The Politics of Inner Peace: Yoga, Mindfulness, and Civic Agency in Educational Policy and Practice

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transformative role of contemplative practices, particularly yoga and mindfulness, in reimagining civic education within post-conflict and transitional societies. Drawing from qualitative interpretive analysis, the study critically examines how national education frameworks in India and Cambodia incorporate or neglect, inner development as a foundation for civic agency. Framed within Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which advocates education for global citizenship and sustainable peace, this research explores the pedagogical and policy-level potential of integrating ethical self-awareness, emotional regulation, and mindfulness into civic curricula. Through theoretical engagement with contemplative pedagogy (Hart, Zajonc, Palmer), civic identity theory (Westheimer, Allen, Dewey), and affective learning, the paper argues that sustainable democratic participation must be rooted in inner awareness and ethical responsibility. Case studies from India's National Education Policy and Cambodia's Peace Education initiatives provide comparative insights into cultural adaptation, policy barriers, and civic outcomes. The findings suggest that yoga and mindfulness practices do not only enhance emotional literacy and trauma resilience but also lay the groundwork for more compassionate, participatory democratic engagement. The study concludes by proposing a contemplative civic learning model and calling for future research into youth-led and context-sensitive models of "political education of the heart."

Keywords: Contemplative pedagogy; civic agency; mindfulness in education; yoga; affective learning; emotional literacy; political socialization; democratic participation.

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I. Introduction

In recent years, the field of education has witnessed a significant shift toward contemplative pedagogies that prioritize inner transformation, ethical reflection, and emotional resilience. This movement has emerged in parallel with global educational frameworks such as UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which explicitly calls for education to foster global citizenship, sustainable development, and the promotion of peace, human rights, and cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2017). Scholars such as Hart (2004) argue that contemplative education cultivates the "interiority" necessary for deep moral reflection, self-awareness, and socially responsible action, qualities often missing from traditional, cognitive-heavy learning paradigms.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated global concern for social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental well-being, particularly among youth. OECD reports (2021) highlight that the psychological toll of the pandemic has prompted schools worldwide to rethink education beyond academic achievement, placing renewed emphasis on empathy, resilience, and emotional regulation. Authors like Maloney with his colleagues (2016) indicate that SEL not only enhances well-being but also strengthens democratic habits such as cooperation, conflict resolution, and community engagement. Despite these global shifts, a critical gap remains between theoretical civic education frameworks and the lived realities of democratic participation, particularly among youth in transitional or post-conflict societies. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) analyse how civic education often defaults to formal knowledge (e.g., government structures) while neglecting the emotional and ethical dimensions of civic identity. In post-conflict settings like Cambodia or postcolonial democracies like India, this gap is even more pronounced, as civic participation is shaped not only by institutional access but by historical trauma, social fragmentation, and a lack of trust in public institutions (McEvoy-Levy, 2018; South Asia Collective, 2020).

Thus, emerging literature suggests that contemplative practices, particularly yoga and mindfulness, can provide a culturally resonant and psychologically restorative foundation for civic re-engagement. (Zajonc, 2013) proposes that contemplative practices awaken a sense of interconnectedness and ethical responsibility, thereby complementing formal democratic education. These practices, rooted in Eastern philosophical traditions, are not merely wellness strategies but pedagogical tools capable of addressing the emotional and spiritual gaps in civic life.

Current educational paradigms often fall short in cultivating the kind of civic agency necessary for sustainable and participatory democracies. Scholars such as Allen (2006) argue that contemporary youth face a civic landscape marked by alienation, apathy, and emotional detachment, particularly in post-conflict or transitional societies. In Cambodia, for instance, research by McLoughlin (2019) reveals that despite civic education reforms, many young people express skepticism toward democratic institutions and lack meaningful opportunities for engagement. This civic disengagement is compounded by an education system that, as Biesta (2015) notes, prioritizes standardized knowledge over moral development and character formation. Formal civic education often becomes a "tick-box" exercise, delivering content without nurturing the inner emotional and ethical capacities that underpin active citizenship. As a result, students may know the mechanics of voting or governance but lack the empathy, mindfulness, or ethical grounding to participate constructively in civic life. Furthermore, there is a widespread neglect of inner transformation as a legitimate foundation for civic engagement. Authors such as Palmer (2000) emphasize that inner life, our capacity for compassion, reflection, and courage, forms the invisible scaffolding of public responsibility. When

education fails to acknowledge this, it risks producing individuals who are informed but disconnected, literate but indifferent, and institutionally compliant but ethically passive.

This study aims to investigate how contemplative practices such as yoga and mindfulness can be harnessed to strengthen civic agency among youth in transitional and post-conflict societies. Specifically, the research seeks: (1) to examine the pedagogical potential of contemplative practices in cultivating emotional resilience, ethical reasoning, and civic consciousness, (2) to analyse the integration, or absence, of these practices in national education frameworks such as India's National Education Policy and Cambodia's Peace Education reforms, (3) to explore the implications of contemplative learning for affective citizenship and participatory democracy, particularly in societies recovering from historical trauma or political repression.

This current work is important both theoretically and practically. It connects Eastern contemplative practices like yoga and mindfulness with Western models of civic education, offering a more holistic, values-driven approach to citizenship that goes beyond procedural norms. It addresses the limitations of conventional civic education, especially in post-conflict or trauma-affected societies such as Cambodia, where mindfulness has aided healing but is absent from formal curricula. The study also aligns with India's NEP 2020, which positions yoga as part of holistic education, though its civic role remains underdeveloped. Overall, this research contributes to global goals like SDG 4.7 by advocating education that promotes peace, ethics, and global citizenship, rooted in inner awareness and outward civic responsibility, echoing Gandhi's principle of selfless service.

II. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Contemplative Pedagogy

Contemplative pedagogy refers to a transformative educational approach that integrates introspective practices, such as meditation, mindfulness, and reflective inquiry, into the learning environment to foster personal and ethical development alongside intellectual growth. Hart (2004) defines contemplative pedagogy as "education that transforms both the self and the world" by drawing on the inner life of students and teachers to inform outer civic and academic engagement. This pedagogical model encourages learners to explore not only the content of knowledge but the context of their values, emotions, and motivations in relation to that knowledge. Arthur Zajonc (2013) further elaborates on this framework by proposing that contemplative practices deepen learning by promoting sustained attention, empathy, and holistic understanding. He argues that contemplative pedagogy enables students to "move from knowledge accumulation to wisdom cultivation," positioning education as a moral and spiritual journey rather than a purely cognitive endeavour. Similarly, Palmer (2000) asserts that effective teaching arises from the integrity of the teacher's inner life, suggesting that "we teach who we are." He contends that moral courage, compassion, and self-awareness are essential traits for educators in democratic societies.

These scholars collectively emphasize that education must be both inward and outward, fostering not only analytical thinking but also emotional resonance, civic responsibility, and ethical consciousness. As Barbezat and Bush (2013) note, contemplative practices support deep learning, reduce stress, and cultivate the emotional intelligence necessary for active citizenship. The philosophical basis of contemplative pedagogy thus aligns with a broader call to restore meaning, moral imagination, and mindfulness to education in the 21st century.

2.2 Civic Agency and Political Socialization

Civic agency refers to an individual's capacity to act collaboratively and ethically in public life to influence democratic outcomes. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) distinguish between three models of citizenship: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. They argue that while many civic education programs focus on basic compliance (e.g., voting, obeying laws), genuine democratic engagement requires a deeper

formation of civic identity grounded in critical consciousness, ethical reasoning, and community participation.

Danielle Allen (2006) conceptualizes political socialization as an emotional and ethical process in which trust, reciprocity, and the ability to communicate across difference are crucial. Allen warns that neglecting the affective dimensions of citizenship risks reducing democracy to procedural formalities rather than cultivating a meaningful civic ethos. She proposes that civic education must nurture the emotional habits that sustain pluralistic societies, such as listening, empathy, and self-restraint. John Dewey, one of the foundational theorists in progressive education, views democracy not merely as a form of government but as a way of life. Dewey (2024) argues that education is essential for cultivating the "habit of associated living," and that schools must serve as miniature democratic communities. Dewey insists that students must learn to think for themselves, engage in collaborative inquiry, and develop moral responsibility through real-world participation. His model affirms that civic agency must be practiced, not just preached.

Taken together, these theories underscore the importance of integrating contemplative practices with civic education to support the development of youth as engaged, ethical, and empowered democratic actors.

2.3 Emotional and Affective Learning

The role of emotion in learning and development has gained increasing attention across educational disciplines. Authors such as Roeser et al. (2000) argue that emotional processes are foundational to motivation, moral development, and social behaviour. Emotional and affective learning (EAL) involves cultivating empathy, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and compassion, all of which are central to civic and ethical engagement. Social and emotional learning (SEL), as defined by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), involves five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Research by Durlak et al. (2011) indicate that SEL programs improve not only academic outcomes but also students' prosocial behaviour and emotional well-being, thus creating conditions conducive to peaceful and participatory learning environments. Scholars such as Nussbaum (2001) emphasizes that emotions like compassion, anger, and hope are not obstacles to civic reasoning but rather integral to moral judgment and democratic deliberation. She argues that a "citizenship of emotion" is necessary to sustain democracy in a pluralistic and unequal world. Similarly, (Roeser et al., 2014) propose that affective learning, through storytelling, reflective journaling, and mindfulness, enhances students' capacity to empathize with others and understand the moral implications of their actions. Rich et al. (2022) show that contemplative practices like mindfulness and self-reflection are linked to greater well-being across global groups. These practices support emotional resilience and empathy, reinforcing their role in fostering ethical and engaged citizenship.

By embedding emotional and affective learning into civic education, educators can help students not only understand the mechanics of governance but also embody the emotional dispositions needed for sustainable peace and democratic coexistence.

2.4 Alignment with SDG 4.7

The integration of contemplative and civic education frameworks is strongly supported by Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which calls for learners to acquire "knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity" (UNESCO, 2017). This subgoal places education at the heart of peacebuilding, environmental responsibility, and intercultural understanding. UNESCO (2020) and (2023) assert that achieving SDG 4.7 requires a shift toward values-based, transformative education that is context-sensitive,

emotionally resonant, and ethically grounded. The organization proposes that contemplative approaches, such as mindfulness and ethical reflection, are essential for developing the "inner dimensions of learning" that complement traditional academic objectives. National frameworks like India's National Education Policy 2020 echo this vision by emphasizing holistic, character-based education rooted in Indian knowledge systems, including yoga and ethical reflection. Meanwhile, Cambodia's education reforms in peace and reconciliation emphasize social cohesion, memory work, and moral responsibility, though often lack the contemplative depth found in lived spiritual traditions (McLoughlin, 2019), as drawn in table 1.

Thus, contemplative pedagogy, civic agency, and emotional learning are not isolated trends but are deeply interconnected with global policy frameworks that seek to transform education into a platform for ethical citizenship, civic justice, and sustainable development as depicted in table 1.

Table 1: Theoretical Framework Overview – The Politics of Inner Peace

Theoretical Domain	Core Concepts	Key Scholars	Relevance to Study
Contemplative Pedagogy	Mindfulness, reflection, moral development, inner-outer transformation	Tobin Hart, Arthur Zajonc, Parker Palmer	Frames yoga/mindfulness as educational tools for civic and emotional growth
Civic Agency & Political Socialization	Democratic participation, civic identity, justice-oriented citizenship	Joel Westheimer, Danielle Allen, John Dewey	Links civic responsibility with emotional and ethical formation
Emotional and Affective Learning	Empathy, emotional regulation, compassion, SEL competencies	CASEL, Martha Nussbaum, Roeser et al.	Supports affective foundation for civic action and peacebuilding
Alignment with SDG 4.7	Global citizenship, sustainable development, values-based education	UNESCO, NEP 2020 (India), MoEYS (Cambodia)	Justifies policy-level integration of contemplative and civic education

III. Methodology
3.1 Research Design
This study was conducted using a qualitative interpretive research design, grounded in constructivist epistemology. The design was selected to examine how contemplative practices, particularly yoga and mindfulness, have been integrated into educational policy frameworks and civic learning environments in two culturally distinct but spiritually connected contexts: India and Cambodia. A comparative and conceptual analysis was employed to explore cross-national similarities and differences, while also synthesizing theoretical constructs drawn from contemplative pedagogy, civic agency, and social-emotional learning. This interpretive approach enabled the researcher to explore culturally embedded meanings and lived educational experiences, especially in relation to emotional development and civic identity formation. It allowed for the nuanced interpretation of how policy discourses and pedagogical practices articulate the relationship between inner transformation and democratic participation.

3.2 Data Collection Methods
Three complementary data collection methods were employed to develop a comprehensive and triangulated dataset. First, a policy document analysis was conducted by systematically reviewing national and institutional policies (Bej, 2025), including India's NEP 2020 and Cambodia's Peace and Civic Education Framework, (CPCEF) issued by the MoEYS. These

documents were examined for references to contemplative practices, moral education, and civic engagement outcomes. Second, a thematic literature review was undertaken to critically analyze scholarly debates on mindfulness in education, yoga-based learning, civic agency, and affective pedagogy. This review incorporated peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, and academic books that informed both the conceptual framework and the study's empirical interpretations. Third, case study illustrations were drawn from existing contemplative education programs, such as the Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning, (SEE) program in India and community-based mindfulness initiatives in Cambodian post-conflict schools. These cases served to demonstrate how contemplative practices have been adapted to support civic awareness, ethical reasoning, and emotional resilience in various educational settings.

3.3 Data Sources

The study analyzed several types of data sources. These included curriculum frameworks from national and subnational education bodies, which detailed the integration of yoga, mindfulness, and social-emotional learning (SEL) in classroom instruction. Official education policy documents, such as strategic plans and implementation guides focused on civic and moral education, were also examined. Additionally, program evaluation reports and monitoring tools published by NGOs and international organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, ICCR, and Emory University, were reviewed to understand support for contemplative or civic initiatives in education. Academic publications from databases like Scopus, JSTOR, and ERIC provided both theoretical and empirical insights into the intersection of civic engagement and contemplative learning. All documents were selected based on their relevance to the research questions, the credibility of the source, and their contribution to understanding civic identity development through inner pedagogical approaches.

3.4 Justification

This methodological configuration was particularly well-suited to the study's objectives for several reasons. First, the qualitative interpretive approach enabled the researcher to capture subtle, value-laden meanings embedded in spiritual, ethical, and civic discourses. Second, the comparative framework facilitated cross-contextual learning between India and Cambodia, two countries with shared Indic traditions but distinct educational governance models. Third, the focus on conceptual and policy-level analysis allowed the study to trace how contemplative practices have been institutionally codified, adapted, or resisted in formal education systems.

This design was especially appropriate for investigating non-linear, culturally situated learning processes, particularly in postcolonial or post-conflict societies where formal civic instruction may fail to resonate without accompanying emotional and spiritual engagement. By aligning methodology with the study's philosophical commitment to holistic education, the research produced meaningful insights into how inner peace can serve as a foundation for civic agency in diverse global South contexts, as depicted in table 2.

Table 2: Thematic Coding Framework for Document Analysis

No.	Code Category	Definition	Examples
1.	Contemplative Practices	References to mindfulness, yoga, breathing, ethical principles, or inner awareness.	"Yoga as daily classroom routine," "Ethics modules from Indian tradition"
2.	Civic Values and Responsibilities	Mentions of empathy, social responsibility, democratic engagement, or participatory learning.	"Learning to live together," "Democratic values in school councils"
3.	Affective and Emotional Learning	Emphasis on emotional literacy, self-regulation, resilience, and compassion.	"Emotionally supportive learning environments," "Trauma-sensitive pedagogy"

4.	Cultural Knowledge Systems	Use of indigenous ethics, spiritual values, or national identity frameworks in curriculum.	"Indian Knowledge Systems," "Khmer Buddhist ethics in textbooks"
5.	Implementation Challenges	Structural, ideological, or political obstacles to contemplative-civic education integration.	"Lack of teacher training," "Concerns over religious neutrality"

IV. Yoga, Mindfulness, and the Inner Dimensions of Civic Education

4.1 Definitions in Educational Contexts

In contemporary education, yoga and mindfulness are increasingly recognized not only as wellness tools but as philosophically rich and pedagogically transformative practices. However, their implementation is often reduced to physical exercises or stress-reduction techniques, overlooking their deeper ethical and civic potential.

As Di Placido (2024) explains that yoga in contemporary India is often reduced to its physical dimensions, yet its classical foundation, rooted in Patanjali's Yoga Sūtras, presents it as a comprehensive ethical and spiritual system. The foundational principle of Yamas, ethical restraints like ahimsa, or nonviolence, and Niyamas, personal observances such as svādhyāya, or self-study, underscore that yoga is not merely a wellness practice but a disciplined path toward moral and spiritual development. Scholars such as Saraswati and Saraswati (2002) argue that these principles cultivate an attitude of responsibility, humility, and interconnectedness, which are vital for preparing learners to become compassionate and socially engaged citizens. Mindfulness, derived from the Pali term *sati*, is defined in educational contexts as the non-judgmental awareness of present-moment experience, a practice rooted in both Buddhist and secular traditions. Kabat-Zinn (2003) describes mindfulness as the "intentional cultivation of attention and awareness" that enables individuals to act with clarity, restraint, and compassion. Author such as Roeser (2016) suggest that when introduced in schools, mindfulness helps foster self-awareness, emotion regulation, and interpersonal sensitivity, all of which are essential for civic learning and prosocial behaviour.

In sum, both yoga and mindfulness contribute to educational experiences that are affective, ethical, and civic, aligning with calls for a more holistic understanding of what it means to educate for democracy and human flourishing.

4.2 Classroom Applications

The integration of yoga and mindfulness into formal and informal educational settings has expanded globally, particularly within Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks. Programs such as CASEL's SEL Competency Model, Mind-up, and India's SEE Learning (Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning) have incorporated contemplative practices into curricula to support student well-being, ethical development, and social responsibility. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been successfully implemented in both Western and Eastern school systems. Research by Meiklejohn et al. (2012) indicate that MBIs improve attention span, emotional regulation, conflict resolution skills, and empathy among students. Similarly, studies in India and Cambodia show that yoga practices in schools have led to decreased aggression, improved classroom focus, and enhanced peer relationships (Doyle Fosco et al., 2023; Kauts & Sharma, 2009).

These classroom applications extend beyond individual well-being. As (Roeser et al., 2000) demonstrate, mindfulness fosters "compassionate presence" and strengthens students' moral and civic reasoning. By learning to respond to situations with emotional clarity rather than impulsivity, students become better equipped to engage in constructive dialogue, nonviolent problem-solving, and community-oriented action. Moreover, teachers trained in contemplative pedagogy report improved capacity to model ethical behaviour, manage classroom dynamics, and promote inclusive learning environments (Jennings et al., 2013). Such findings suggest

that contemplative practices are not merely therapeutic but can be pedagogically designed to reinforce democratic values such as respect, justice, and participation.

4.3 Inner Practices as Civic Foundations

Inner practices such as yoga and mindfulness are foundational to cultivating ethical awareness that leads to public responsibility. Dewey (2024) argued that education must begin with the learner's experience but should extend toward social participation and moral responsibility. Contemplative practices align with this vision by enabling learners to reflect on their emotions, values, and intentions, preconditions for democratic engagement.

Authors like Zajonc (2013) contends that civic agency cannot be sustained by knowledge alone; it requires emotional maturity, moral discernment, and inner clarity. When individuals are trained to observe their thoughts, recognize interconnectedness, and act with compassion, they are more likely to embody democratic virtues such as cooperation, inclusion, and civic courage. In transitional or post-conflict societies, where civic life is often marked by distrust or trauma, these inner capacities become even more critical. Harris (2007) observes that Buddhist-based mindfulness practices have played a healing role in Cambodian communities, providing emotional scaffolding for civic rebuilding. Similarly, in Indian education, the integration of yoga is increasingly seen to revive ethical public life rooted in Gandhian and dharmic traditions (Kumar & Giri, 2020).

Ultimately, personal regulation through contemplative practice serves as a bridge to participatory agency. As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argue, justice-oriented citizenship involves not only understanding power structures but also developing the emotional and moral capacities to challenge injustice with integrity. Yoga and mindfulness, when appropriately contextualized, provide educational pathways for this transformation, empowering youth to act as reflective, resilient, and relational civic agents as highlighted in table 3.

Table 3: Inner Dimensions of Civic Education – Yoga and Mindfulness

Dimension	Focus	Application	Civic Relevance
Yoga (Beyond Asana)	Ethical principles (Yamas/Niyamas), self-discipline, awareness	Integrated in values education, stress management, moral formation	Promotes nonviolence, integrity, and responsibility in civic life
Mindfulness	Present-moment awareness, compassion, emotional clarity	Implemented through SEL programs and classroom-based interventions	Supports empathy, conflict resolution, and civic empathy
SEL and Classroom Practices	Mindfulness-based interventions, ethical reflection, breathing exercises	Used to enhance attention, discipline, peer relations	Fosters ethical dialogue, civic participation, and emotional maturity
Inner Practices as Civic Foundations	Emotional regulation and ethical awareness leading to social action	Embedded in reflective journaling, service learning, and moral inquiry	Connects self-awareness with justice-oriented citizenship

V. Case Examples and Policy Analysis

5.1 India – National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative shift in the country's educational vision, explicitly emphasizing the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), including yoga, ethical learning, and holistic development. The policy states that "education must not only develop cognitive capacities but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities" (Ahuja & Poddar, 2022). Authors such as Kumar (2017) and Kumar and Giri (2020) interpret

this as an institutional recognition of contemplative practices like yoga, mindfulness, and moral inquiry as legitimate pedagogical tools aligned with both national tradition and global well-being goals.

The NEP proposes introducing yoga in both curricular and co-curricular forms to promote discipline, emotional balance, and cultural rootedness. Scholars such as Ahuja and Poddar (2022) argue that this move reframes yoga from a purely physical discipline to a vehicle for character formation, civic responsibility, and mental resilience. However, integration efforts face several institutional and ideological barriers. While elite private institutions have embraced contemplative curricula, often supported by NGOs and philanthropic foundations, public schools, particularly in under-resourced regions, struggle with lack of trained teachers, curricular overload, and bureaucratic inertia (Nambissan, 2020). Furthermore, questions of secularism and inclusivity have emerged. Some educators express concern that yoga's spiritual connotations may conflict with India's pluralistic and secular ethos. As Aithal and Srinivasan (2024) note, implementation requires a pedagogical shift that emphasizes yoga's universal ethical dimensions rather than its religious origins. Despite these challenges, India's NEP stands as a strong national-level policy model that explicitly integrates inner transformation into civic education goals.

5.2 Cambodia – Education for Peace and Reconciliation

In contrast to India's structured policy architecture, Cambodia's engagement with contemplative education emerges from its post-conflict context. Following the devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), Cambodia has made gradual efforts to rebuild its education system with a focus on peace, memory, and reconciliation. The MoEYS has introduced initiatives aimed at developing emotional resilience, civic knowledge, and nonviolence, but largely within the framework of peace education rather than contemplative pedagogy per se (McLoughlin, 2019; Tan, 2007). These efforts are grounded in a broader historical trajectory of Cambodian education, which, as Huot et al. (2024) note, evolved from instinctive to creative senses, reflecting deeply embedded cultural and philosophical roots. While contemporary initiatives prioritize post-conflict healing, they remain largely distinct from the contemplative frameworks emerging in other Asian contexts.

Mindfulness practices, derived from the country's Theravāda Buddhist heritage, have played an important but largely informal role in this healing process. Civil society organizations, such as the Buddhist for Development Movement and the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, have implemented mindfulness-based trauma healing programs in schools and communities (Harris, 2007). These practices have contributed to emotional regulation, post-traumatic recovery, and the cultivation of empathy, particularly among youth affected by intergenerational trauma. However, despite these promising grassroots efforts, the absence of formal policy structures linking contemplative practice to civic education or curriculum reform remains a significant limitation. MoEYS documents emphasize peacebuilding and moral education, but lack specific implementation frameworks for yoga, mindfulness, or SEL in public education (Doyle Fosco et al., 2023). Additionally, teacher training programs do not yet include modules on emotional literacy or contemplative practice, limiting the scalability of existing efforts.

Youth For Peace Cambodia (YFP) (2025) emphasizes "personal change can bring about relational change within communities or institutions and overall social/structural change" and works to encourage increasing numbers of young people to take action and work for peace, justice, and reconciliation in Cambodia, using participatory and creative methods.

5.3 Comparative Reflections

When analysed together, the Indian and Cambodian cases offer complementary insights into the promises and limitations of contemplative civic education. India represents a top-down policy approach, embedding yoga into national curricular discourse, albeit unevenly

implemented across public-private divides. Cambodia, conversely, reflects a bottom-up civil society model, where mindfulness is used for peace and trauma healing but has yet to be institutionalized within national civic education frameworks. Culturally, both countries draw from Indic spiritual traditions, Hindu and Buddhist respectively, that emphasize nonviolence, self-discipline, and interdependence. These shared ethical roots create fertile ground for contemplative education, though the modalities of implementation differ due to political history, administrative capacity, and public discourse. In India, yoga is state promoted as part of a national heritage narrative, while in Cambodia, mindfulness retains a therapeutic and spiritual role, often disconnected from formal policy agendas.

In terms of policy depth, India's NEP provides clear guidelines for implementation, but faces obstacles in practice due to scale, training gaps, and resistance to perceived religious overtones. Cambodia lacks such formal integration but demonstrates grassroots innovation, especially in connecting mindfulness with community reconciliation and emotional healing. This comparison underscores the opportunities for cross-cultural learning and adaptation. Cambodia could benefit from India's institutional experiences, particularly in curriculum design and teacher training models for contemplative education. India, in turn, could learn from Cambodia's integration of mindfulness into trauma-informed and post-conflict educational settings, where emotional healing precedes civic engagement. Both cases reveal that inner transformation, and civic agency must be contextually adapted, culturally grounded, and supported by both policy frameworks and community ownership. The path to contemplative civic education is not linear, but these examples suggest that diverse societies can draw on their spiritual and ethical heritage to reimagine education for democracy and peace.

VI. Discussion

6.1 Rethinking Civic Agency

Traditional models of civic education have long emphasized external participation, such as voting, volunteering, or knowledge of institutions, as the primary indicators of civic engagement. However, this instrumental view often fails to account for the internal dispositions that underlie sustained, ethical, and compassionate participation in democratic life. compliance:ch as Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argue that effective citizenship requires more than knowledge or compliance; it demands the development of justice-oriented agency, grounded in empathy and critical awareness.

This study proposes a reframing of civic agency as not only a matter of public action but also a function of inner awareness, emotional intelligence, and ethical consciousness. Zajonc (2013) asserts that civic responsibility must begin with the cultivation of inward capacities, such as mindfulness, reflection, and compassion, that support discernment, resilience, and relational understanding. In this framework, inner peace becomes a civic resource, providing psychological and ethical grounding for navigating societal challenges such as polarization, violence, and alienation. Moreover, in post-conflict or transitional societies, where public trust may be fragile, the restoration of civic life cannot rely solely on formal instruction or institutional reform. As Palmer (2000) suggests, democratic vitality depends on the courage to listen, reflect, and act from a place of personal integrity. Mindfulness and yoga, when framed as tools for conscious presence and moral reflection, serve as bridges between self-understanding and civic participation. They equip learners with the inner capacity to engage the outer world with responsibility, openness, and care.

6.2 Education Reforms for Affective Citizenship

To realize this vision of contemplative civic agency, educational reform must prioritize affective and ethical dimensions of learning. While the cognitive foundations of citizenship, such as legal literacy and political systems, remain important, they are insufficient for nurturing values such as empathy, courage, and justice. As Nussbaum (2010) contends, education must cultivate the "narrative imagination", the ability to see the world through others' eyes, as a

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prerequisite for democratic engagement. One critical area for reform is teacher training. Jennings et al. (2013) argue that educators are more effective in fostering social-emotional learning when they themselves embody mindfulness, self-regulation, and compassion. This study supports the view that teacher education programs should integrate contemplative pedagogical competencies, enabling teachers to model and facilitate reflective inquiry, emotional awareness, and ethical dialogue in the classroom. Additionally, curriculum design must evolve beyond fact-based civics to include practices that nurture emotional resilience and moral discernment. Reflective journaling, community-based storytelling, dialogical ethics, and contemplative silence are examples of pedagogical strategies that bridge personal growth with public responsibility. CASEL (2020) defines five core SEL competencies: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making*, and their 2020 update also emphasizes educational equity and integrates a systemic approach across classroom, school, family, and community settings. Also, Rich with his colleagues (2022) advocate for an education that embraces the full range of human capacities, not only intellect, but heart and conscience, as essential to civic formation.

By embedding inner development into curriculum and teacher practice, educational systems can move toward affective citizenship: a model of civic life rooted in empathy, interconnectedness, and emotional maturity.

6.3 Limitations and Challenges

Despite its promise, the integration of contemplative practices into civic education is not without challenges. One major concern is the risk of spiritual commodification, that is, the extraction of practices like yoga and mindfulness from their ethical or philosophical roots for instrumental or commercial purposes. Purser (2019) critiques this trend as "McMindfulness," warning that depoliticized mindfulness may serve neoliberal agendas of productivity and self-regulation rather than liberation or civic justice. Similarly, when contemplative practices are introduced without critical context, they may lead to political depoliticization, masking systemic injustices with individual coping strategies. As Biesta (2015) argues, civic education must not only promote personal growth but also cultivate agency to challenge structural inequities. If mindfulness is presented as a universal panacea without attending to local histories, traumas, or social realities, it may reinforce rather than transform existing power dynamics. Furthermore, there is the challenge of cultural and religious sensitivity in secular education settings. In multicultural and pluralistic societies, integrating yoga or mindfulness into public schooling may provoke concerns over religious neutrality, inclusivity, and cultural appropriation. Aithal and Srinivasan (2024) and Allen (2006) caution that contemplative education must be carefully contextualized to avoid imposing spiritual values on students or undermining secular norms.

This study therefore emphasizes the need for culturally responsive adaptation of contemplative civic education. Programs must be dialogical rather than prescriptive, engaging students, teachers, and communities in co-constructing practices that honour local traditions, plural beliefs, and shared civic goals.

VII. Policy and Practical Implications of Contemplative Civic Education

This study underscores the transformative potential of contemplative practices, like mindfulness and yoga, when integrated into education. These practices not only foster emotional resilience but also promote civic responsibility and ethical development. For meaningful impact, a coordinated approach involving policymakers, educators, and civil society is essential.

- Ministries of Education should embed contemplative practices into civic and moral education frameworks, as seen in India's NEP 2020. They must also invest in teacher training that supports mindfulness, emotional literacy, and reflective pedagogy, ensuring these values are embodied in teaching.

- Educators and Curriculum Developers are responsible for translating policy into practice through interdisciplinary, values-based curricula. By combining mindfulness with civic learning activities, like debates, community service, and journaling, they help students connect personal growth with social responsibility, especially in diverse or post-conflict settings.
- Civil Society and NGOs can extend the reach of contemplative civic education by delivering community-based programs and partnering with local cultural leaders. Their role is vital in ensuring cultural relevance and promoting youth empowerment, justice, and collective well-being.

As its core, when contemplative practices are treated as core educational tools rather than optional extras, they can help shape students who are emotionally strong, ethically aware, socially engaged, and civically active.

VIII. Conclusion

8.1 Integrating Inner and Civic Development

This study has explored the transformative potential of contemplative practices, particularly yoga and mindfulness, as foundational elements in civic education. Grounded in the works of Hart (2004), Palmer (2000) and Zajonc (2013), the research emphasized that nurturing inner awareness alongside social responsibility can cultivate more authentic and sustainable forms of civic engagement. Rather than limiting civic education to knowledge acquisition or procedural training, this approach highlights the development of ethical discernment, emotional resilience, and empathetic action as essential components of participatory democracy. In addressing the growing disengagement and emotional detachment among youth, especially in post-conflict societies like Cambodia and India, contemplative pedagogy offers a meaningful alternative. It responds not only to cognitive needs but also to the affective and moral dimensions of learning. As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) assert, true democratic participation is rooted as much in emotional and ethical capacities as in factual understanding. Civic education, therefore, must evolve into a more holistic framework, one that centres personal growth, relational awareness, and inner transformation.

8.2 Toward a Civic Education of the Heart

This research calls for a reimagining of civic education as a "political education of the heart", an approach that prioritizes compassion, justice, and responsibility as lived experiences rather than abstract ideals. Practices like mindfulness and ethical self-reflection offer students a way to internalize democratic values and engage with civic life through embodied, meaningful participation. Particularly in post-conflict or authoritarian contexts, such as Cambodia, the cultivation of inner peace becomes a foundation for rebuilding trust, healing trauma, and strengthening democratic resilience. As Huot et al. (2025) argue that emotional healing plays a crucial role in shaping political transformation, especially in societies marked by historical trauma and cultural disruption. They emphasize that addressing emotional wounds is not a separate process from rebuilding political structures, it is a foundational component of genuine and lasting change. By embracing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of citizenship, educators and policymakers can foster more grounded, inclusive, and responsive civic cultures.

8.3 Directions for Future Research

To further advance this emerging field, the following areas merit focused inquiry: Cross-Cultural and Comparative Analyses: Investigating how contemplative civic pedagogies operate across different cultural and political contexts in the Global South could offer valuable insights into the diverse ways ethical, emotional, and spiritual learning intersect with systemic structures such as governance and historical memory.

Ultimately, this academic study contributes to a growing movement that repositions education not merely as a means of technical skill-building or policy implementation, but as a deeply human and moral endeavour. The integration of inner peace and civic participation is neither

abstract nor optional, it is a timely, culturally rooted, and necessary response to the complex challenges facing youth and democracy today. By embracing a holistic model of education, one that develops ethical consciousness and emotional depth, we move closer to cultivating citizens who are not only informed, but compassionate, engaged, and resilient.

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