

**Research Article**

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Chinese Buddhist Practice of Mantra-Dharani Chanting During Covid-19 Pandemic: Motivations, Activities, and Health Benefits

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***Corresponding author:** Ampere A Tseng, Manufacturing Institute, Arizona State University, Arizona, USA.**Received Date:** February 09, 2022**Published Date:** March 17, 2022**Abstract**

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic impacts Chinese Buddhists in various ways, including the cancellation of Sunday and sermon services, the rescheduling of spiritual retreats and cultivation workshops, and the suspension of festivals and many others.

Objective: The purpose of this article is to study the practice of Mantra-Dharani Chanting during the pandemic with attention on the motivation of Chinese Buddhists to practice Mantra-Dharani chanting, the associated activities, and the examination of health benefits to practitioners.

Methods: Chinese Buddhist scriptures are studied to identify the spiritual motivation for engaging in Mantra-Dharani chanting. By communicating with major Chinese Buddhist temples, monasteries, and organizations, research is performed to analyze Chinese Buddhists' activities for Mantra-Dharani chanting. A wide range of medical studies are examined to identify the benefits of health improvement in performing this practice.

Results: The background and motivations for engaging in the practice of Mantra-Dharani chanting are presented. We examine the activities of Chinese Buddhists on Mantra-Dharani chanting during the Pandemic to explore the changes in practicing Mantra-Dharani chanting caused by the pandemic. We also present the psychological and physiologic evidence on the health benefits by practicing Mantra-Dharani Chanting.

Conclusion: We found that the clerics of the temples have always found ways of remaining active by offering online services and ritual performances for their followers. Through the medical evidence, we also found that, by practicing Mantra-Dharani chanting, Chinese Buddhists can not only satisfy their religious purpose but also reduce their anxiety and increase their health and immunity during the Pandemic.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhists; COVID-19 Pandemic; Health Improvement; Mantra-Dharani Chanting; Mantra Meditation; Medical Evidence; Online Service; Web Conferencing

Abbreviations: CBETA: Chinese Electronic Tripitaka Collection, edited and published online by Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, Taipei 2016 (<http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/>); T = Taisho Tripitaka. ed. by Takakusu Junjiro and Watanabe Kaigyoku. Tokyo: Taisho Issaikyo Kankai, 1934. All citations in this article are based on CBETA version; Txxnyyyy = xx is the volume number and yyyy is the order number of Taisho Tripitaka; X = Xuzangjing Swastika (Kawamura Kōshō (ed). 1912. Manji Newly Compiled Great Japanese Supplementary Sutras. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai National Book Publishing Association). All citations are based on CBETA version; Xxxnyyyy = xx is the volume number while yyyy is the order number of Xuzangjing

Introduction

The global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus identified in 2019, known as the COVID-19 pandemic, has impacted the

religious life of Chinese Buddhists in myriad ways, including the cancellation of regular sermon services, the deferral of spiritual



retreats and cultivation workshops, and the suspension of many festivals and ceremonies. During the pandemic, to help maintain institutional bonds with their followers, Buddhist temples, monastics, and their associated communities have offered services and other activities through online media and wireless communications.

In Buddhism, diseases caused by a pandemic are considered to be one of the four fundamental sufferings of sentient existence, along with living, aging, and dying. Chinese Buddhists possess a widespread belief that Buddhist teachings and practices can actually heal disease and prevent disasters. Millions of Chinese perform Buddhist rituals and practices by following Chinese Buddhist teachings, to varying degrees. For example, on January 28, 2020, both *The Times of India* and the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamshala, India reported that the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, in India specifically called upon Chinese devotees to chant the mantra “Om tare tuttara ture Soha” (known as the Mantra of Tara and Green Tara Mantra) to bodhisattva Tara in order to offer strength and protection against the virus, as it would help contain the spread of the epidemic [1,2].

Moreover, from January 21 to February 10, 2021, Hong Kong Buddhist communities, including 36 temples or monasteries, cooperated with tens of temples or monasteries in Mainland China to conduct a Pandemic Cessation Dharma Assembly of Thousands of Monks and Millions of People for ending the epidemic and the associated pain and suffering soon [3]. In addition to required rituals and chanting sutras, the main activities of the Assembly include chanting the Mantra of Bhaisajyaguru (also known as the Medicine Buddha Dharani) and reciting the “Holy Names of Three Buddhas and Four Bodhisattvas three Four Buddhas and Bodhisattvas” one hundred and eight times daily for twenty-one days. Although the Assembly was conducted through webcasting, approximately seven thousand monks or nuns participated in the Assembly in-person. A similar assembly was also conducted from September 6 to September 26, 2021, and more than forty temples or monasteries in Hong Kong and Mainland China participated in this Assembly [4]. Three major mantras, including Mantra of Bhaisajyaguru, the *Nilakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī*, and the *Shurangama Mantra* were scheduled to be chanted for Han Buddhists. Furthermore, from February 4 to February 11, 2020, the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai lighted lanterns and offered to pray for a quick ending of the pandemic and sufferings by chanting sutras and mantras in the front of Buddhas in its Main Hall [5].

Although many more Mantra-Dharani Chanting activities are presented in later sections, just based on the above examples, Mantra-Dharani Chanting should be considered as an important practice for Chinese Buddhists to cope with the anxiety and suffering induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Tseng [6] also indicates that Mantra-Dharani Chanting is one of the five major practices selected by Chinese Buddhists during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently,

the purpose of the present article is to study the practice of Mantra-Dharani Chanting by Chinese Buddhists during the pandemic with the focus on their motivation, the associated activities, and the psychological and physiologic evidence on health benefits in practicing Mantra-Dharani Chanting.

Following the introduction to the importance of the practice of Mantra-Dharani chanting, we present the background information on the practice. Then we examine the scriptural foundation of Buddhism, which we argue to shed light on motivations for Chinese Buddhists to engage in the practice during the Covid-19 pandemic. We investigate common rationales for this practice, specific activities associated with each major mantra. A common driving force for this practice is the Buddhist teachings themselves. In Buddhism, sickness is considered one of the four fundamental sufferings of sentient existence, along with living, aging, and dying.

Chinese Buddhists possess a widespread belief that Buddhist practices can actually heal sickness and prevent disasters. We examine how the ways and forms of performing these rituals and practices changed during the pandemic with a focus on Mantra-Dharani chanting. Also, we present the medical evidence that the Mantra-Dharani chanting can largely improve the mental and physical health of practitioners in shedding light on the interplay of religion, faith, well-being, and the pandemic. We conclude with a summary of specific findings to support the faith of Chinese Buddhists during the ongoing pandemic and for leveraging specific tenets of Buddhism in reducing pandemic risks.

The Chinese Buddhists studied in this article reference the Buddhists residing in Han Chinese communities. The Han Chinese are the largest ethnic group in China, representing more than 90% of the population of China [7]. In addition to mainland China, Han Chinese communities are found in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and Chinese diasporic communities throughout Asia, North America, Europe, and many other parts of the world. Chinese Buddhism, also known as Han Buddhism, is the Buddhism observed by Chinese Buddhists, which is distinct from Theravada Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism [8]. As reported by Tseng [9], the population of Chinese (Han) Buddhists was 200.51 million in 2010, while the total Buddhist population in 2010 was 487.54 million, as reported by the Pew Foundation [10]. With Chinese (or Han) Buddhists representing nearly half of all Buddhists, the activities of Chinese Buddhists in response to the COVID-19 pandemic represent a significant Buddhist group to study and can be expected to have meaningful influences on Chinese communities in general.

Motivations

A mantra is a sacred utterance consisting of syllables, words, or verses to form various spells or incantations. A dharani, on the other hand, is a small group of sacred Sanskrit or Pali phrases, which are often considered to be a melodic summary or retention of a much-longer scripture [11,12]. Normally, both mantras and

dharanis are untranslatable without explicitly literal meaning. The sounds are more important than the meaning since they are mainly chanted in rituals. All of them possess mystical or spiritual efficacy to protect practitioners as well as to safeguard the prosperity of Buddhism [11]. A mantra or dharani may be chanted softly, loud enough for the practitioner to hear it, or it may be recited silently within the practitioner's mind. Most mantras and dharanis are musically pleasing and spiritually meaningful to the chanter [13]. Mantras were in use in India long before Buddhism, while Dhāraṇīs have appeared only in Mahāyāna related Buddhist scriptures, which appeared in much later times, i.e., after the beginning of the 1st century. In general, mantras are shorter than dharanis.

To Chinese Buddhists today, mantras and dharanis are generally synonymous and the common Chinese translation of dharani and mantra are all “zhòu” (literally, incantation or spell). As a result, in this article, Mantra Chanting and Dharani Chanting are collectively called Mantra-Dharani Chanting, which is mostly aligned with the views of Tsukamoto [14]. and Skilling [15] as well as with those presented by Gyatso [16] and McBride [17]. Note that every dharani or mantra recited or chanted is always related to a specific Buddha or Bodhisattva.

In Chinese Buddhism, mantra-dharanis can be chanted for the protection, safety, and shelter of the chanters and for the generation of merit for Buddhist devotees to attain a liberated state [18,19]. Quite often a dharani-mantra represents a shortened form of a longer sutra text, which is otherwise difficult to read due to its length. Reciting or chanting this mantra-dharani would bring the same merit as reading or chanting the whole text. Chanting dharani-mantras is thus an important feature of Buddhist rites and ceremonies.

Since a profusion of dharani-mantra related scriptures were transliterated in China in the 1st millennium CE, chanting mantra-dharanis has gradually become popular in China [20]. Various forms of dharani-mantras comprise a large portion of the Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Typically, the most important Chinese Buddhist sutras include sections on dharani-mantras [17]. For example, the Śūraṅgama Mantra comes from the Śūraṅgama Sutra (T19n0945), which extensively references Buddhist deities and was popularly chanted on many different occasions.

The popular Lotus Sutra (T09n0262) also contains sections of mantras and dharanis [21,22]. As indicated in Chapter 26 of the Lotus Sutra, many dharanis are provided to protect those who elucidate, chant, or practice the sutra. Each of these dharanis is offered by a specific bodhisattva or a powerful deity, which include Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja, Bodhisattva Pradānaśūra, Vessavaṇa, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The Lotus Sutra also advocates the practice of reciting the Buddha's and Avalokitesvara's names, which had a tremendous effect on the spread of Buddhism. Both Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja and Bodhisattva Pradānaśūra have the power to

protect the devotees of the Lotus Sutra. They also have their own special strength and abilities, which can provide additional protections to followers who chant the dharanis presented in the Sutra. For instance, Bhaiṣajyarāja is the 'Medicine King' Bodhisattva. His dharani is particularly effective for healing and curing disease. Regarding Bodhisattva Vessavaṇa and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, mentioned in Chapter 26 of the Lotus Sutra: Vessavaṇa is considered the lead King among the Four Heavenly Kings. The Four Heavenly Kings are Buddhist Dharma protectors and each Heavenly King watches over a cardinal direction of the world. Usually, the Chamber of the Heavenly Kings is the entrance hall of Chinese Buddhist temples, which is an important element in any Chinese temple. In general, a dharani, which can be short or long, has its own purposes and can offer a range of protections and benefits. Each of the powerful Buddhist deities can offer his or her own dharani-mantra for devoted followers to chant for the intended protections.

The mantra-dharanis discussed in this section represent only a few examples among a much large number of dharani-mantras available to Chinese Buddhists for seeking protection on different occasions.

Dharani-Mantra Chanting Activities During the Pandemic

The four mantra-dhāraṇīs discussed earlier, i.e., the Mantra of Tara, the Mantra of Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Shurangama Mantra, and the Nilakantha Dharani, are all popular in Chinese Buddhist communities. To Han Buddhists, each of the mantra-dharanis recited is invoking a specific Buddha or Bodhisattva. For a specific area, one Buddha or Bodhisattva might be more powerful than the other and the associated mantra or dharani is thought to be more effective in helping chanters in the specific area or purpose. In this section, we present the activities of mantra-dharani chanting with the invoked Buddhas or Bodhisattvas during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Tara Mantra (Duoluo Bodhisattva) with Parnashavari Mantra

Tara is especially revered in Tibetan Buddhism as a female Buddha and has two major manifestations (or *nirmāṇakāyas*) including Green Tārā's manifestation as the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti (c. 605-650) and White Tārā's manifestation as the Chinese Princess Wencheng (628-680) [23,24]. Wencheng and Bhrikuti are the main deities worshipped in the Jokhang and Ramoche Temples, respectively, which are the two most sacred Temples in Tibet. In Han Buddhism, Tara is known as Duoluo Bodhisattva and is considered as a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, who is the most admired and venerated bodhisattva by Han Buddhists [25]. At least, four Han-Buddhist sutras collected in Taishō Tripiṭaka are specifically dedicated to Duoluo Bodhisattva. These four sutras are the Mahavaipulya Manjushri Sutra (T20n1101) translated by Amoghavajra (705-774), the Avalokitesvara Heart Mantra Sutra

(T20n1103a) by Zhitong (7th century), the Saint Tara Bodhisattva Sutra (T20n1104) translated by Devaśāntika (fl. 980-1000), and the Praises of Saint Tara Bodhisattva's 108 Titles Sutra (T20n1106) by Devaśāntika. This signifies the eminence of Tara in the pantheon of Han Buddhism. The five syllabuses of the Mantra of Tara called by Dalai Lama for Chinese followers to chant during the Covid-19 Pandemic were transliterated by Amoghavajra and Xuanzang (602-664) into ten Chinese characters, so that the mantra also called the Ten-character Heart Mantra by Han Buddhists [26].

Coincidentally, the China Charity Federation reported that, on January 27, 2020, the 11th Panchen Lama (Tibetan spiritual leader second only to Dalai Lama) in Beijing prayed for the early cessation of the Covid-19 epidemic and for the full recovery of the infected people and for the safety and health of medical workers by repeatedly chanting the Mantra of Parnashavari [27]. Parnashavari is a deity of diseases and can offer effective protection against outbreaks of the Covid-19 pandemic [28,29]. In Han Buddhism, Parnasabari is also depicted as a manifestation of Tara (Duoluo Bodhisattva) and Avalokitesvara [30,31]. According to the Parnaśabaryavalokiteśvarabodhisattva SutraYe (T20n1100) translated by Amoghavajra, Parnasabari has her own mantra.

Both Tara and Parnashavari are worshiped by Han and Tibetan Buddhists. A great many Han and Tibetan Buddhists have invoked the blessings of Tara and Parnashavari through chanting their mantras to overcome a state of fear [24,28,31]. On February 2, 2020, the Hushan Branch of the Bliss and Wisdom Sangha located in Taiwan conducted an online joint practice through Chanting the Mantra of Tara for cultivating blessings and wisdom, increasing spiritual strength, and subsiding the pandemic as soon as possible [32].

Bhaisajyaguru Mantra or Dharani

Bhaisajyaguru is known as the Medicine Buddha. Naturally, during the pandemic, Chinese Buddhists seek Bhaisajyaguru's protection by chanting the Mantra of Bhaisajyaguru for preventing the transmission of coronavirus and for eliminating all the suffering and afflictions of sentient beings. The Mantra of Bhaisajyaguru is also known as the Medicine Buddha Dharani which can be found in the Bhaisajyaguru-vaiḍūryaprabhārāja Sūtra, (T14n0450) translated by Xuanzang.

In addition to the Pandemic Cessation Dharma Assembly sponsored by Hong Kong and Mainland China Buddhist communities mentioned in the section of Introduction, the Mantra of Bhaisajyaguru was also chanted in the 6th Bhaisajyaguru Culture Festival held in New Taipei by the Chinese Buddhist Association in Taiwan on November 1, 2020. The theme of this Taiwan Festival is "Pray for the End of the Epidemic for the World." Thousands of monks were specially invited to chant the Mantra of Bhaisajyaguru ten million times [33]. Under the blessing of Bhaisajyaguru, the chanters prayed for the end of the epidemic and

for safety and freedom from suffering for all beings. The festival also recommended chanting one million times of the Bhaisajyaguru-vaiḍūryaprabhārāja Sūtra.

Furthermore, eighteen European branches of the Buddha's Light International Association jointly launched a dharma activity to pray for stopping the continuous spread of the epidemic by reciting the Medicine Buddha Dharani. These European branches mainly serve the Chinese diasporic communities in Europe as well as the local people. The practice activities lasted from September 21 to November 14, 2020. Participants reported the number of daily recitations through their website. A total of nearly 5.3 million recitations of the Medicine Buddha Dharani were recorded, of which those in the Paris Branch recited more than 2 million times [34].

Nilakantha Dharani

The Nilakaṅṭha Dharani chanted in the Assembly mentioned in the Introduction section is also known as the Mahākaraṇḍa Dharani and is one of the most popular mantra-dhāraṇīs chanted by Chinese Buddhists [35]. The Dharani consists of 415 Chinese characters and is one-section in the Nilakaṅṭha Dhāraṇī Sūtra (T20n1060) transliterated by the Indian monk Bhagavaddharma in the 7th Century. The Nilakaṅṭha Dharani is associated with Avalokiteśvara, As mentioned earlier, she can empower the chanter to heal and to be protected and purified. The dharani is chanted in many dharma assemblies or festivals dedicated to protecting people from infection by COVID-19 and enjoys a high degree of popularity in Chinese Buddhist communities.

The Zhuhai Putuo Temple in Guangdong considers the Nilakaṅṭha Dharani as its special Dharma Gate to enlightenment. During the Pandemic, the temple initiated a joint online-cultivation campaign for reciting the Nilakaṅṭha Dharani one hundred thousand times and chanting Buddha's names one million times for overcoming the sufferings caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic [36]. The first phase of the campaign lasted for ten days from February 4 to 13, 2020. Participants input their daily reciting or chanting times through the temple's website. The pariṇāmanā or merit transfer of reciting would go directly to repay the country and society and to increase the happiness and wisdom of the participants as well as to stop the spread of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In Taiwan, on August 1, 2020, Dharma Drum Monthly reported that the Dharma Drum Mountain launched a practice to chant the Nilakaṅṭha Dhāraṇī with the participants connected through mobile phones using the freeware of LINE for praying for pandemic fading away soon and for having a peaceful world with happy people. After nearly a hundred days of practicing, as indicated in the closing ceremony on July 12, 2020, the Nilakaṅṭha Dhāraṇī had been chanted more than six million times with more than three-thousand online participants from all over the world. Buddha names were also recited more than 270 million times [37]. In 2021,

Dharma Drum Mountain continued a similar program with a new online feature by calling each participant to chant the *Nīlakaṅṭha Dhāraṇī* and to recite the Buddha's name more than one hundred and eight times daily [38].

Chanting the *Nīlakaṅṭha Dharani* is also frequently promoted by the Chinese diasporic communities in the USA. For example, on March 8, 2020, the Avatamsaka Buddhist Lotus Society in Milpitas, California celebrated Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara's Birthday by chanting the *Nīlakaṅṭha Dharani* and several other Avalokiteśvara-related dharani-mantras to express followers' praise, reverence, and gratitude [39].

Shurangama Mantra with Six-syllabled Mantra

The currently popular version of the Shurangama Mantra is a chapter in the 7th volume of the ten-volume Shurangama Sutra (T19n0945), which was translated and transliterated from Sanskrit to Chinese by Indian monk Pramiti with the help of Chinese monk Huaidi and lay Buddhist Fangrong at Guangzhou's Zhizhi Dhama Site (today's Guangxiao Temple) in 705 CE [40].

The Śūraṅgama mantra has a total of 2,620 characters and is split into 439 verses for chanting. It is the longest mantra in Han Buddhism and needs a great effort to chant in a required fashion i.e., no interruptions, no retention, and no wandering. Normally, it takes approximately one hour to recite ten times of the 439-verse Shurangama Mantra. The mantra is often recited as part of the daily morning liturgical services in Buddhist monasteries or temples. According to the opening chapter of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, and similar to the popular Six-syllabled Mantra "Om mani padme hum," the Śūraṅgama Mantra is synonymous with chanting and invoking Avalokiteśvara. It also refers to many other Buddhist deities, such as the bodhisattvas Manjushri, Mahākāla, Sitatapatra, Vajrapani, and the Five Tathagatas. Most importantly, the mantra includes large many verses on subduing the heretics and demons and praying for the eradication of various diseases. As a result, chanting Śūraṅgama mantra is popular during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In opposite to the Śūraṅgama mantra, which is the longest mantra to Han Buddhists, the six-syllabled mantra can be considered as one of the shortest mantras. The Six-syllabled Mantra first appeared in the Mahayana Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra (T20n1050 p. 23, 24) translated by Devaśāntika. The sutra promotes the recitation of the associated Mantra as a means to liberation. The Mantra is associated with the four-armed form of Avalokiteshvara, and is also referred to as the "innermost heart" of Avalokiteshvara [41]. The sutra promotes the recitation of this mantra as a means to liberation. Also, the first syllable of the Mantra, Om, is a sacred syllable and is considered as a standalone mantra in both Hinduism and Jainism, which will be discussed more in the next section.

At the beginning of the Pandemic, on February 7, 2020, Master Shengkong, the Abbot of the Fomu Temple located in Chaozhou, Guangdong, launched an online joint practicing activity

of Shurangama Mantra chanting thousands of times for praying the early end of the Pandemic [42]. Up to February 21, 2020, the 439-verse Shurangama Mantra was jointly chanted three million four hundred twenty thousand times. Only on February 20, 2020, the Shurangama Mantra was recited online five hundred eighty-eight thousand eight hundred twenty-four times. Indeed, the power of the massive online chanting the mantra is incredible. Other temples in China, including the Xiangyin Temple in Chaohu, Anhui, also offered help to suffering people and prayed for early ending the Pandemic by reciting the Shurangama Mantra [43].

On February 12, 2020, the Gold Coast Dharma Realm Buddhist Monastery located in Bonogin, Australia launched a 3-month Shurangama Recitation Program: Pray for Early Eradication of the Covid-19 Pandemic to local oversea Chinese communities. The Monastery urged followers to recite the Shurangama Mantra and pray for early eradication of the pandemic and to dedicate the merit of the recitation to quell this Pandemic soon, to bring good health and happiness to all, and to enable social stability and harmony. With 129 online participants, the Shurangama Mantra was recited more than 1.5 million times [44].

On January 12, 2021, the Dharma Realm Sagely Monastery located in Taiwan held the second phase of the campaign for Thousands of people chanting the Shurangama mantra together. The Monastery suggested that all participants devote their merits from the daily recitations of the Shurangama Mantra to the early elimination of the coronavirus, to the quick recovery of suffering people, and to the fast accession to the bliss world of the pandemic victims. Although the deadline for the second phase is July 31, 2021, in the middle of the campaign, the total number of recitations already reached 50,756 times, about 85% of the final goal [45]. Many other Buddhist Monasteries in Taiwan, such as the Ling Jiou Mountain Wu Sheng Monastery, also prompt online chanting the Shurangama mantra [46].

Nianfo

As indicated early, in most Buddhist assemblies or ceremonies, Chinese Buddhists frequently chant the Buddhas' or Bodhisattvas' holy names, especially reciting Ēmítuófó and Námó ěmítuófó which represent the Chinese pronunciation of Amitabha and Namó Amitābha, respectively. Chanting the name of Amitābha is to pray for rebirth in the Western Pure Land and is a kind of Nianfo chanting buddha, which is a way of invoking a buddha or a bodhisattva by chanting his or her holy name for final enlightenment. The Western Pure Land is a place of refuge where one can become enlightened without being distracted by the sufferings of existence. According to the Larger Sukhavativyūha Sutra (T12n0360) translated by Saṃghavarman (3rd century CE), Nianfo has three types: 1) mentally (silently) reciting, in which one has connected thoughts in one's mind. 2) Softly (lightly) reciting, in which one is able to hear one's own voice, and 3) Loudly reciting [47]. The Larger Sukhavativyūha Sutra also states that there are ten merits for performing Nianfo: 1)

Can push away (the impediment of) sleep, 2) Māra is terrified, 3. The voice reaches everywhere, ... and 10) Rebirth is attained in the Pure Land, which implies that the ten merits attained apply to the practice of loud recitation [47].

Recently, silently or softly chanting the Buddha's name are also popular in many Chinese Buddhist communities [48,49]. They follow the meditative teachings by "Speaking silently, moving stilly, and reciting the name of the Buddha in walking, standing, sitting, and lying down". In discussing the mind-connected chanting Master Daan claimed that the merits gained by silent recitation and by loud recitation are essentially equal [50]. To Han Buddhists, Nianfo becomes a way of meditation and can be conveniently performed on most occasions, i.e., walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. It can also be practiced while mentally counting with Buddhist prayer beads [51].

Other Mantras and Dharanis

Normally, in a Dharma assembly or similar activities, many different mantras or dhāraṇīs are chanted. During the Covid-19, Pandemic, in addition to the five mantra-dhāraṇī discussed above, other dhāraṇī-dhāraṇīs are also recited and chanted for praying for people's well-being and for ending this Pandemic. For example, in a Blessing Dharma Assembly held by the Chinese Buddhist Association in Taiwan on February 11, 2020, more than ten different mantra-dharanis were chanted in the Assembly [52]. In addition to the Nīlakaṇṭha Dhāraṇī and Bhaisajyaguru Mantra, the popular Six-syllabled Mantra, Sukhavatī Vyūha Dharani (also known as Pureland Rebirth Dharani), Karma Eliminating Mantra Bodhisattva Cundi Mantra White Manjusri, and Manjushri Heart Dharani were chanted in the Assembly. These mantra-dhāraṇīs were recited 1,957,380 times in this Assembly [6].

Many other medical-related mantra-dharanis, such as the Detoxification Mantra (also known as the Sakyamuni Buddha Mantra) and the Plague-Dispelling Mantra are also popular and chanted in different occasions. For example, on January 23, 2020, the Jingan Temple in Shanghai conducted online praying by chanting sutras and mantras for speedy recoveries of those suffered by the pandemic and for blessing everyone. The temple specifically provided the Sutra of the Plague-Dispelling Mantra (X02n0193) which was transliterated by Amoghavajra, so that the followers can chant the Mantra online [53].

Medical Benefits and Scientific Evidence by Chanting Mantra-dharani

In this section, we present the benefits of practicing mantra-dharani chanting on physical and mental health. As indicated in the preceding section, to perform the practice of mantra-dharani chanting, Chinese Buddhists normally have to chant or recite 108 times or more of the specific mantra or dharani. Normally, a chanting session can last from 20 to 100-min dependent on the

repetition times and the length of the mantra or dharani. Thus, many studies call this type of practice "mantra meditation". As described by Delmonte [54] and Ospina et al. [55], mantra meditation is a technique to achieve a meditative state by the repetition of a mantra in which mantra repetition no longer consciously occurs and instead the mind reaches a near-empty state without thought and bothering by anxiety and attachments [6]. Mantra meditation can be considered as one of the simplest practices to reach a meditative state.

In addition to Buddhism, mantra meditation is also practiced in many other traditions, including Hinduism [56], Judaism [57], Jainism [58,59], Christianity [60], Islam [61,62], and Iranian theosophy [63]. Most mantras used for mantra meditation in these traditions are relatively short. For example, one of the very important mantras in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism is Om, which has only one syllable and is often chanted either independently or during meditation in these traditions [56,64,65]. Om is also the first syllable of the Mantra of Tara and the Six-syllabled Mantra discussed in the preceding section. The connotations of Om vary across the different traditions. In most cases, Om is the name or symbol of the deity of the practitioner's faith. To Hinduists, Om is the sound of a sacred spiritual symbol while, to Chinese Buddhists, Om could associate with Bodhisattva Tara or Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara as discussed earlier. In Om meditation, the meditators first gently direct their attention to the symbol or the image of the associated deity (to an atheist, the image can be any instant picture appearing in his mind) and then mentally or loudly chant mantra Om effortlessly; this finally leads to a meditative state characterized by harmonious and blissful awareness.

In general, mantra meditation techniques have two essential components: mantra recitation and the resulting meditative state. For example, one of the popular mantra-meditation techniques, called the Transcendental Meditation (TM), directs the practitioners to sit in a comfortable posture, with eyes closed, and mentally (silently) repeat the mantra [66]. This and other mantra meditation techniques involve passive breathing, and no specific pattern should be prescribed. Without any strenuous effort, meditators softly direct their attention to the mantra [67]. The awareness is eventually freed of all mental content, remaining silently awake within itself, and producing a meditative state be characterized by the experience of perfect stillness, rest, stability, and by a complete absence of mental boundaries [67].

In this section, four Mantra-Meditation studies using mantras including "Om" and "TM" are examined to explore the psychological and physiological evidence on the mental and physical changes that benefit from practicing mantra meditation. The review presented is not meant to be a comprehensive one but rather a brief exposure of several typical medical studies to illustrate the health benefits from both silent and loud mantra-meditations.

Salivary immunoglobulin A (s-IgA) Changes by loud mantra chanting

Salivary immunoglobulin A (s-IgA) is an antibody found in body fluids that prevent microorganisms' adhesion to the epithelial cells in gastrointestinal and respiratory tracts, thus helping the body to counteract the pathogens ingested, inhaled, or adhered to the body surface.

A ten-month study with 30 healthy Iranian women (mean age of 44+ 3 years) recruited from yoga clubs in Shiraz, Iran, was conducted in 2016 to evaluate the effect of loud mantra chanting on the change of s-IgA [63]. Fifteen participants were randomly assigned to the experimental (test) group while the rest fifteen were the control group. The experimental-group participants did group mantra-meditation by repeating the mantra with a loud voice for about 20 min, while the control group participants were left passive in sitting on their chairs at rest condition in a different room. During 20-min loud reciting, the participants were sitting cross-legged on the ground and the mantra chanted was "Hoo," which is one of God's names in Iranian theosophy. Saliva samples were collected from both groups at four interventions, i.e., at pre-test (8:30 am), after the tutorial session (9:20 am), after 20-min chanting meditation (9:50 am), and one-hour later time (10:50 am) [63]. The s-IgA level was evaluated using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent-assay test and the salivary kits were used with the normal range between 40 and 170 µg/ml.

The mean s-IgA concentrations of the samples taken after the meditation one-hour later from the experimental group were found to be statistically different from those of the control group. The change of the s-IgA level of the control group is from 53.5 µg/ml at pretest time to 66.2 µg/ml at one hour later time after the 20-min resting, a 23.7% increase, while the corresponding change of the experimental group is from 54.3 µg/ml to 96.3 µg/ml, a 77.3%, which is 3.26 times higher than that of the control group [63]. This difference is statistically significant. Since the s-IgA level is a type of antibody found in body fluids, normally, the higher the antibody level, the better the body's immune system. This study indicates that continuously reciting a mantra even for a single-20 min session can have a positive influence on immunological components and improve the immune states of the chanters.

EEG brain-spectra influenced by loud chanting of Om mantra

The Electroencephalogram (EEG) is a method to measure voltage fluctuations (brain waves) resulting from ionic current within the neurons of the surface layer of the brain. Through small metal electrodes attached to the brain scalp, brain cells can communicate via electrical impulses all the time, even when the tester is asleep.

By using EEG, Harne & Hiwale [68] studied the brain dynamics of oscillatory (brain waves) changes as a result of Loud Om Mantra

meditation. Twenty-three Indian college students without any mantra meditation experience were recruited for the loud Om meditation study. All participants were right-handed and healthy (nonsmokers, medication-free and none-habitual drinker). EEG spectra were recorded before and after 30-min loud Om chanting. The recorded EEG signals were then analyzed using spectral-domain analysis.

During meditation, first, the participants have to inhale smoothly; soon they have to release the air (exhale) by chanting Om. The surrounding was made silent, and no light was in the room during the 30-min loud chanting. The participants were then asked to relax by laying down and eyes closed, and EEG was recorded for more than 2 min in the electrical shield room of the Bilala hospital in Shegaon, India under the guidance of a medical doctor. Sixteen electrodes were used to provide 16-channel data for analysis. The IBM SPSS, version 22 was used for statistical analysis. A significant increase in theta power was found after chanting when averaged across all brain regions [68].

The results show that a loud 30-min Om meditation alters theta EEG patterns (frequency from 4 to 7 Hz) significantly (increase) higher than the baseline EEG brain-wave patterns, which is similar to other studies documenting a reduction in cortical arousal during a state of relaxation. The present finding implies that the loud 'Om' chanting should have the potential for offering stress relaxation for the practitioner. The loud Om chanting can also serve as an introduction to mantra meditation that provides naive meditators with the opportunity to experience of chanting meditation to a state of relaxation [68].

Hemodynamic imaging affected by silent Om chanting

Deepeshwar et al. [69] employed functional Near-Infrared Spectroscopy (fNIRS) to study the relative hemodynamic changes in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) during 20-min Silent Om Chanting. The PFC is a part of the brain located at the front of the frontal lobe. Hemodynamics is to study the relationship between the circulatory changes of blood flow and cardiovascular functions, while the fNIRS is adopted for measuring the circulatory changes of blood flow. The fNIRS uses near-infrared (NIR) light for measuring the concentration of the hemoglobin to estimate cortical hemodynamic activity which occurs in response to neural activity. The technique takes the advantage of the optical window in which skin, tissue, and bone are mostly transparent to NIR light (700–900 nm wavelength) and, on the other hand, hemoglobin and deoxygenated hemoglobin are strong absorbers of NIR light. Thus, NIR light can penetrate the 'transparent' surface layer of the scalp and detect the underneath regions near the cortical surface as the NIR detector moves or propagates through the head.

Twenty-two right-handed healthy Indian males (mean age 22.9 ± 4.6 years) with a minimum of 12-month experience in mantra meditation were recruited to the study. Apart from their

prior experience of meditation on “Om”, all participants were given a 3-month orientation, 5 days a week under the guidance of an experienced meditation teacher. Each participant was assessed for both the meditation (testing) and random-thinking (control) sessions on two separate consecutive days. The total duration of each session was 60 min, including five periods: 1) Pre (5 min), 2) Stroop-Pre (15 min), 3) 20-min silent Om chanting or random thinking, 4) Stroop- Post (15 min), and 5) Post (5 min). Each participant sat cross-legged with eyes closed and followed pre-recorded instructions throughout the meditation experimental and random thinking (control) sessions. During the random-thinking period, the participants were asked to listen to a compiled audio CD mixing with non-connected random conversation, announcements, advertisements, and other talks recorded from a local radio station.

During the meditation session, over the right prefrontal cortex (rPFC), there was an increase in the total hemoglobin (THC) concentration from -5.11 to -0.06 nM with a reduced deoxy-hemoglobin (HbR) concentration from -3.90 to -7.04 nM. On the other hand, in the random-thinking session, there was a decreased THC from -4.29 to -8.41 nM with an increased HbR concentration from -5.18 to +0.19 nM [69]. To oxy-hemoglobin (HbO), increased concentrations were observed in both the meditation and random thinking sessions at the right PFC. The only difference is that the increase of HbO in the meditation period is 60% larger than that of the random-ticking session. The HbO increased from -2.45 to +0.35 nM and from -2.65 to -0.1.0 nM for the meditation and random-thinking session, respectively. Since the increase of the hemoglobin changes in the right PFC is much larger than that of left PFC, this implies that the brain activities over rPFC is much more active than that of IPFC during the meditation session and the brain activities in the random-thinking session are much less active than that of the meditation session.

The study results also indicated that the mean reaction time (RT) was shorter during the Stroop color-word task (period), which suggests improved performance and efficiency in periods related to attention during the meditation session. The result of shortened mean RT is consistent with the hemoglobin changes measurements i.e., higher brain activities during the meditation session. In sum, the findings reported by Deepeshwar et al. [69] provide medical evidence that the oxygenation levels (proportional to total hemoglobin THC or oxy-hemoglobin HbO) are increased in the rPFC during meditation compared with random thinking in the same practitioners. This implies that silent Om chanting did enhance neural activity and brain performance, including cognitive capabilities and executive functions, which were found to be mainly associated with activation of the rPFC.

Reduction of blood pressure and stresses by silent transcendental meditation

From January 2006 to May 2007, Nidich et al. [70] conducted

a randomized controlled trial in 298 healthy college students from American University in Washington, DC to study the efficacy of the TM on their blood pressure and psychological distress. Students were excluded if they had certain chronic diseases, such as hypertension, hypotension, and coronary heart diseases. The 298 filtered participants were divided into two groups: the TM testing group and the control group.

The participants learned the TM technique through seven tutoring courses taught by certified instructors. After passing these courses, the qualified participants in the TM testing group practiced twice a day for 20-min of the TM for three months [70]. Participants who practiced at least once a day were also considered adherent. The primary outcome for the trial was blood pressure, which was measured in a seated position using a standard clinical trial technique. Three readings were taken in both pre- and post-testing sessions. The first reading was taken after an adaptation period of 5 min and a 1-min adaptation period was used between the first, second, and third readings. The last two were averaged for the study score.

Only 207 of the 298 participants completed both blood pressure baseline and post-testing. Among the 207 participants, 93 (25.4+9.2 years in age) were in the TM experimental group and 114 (26.2+9.9 years) were the control group. The blood pressures of the TM group had an average of SBP/DBP were 118.7/75.9 mmHg from pre-test readings and 116.7/74.7 mmHg from post-test readings. Changes in SBP/DBP for the TM-group participants were -2.0/-1.2 mmHg, while the changes were +0.4/+0.5 mmHg for the control group. Although the reduction of 2.0/1.2 mmHg in blood pressure by practicing 20-min TM is a relatively small improvement, this is encouraging, since the corresponding change of the control group is an increase of 0.4/0.5 mmHg. Consequently, TM has the potential to be a good candidate for non-dietary and non-drug treatments of hypertension.

Travis et al. [71] also applied EEG to investigate the effects of TM practice on brain functioning. They found that TM practice decreases the effects of previous stressful experiences and can help an individual function better in stressful situations. Also, their results indicate that lower sleepiness and faster habituation rates were negatively correlated with higher scores on the Brain Integration Scale, which is an integrated parameter defined by the authors and is also negatively correlated with anxiety [71,72].

Moreover, as reported by Brook et al. [73], TM has been recommended to the American Heart Association in its Scientific Statement as an alternative approach to lowering blood pressure and classified as Class IIb (Benefit > Risk, additional studies and data would be helpful or needed) and Level of Evidence B (Recommendation that procedure or treatment is useful/effective and evidence from single randomized trial or nonrandomized studies).

Concluding Remarks

Many Chinese Buddhists find comfort in relieving their anxieties and sufferings by practicing mantra-dharani-chanting during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This practice also makes one feel relaxed and secure, allowing one to pray for a quick end to the pandemic and for gaining merit for one's cultivation towards Buddhahood. The present article finds that calls for social-distancing and other self-restraints affect every aspect of Chinese Buddhists and associated temples and monasteries. The clerics and their adherents find ways to remain active through online communication, online services, and online practicing.

In studying Mantra-Dharani chanting, we first examine their content and significance to Chinese Buddhists. We find that Chinese Buddhist scriptures comprise a large number of mantra-dharanis, which are well-liked in China. We present motivations for Mantra-Dharani Chanting, and also examine typical activities during the pandemic, including specific mantra-dharanis popularly chanted over the past two years. As discussed in this article, mantra-dharanis have been widely chanted throughout the pandemic to protect the well-being of chanters. They represent powerful tools for their chanters, although one mantra-dharani might be more effective than another for specific protection.

In studying the medical evidence of the benefits of Mantra-Dharani chanting (mantra meditation), four major studies have been presented. There is no doubt of a strong connection between reciting mantra and body health, although the underlying psychological and physiologic mechanisms are not fully understood. The sample studies examined include mantras "Om" and "Hoo", these short mantras are similar to chanting Buddha's name (Nianfo) by Chinese Buddhists focusing on its sound with no interruptions, no retention, and no contemplating or wandering. For some meditative techniques, the practitioner may also focus on specific mental or sensory activity: a repeated sound other than a mantra, a photo image, or specific body sensations such as breath counting or heartbeats.

In the four examples reviewed, the parameters or properties measured include 1) Salivary Immunoglobulin A (s-IgA), 2) Electroencephalographic spectra, 3) Hemodynamic responses, and 4) Blood Pressure. The instruments adopted include 1) Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay tester, 2) EEG machine, 3) NIRS machine, and 4) Blood Pressure Gage. The results of the four examples illustrated that the practice of mantra chanting or meditation can improve both mental and physical health, especially in the areas of the immune system, stress relaxation, brain performance, alertness, and hypertension. The brain pattern changes during and after repetitive mantra chanting, also show that mantra chanting can help practitioners to oxygenate the brain, reduce heart rate, create calm brainwave activity, and get cured by many ailments.

Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

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