Nawijn, 2011; Tuo et al., 2014; Voigt et al., 2011).

The current study is based on a meditation retreat founded in Thailand. The effects of practising meditation might be reported differently in other contexts, cultural background and the degree of practice. Evidence also supports that meditation is beneficial to an individual if one appreciates the technique and the meditation master. Lastly, this current study reported the results from tourist perceptions and not lab-based studies. Some benefits could not be clearly measured.

6. IMPLICATIONS

For theoretical implication, this study has broadened the knowledge about meditation retreat tourism and added evidence to tourism study as a single tourism field without being sub-sectors of other tourism types. Accordingly, previous studies strongly suggest examining a single object/activity to clarify specific types of tourism (Choe et al., 2015; Norman, 2012; Régi et al., 2016). Firstly, the study has expanded the contributions, particularly the literature on meditation retreat tourism, enhanced the knowledge in its emergence in tourism and provides an evidence of perceived benefits to health and well-being. These points raise adequate knowledge for the meditation retreat in the tourism field.

Secondly, this study provides an extension of benefits to tourists' health and well-being through an investigation of actual meditation tourists. Studies have scarcely been conducted in this type of tourism context. These details may benefit the tourism literature where the observed objects are uncontrollable and cater to various backgrounds which differ from other controllable groups as seen in psychology studies, where major discourses of well-being have been investigated. Tourism is diversifying and evolving under dissimilar conditions. These views summarise the contribution that this study makes to tourism literature. Moreover, this study contributes to the literature by introducing some solely based viewpoints, namely, meditation retreats in tourism. These perspectives also extend from spiritual tourism and health and wellness tourism with their rigorous earlier discussions. By obtaining adequate knowledge particularly in meditation retreat tourism, strategies and policies can be developed to raise meditation retreat tourism with better international visibility whilst maintaining the core essence of the practice.

Finally, this study provides several implications which may be helpful for the tourism industry. Firstly, knowledge of meditation retreat tourism and their different benefits may help in the prediction of consumption of a particular tourism product and help a destination meet the desire of tourists from different markets. It helps public organisations such as the Tourism Authority of Thailand, to set clear strategic goals to a specific type of tourism. Establishing an effective tourism marketing strategy creates opportunities to accurately target the tourism market. This strategy opens an opportunity to promote visit intentions of other tourists who have not travelled to a destination to participate in meditation retreats for better health and well-being.

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