

Research Article

Transformational Spaces: An Interpretative Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived Experience of Young People Visiting Kanha Shanti Vanam Meditation Center, Telangana, IndiaVivek Shekhar ^{1, 2}, Hester O Connor ^{2, *}1. Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, USA; E-Mail: shekhar.vivek@gmail.com2. Heartfulness Institute, Kanha Village, Nandigama, Telangana 509328, India; E-Mails: hester.oconnor@heartfulness.org; hohesteroconnor@gmail.com* **Correspondence:** Hester O Connor; E-Mails: hester.oconnor@heartfulness.org; hohesteroconnor@gmail.com**Academic Editor:** Marcus Henning*OBM Integrative and Complementary Medicine*
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doi:10.21926/obm.icm.2601007**Received:** October 29, 2025**Accepted:** January 29, 2026**Published:** February 04, 2026**Abstract**

The innate desire to belong and to connect is profoundly human, yet in a world of instant communication, millions of young people increasingly feel untethered and adrift. Loneliness is the 21st century's primary health care concern across all age groups. Young people not only feel lonely and emotionally isolated, but they also describe a lack of meaningful connections and purpose. Young people lack safe spaces where they can connect with their peers, without fear of judgment, prejudice, and pressure to succeed. In a qualitative study, 10 young people aged 18-27 years were interviewed to understand their experiences of participating in a 3-day retreat at the world headquarters of Heartfulness Meditation, Kanha Shanti Vanam, in Telangana, India. Participants described profound experiences which were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Many of the participants narrated stories of loss, depression, and disappointment in the years before the retreat. The feeling of being in a safe and nurturing space offered new perspectives and possibilities. The themes of "container", "belonging", and "transformative experiences" emerged as overarching themes in the Youth Unite study. The places where young people would traditionally be expected to express themselves freely without fear or prejudice are very few and far between. When they are



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offered the opportunity to come together without pressure to perform, invited to connect within their own hearts, and to connect with others in a serene and nurturing environment, they report finding meaning and spiritual connection. The 10 young people in the study were deeply impacted by the spiritual environment of the meditation center and expressed awareness of the importance of nature, people, and even a grain of rice. Such experiences suggest that offering safe spiritual spaces might help young people embark on profound inward adventures.

Keywords

Heartfulness; meditation; meditation center; youth; loneliness; belonging; container; transformative experiences

1. Introduction

“All that I need in my life is only love. And in Kanha, I felt love in every inch of inch of that (love)... So, what I had felt, what I am feeling about that can’t be expressed in words. You know, it is a completely old feeling... When I went back from Kanha, I’m thanking God.” (Hamzaa, study participant).

The World Health Organization, in 2023, officially declared loneliness, defined as the lack of meaningful connection with others, a “pressing health threat [1]”. In 2024, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (USA) [2] identified loneliness and social isolation as serious public health risks, linked to increased rates of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and depression. In 2023, former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory calling loneliness and isolation an epidemic and a serious threat to public health [3].

In her book, *The Lonely Century* [4], renowned economist Noreena Hertz urges us to consider loneliness as pressing an issue as climate change or inequality. The arguments she submits in her book have succeeded in making loneliness a collective rather than a personal issue. She wrote her powerful diagnosis of our era before the global Covid-19 pandemic. For many, the pandemic was a time of isolation, anxiety, and depression. The post-Covid landscape, along with the disrupted economic and political landscape, remains uncertain, thereby adding to the pressures we face individually and collectively. These pressures have intensified the epidemic of loneliness, lack of meaningful connection, and polarization within society.

The absence of meaningful connection is likely to be intense among young people, many of whom face a lack of purpose due to the dearth of role models of high moral fiber. It is hardly surprising that young people report a lack of solid ground within themselves. Loneliness is frequently a precursor or part of mental health challenges.

Hertz and Murthy lead the call for collective action to address the mental health and social challenges faced as a result of loneliness. According to the World Health Organization report [5], one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental health issue, accounting for 15% of the global burden of disease in this age group. Depression, anxiety, and behavioral challenges are among the leading causes of mental health challenges among adolescents. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among those aged 15-29 years old. Significant life transitions, emotional development, and

rapid brain development mark the period of emerging adulthood (ages 18-25). The WHO report emphasizes the need for national-level resources to address the causes of anxiety and depression in young people.

According to Evans et al. [6], the challenges faced by young people continue through college years, when graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as the general population. Holliday et al. [7] reported that the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the challenges faced by students, with reports of increased depression, anxiety, fatigue, and burnout.

In India, approximately 678 million people, representing 65% of the population of 1.46 billion, are under 35 years old. India can boast the largest number of millennials and Gen Zs on the planet. Due to high population density, competition amongst and pressure on young people is intense across all areas: education, employment, marriage, and achieving emotional and financial independence. The stigma associated with experiencing mental health difficulties among young people in India is immense—fewer than 10% of its youth report such problems. The public stigma associated with mental health problems particularly affects help-seeking among young people [8].

Suresh and Dar [9] confirmed that academic pressure, social isolation, post-Covid-19-related ongoing stress, economic uncertainty, screen time, and sedentary lifestyles continue to impact the mental health of 18-29-year-olds attending higher education across eight major cities in India. The majority of the students in this cross-sectional study reported high levels of depression, anxiety, and loss of emotional and behavioral control. Yet according to their study, despite the prevalence of between 60-70% of young people sampled reporting levels of distress, often due to stigma, a minimal number of young adults accessed mental health services.

Tushar Varma reported in *The Indian Express* [10] that according to the Indian National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, the number of student deaths by suicide increased 4.5% in 2021. Maharashtra had the highest student deaths by suicide in 2021. The NCRB's data showed that student suicides had gone up drastically during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and have been steadily rising in the last five years.

In addition, young people in India, particularly those living in rural areas, face high levels of cognitive dissonance between their day-to-day lives and the way life is presented on social media. These social platforms predominantly represent Western values, which are at odds with the values held by families and elders. The majority of the population of India, more than 63%, lives in rural areas, which are associated with more traditional values and the maintenance of social norms.

Heartfulness meditation offers the potential to help address the struggle for meaningful connection through its meditation and opportunities for social connection. Heartfulness is a simple practice that facilitates connection within one's own heart through the core practices (meditation, rejuvenation, prayer, journal writing, and attendance at group meditation). Heartfulness meditation is widely practiced in India, with centers in all 28 states. The Youth Unite program was initiated at the world headquarters of Heartfulness, located at the Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center in Telangana, Hyderabad, India.

Kanha meditation center is a 1,000-acre site dedicated to water and tree conservation. There are thousands of trees, a rainforest, and places for quiet rest where thousands come for spiritual retreats, educational events, and training opportunities. The meditation center has a large meditation hall with no doors, making it suitable for small and very large gatherings, where

thousands of people can meditate at the same time. Heartfulness practices are offered free of charge globally.

This study reports the experiences of 10 young people who visited the meditation center for a 3-day retreat in 2024 as part of the Youth Unite program. At an individual level, Heartfulness can offer young people a way to connect with their own hearts. Connecting to their own hearts opened possibilities for further connections, such as deepening the connection with themselves, with others, and experiencing connection with their higher selves. The experience is unique for each person and is not seen as a panacea for loneliness. The social aspects of Heartfulness is experienced in many ways: through group yoga and meditation sessions, eating in the communal dining hall, exploring the Yatra Garden and the Rain Forest, and engaging in volunteering activities. All the opportunities offered during the 3-day retreat provide means to build social connections and enhance personal and social qualities. The key elements of Youth Unite program include:

- Heartfulness meditation practices (meditation, rejuvenation, prayer, journal writing, and attendance at group meditation sessions) are the core elements.
- Three-day retreat at Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center, Telanegana, Hyderabad. The retreat included meditation; educational, recreational, and peer-support activities to foster connection; and lifestyle opportunities such as diet, yoga, and service.

2. Literature Review

To understand the participants' experience during the 3-day retreat at the Heartfulness headquarters, it is necessary to situate the study within wider theoretical contexts. We began by researching the benefits of meditation. We then explained what Heartfulness meditation is and provided an overview of relevant research on its benefits. We followed with a brief overview of the meaning of safe spaces for young people. Next, we examined the environment of the meditation center as a form of maternal container. In this safe place, the participants described having the opportunity to experience themselves in new ways, opening up new possibilities in their young lives.

2.1 The Benefits of Meditation

The benefits of meditation for well-being and mental health have been documented, particularly for mindfulness meditation [11]. Mindfulness meditation is associated with increased self-awareness, which in turn is associated with reduced risk of relapse in depression and anxiety. Jobin et al. [12] conducted a scoping review of mindfulness-based interventions to enhance adolescent mental health. The review of eleven studies reported improvements in teenagers' mental health and well-being. Improved emotion regulation, resilience, and decreased levels of anxiety, depression, negative emotions, and stress were found in adolescents. Regular practice was reported as an essential factor in maintaining the positive effects of mindfulness. Mindfulness-based interventions delivered during late adolescence (15-18 years of age) had the greatest effects on mental health and well-being outcomes.

2.2 Heartfulness Meditation and Related Research

Heartfulness meditation began in India in the early 1900s and is now practiced in approximately 160 countries worldwide. The meditation practice invites the meditator to gently bring their

attention to the source of light already present in their own heart. The rejuvenation practice invites the meditator to let go of all the impressions that have accumulated during the day and to imagine that the impressions are leaving the whole system, through the back in the form of vapor, creating a vacuum in the heart. The meditator is invited to let love fill the vacuum created in the heart. Heartfulness meditation is usually done in the morning, and the rejuvenation practice in the evening.

Iyer et al. [13] found that Heartfulness meditation significantly reduced loneliness and stress and increased well-being among 14- to 19-year-old students over 28 days. A 3-month study of the impact of Heartfulness meditation on anxiety, perceived stress, well-being, and telomere length with a group of 100 healthy 18-24-year-olds, randomly assigned to either meditation practice group or a control group, reported that cortisol levels in the meditators decreased significantly compared to the controls. Anxiety decreased and well-being improved in the meditation group. Additionally, telomere length was shown to be affected by cortisol levels, suggesting that Heartfulness meditation practice can help to increase telomere length, and thereby slow cellular aging [14]. Heartfulness meditation has been shown to improve burnout and stress among healthcare workers [15].

Gisbert et al. [16] reported a pilot study on Heartfulness meditation to improve resilience and anxiety in healthcare students. Forty-eight nursing students were randomly assigned to Heartfulness meditation or a waitlist control group. The participants meditated three to five times a week for 90 days. At baseline, the students were found to have low resilience and high levels of stress, anxiety and depression. On days 45 and 90 of the study the Heartfulness group demonstrated increasing resilience and decreasing depression and anxiety scores, while the control group's scores remained largely unchanged. The findings were noted to be statistically significant for depression and anxiety scores.

A phenomenological study investigating the impact of Heartfulness meditation among 11 participants who had been practicing Heartfulness for between 1 year and 40 years reported a key theme of a growing feeling of being more grounded within. In addition, participants reported improved connections with family, friends, and colleagues at work [17].

To understand how a residential retreat setting might affect the experience of young people attending the Youth Unite retreat, it is necessary to examine the literature on the impact of such events.

2.3 The Meaning of Safe Spaces for Young People

"Adolescents are exposed daily to threats from all spheres, whether in subtle pressure by parents who may convey conditional approval, or more academic and achievement pressures for success. They may also be subject to bullying, teasing, to feeling they need to meet specific requirements for physical appearance and dress, general competitive peer pressures for social acceptance and needing to belong, and in facing the need to enter a world where there are no absolute values of truth or worth." [18].

In 2025, Pearmain conducted a phenomenological study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with fourteen young people aged 15-18 years who had attended spiritually oriented summer camps to understand their lived experience and what they valued from the camps. Eight participants attended a camp run by the Society of Friends (Quakers), and six attended a summer camp at the Danish Heartfulness meditation center. The majority of the participants attended the

camps on more than one occasion. Two main themes emerged: “safe haven” and “transforming processes”. Pearmain discusses the special meaning of creating safe and sacred spaces for young people where they can be together, be themselves, be accepted, and not feel judged.

There is a dearth of studies using qualitative methodologies to investigate the experiences of young people attending camps or residential programs that offer a broad range of opportunities, including spiritual exploration, as described in Pearmain’s study.

The 2024 study “I Feel Seen”: Creating Safe Spaces to Foster Self-Understanding and Agential Expression Among Youth Through Social Circus [19], focused on a 4-day social circus event with young people. Social Circus programs use circus arts to achieve social and personal goals. Social Circus does not focus on circus artistry per se, but helps to build self-esteem, social skills, and community engagement. Social Circus is often used with marginalized groups. Using qualitative methods, four major themes emerged from participants' narratives: (1) creating a safe social space, (2) enriching self-understanding, (3) bolstering expressive capacities, and (4) experiencing the world around you. The young people described the environment as a safe social space, where they felt accepted, respected, and could take risks without fear of judgment. The young people who attended the event based on circus artistry were from marginalized communities. They do not necessarily represent the broader youth community.

Researchers in the “I Feel Seen” study [19] found that movement, balance, and performance practices allowed participants to gain insights into their strengths and limitations. These insights helped foster self-awareness, self-reflection, and recognition of their capacities. Engagement in Social Circus affected how youth related to their surroundings, the space, the people, and the community. The experience encouraged relational awareness, attentiveness to others, and shifting perceptions of social contexts.

Studies like these highlight the importance of both faith-based communities and structured social programs as critical sources of emotional support, resilience, and personal growth for youth facing various challenges, including marginalization. Pearmain’s study is unique in its attempt to understand the lifeworld and lived experience of young people attending spiritually focused summer camps. In the Youth Unite study, the experience of college students attending the meditation center for the first time was the primary focus.

The purpose of the present study was to understand how a sample of 10 young people among the 128 attending the inaugural Youth Unite retreat made sense of their Heartfulness experience.

3. Methods

This study explored how young people attending the Youth Unite retreat made sense of their Heartfulness meditation experiences. All participants were first-time visitors to Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center and were new to Heartfulness practice. The study forms part of a larger research project and reports on qualitative interviews with 10 participants (six women and four men) aged 18-28 years. Participants originated from Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana. The Youth Unite retreat, attended by 128 young adults aged 18-35 years, was held in June 2024.

3.1 Study Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to understand the lived experience of young people participating in a spiritual retreat. Phenomenology was chosen because the aim was to listen to and understand the experiences of young people, in their own words and from their own unique perspectives.

Phenomenology is an umbrella term that encompasses both a philosophical movement and a range of research approaches. Phenomenological research involves asking questions such as, “What was the experience like?” and “How does this experience in your life present itself to you?” Phenomenological researchers are interested in the embodied experience and what it means to those experiencing it. The lived experience is taken seriously, and the embodied lifeworld of research participants is valued and not contested by the researchers [20].

3.2 Sample Selection

Ethical approval was obtained from the MAARG Independent Ethics Committee (MIEC-053-23, 20 May 2024). Written consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were Agricultural Science students from the same university, many of whom had not met before the retreat. Recruitment occurred during a group session on 22 June 2024, where all 128 retreat participants were invited to volunteer for interviews. Given the phenomenological orientation, a maximum sample size of ten was predetermined. Ten students self-selected by raising their hands and providing their WhatsApp contact details, at which point recruitment closed. Participants expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to share their experiences in an open, unstructured conversation with one of the principal investigators (PIs).

Inclusion criteria were:

- first-time practitioners of Heartfulness meditation.
- participation in the Youth Unite retreat at Kanha Shanti Vanam.
- First-time visitors to Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center.
- fluency in spoken English (although Hindi was the first language for many).
- willingness to participate in a recorded qualitative interview.

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that interviews would take place in the days following the retreat.

3.3 Data Collection

The qualitative interviews with the 10 participants were unstructured. They focused on the following research question: ***What is the lived experience of youth attending a 3-day Heartfulness retreat at the Kanha Shanti meditation center as part of the Youth Unite program?*** The interview was open-ended and allowed participants to answer the question from their own experience and perspective (Annexure 1). No attempt was made to direct the answers in any particular direction. The participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Most were conducted via Zoom within one week to ten days after the retreat, once students had returned to campus. Two interviews were conducted in person on the final day of the retreat. Interview scheduling occurred through WhatsApp, and consent was reconfirmed before recording. Participants were briefed on the study procedures,

assured of confidentiality, and informed that they could request edits to their transcripts or withdraw at any time. No participants raised concerns or withdrew. Zoom recordings were transcribed verbatim and were shared with participants for review, and minor amendments were incorporated to ensure accuracy and preserve intended meaning, supporting a co-constructed narrative process.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a methodology grounded in phenomenological principles and focused on exploring experience in its own terms [21]. Finlay's five iterative processes guided the analytic process: (a) embracing the phenomenological attitude, (b) entering the lifeworld through descriptions of experiences, (c) dwelling with horizons of implicit meanings, (d) explicating the phenomenon wholistically, and (e) integrating frames of reference [21]. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was selected because its focus on lived experience and meaning-making aligned closely with the aims of the study and provided an appropriate framework for capturing the depth and nuance of participants' accounts.

The researchers sought to follow the process for producing a rigorous IPA study, adhering to the four qualities of good IPA suggested by Nizza et al. [22]. The authors suggest that "1. constructing compelling unfolding narratives, 2. developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account, 3. close analytic reading of participants' words, and 4. attending to convergence and divergence" (p. 371). To follow the phenomenological process as recommended by Nizza et al. [22], the researchers required a sustained openness, a dwelling within the texts, and an empathic resonance to reflect on the felt sense of the lived experience of the 10 participants.

The following steps were taken to allow the two principal investigators (PIs) to dwell within the transcripts of the interviews. The PIs worked independently and then together, in line with the recommendations for conducting IPA [21]. Each principal investigator (PI) first engaged independently with the data by listening and relistening to each interview recording, reading and rereading the transcripts, taking exploratory notes, identifying experiential statements, and developing preliminary experiential themes for each participant. Following this individual phase, the PIs met to share their observations for all ten participants, discuss emerging group-level themes, and maintain a sustained openness to the unfolding meanings within the data. Together, they worked to integrate different interpretive perspectives, refine and merge themes into overarching structures, and compile a spreadsheet of themes and illustrative quotations to support systematic tracking. Throughout the analytic process, the PIs supported one another in remaining attentive to their own subjectivity and potential biases.

4. Results

The three key themes that emerged from the analyses were container, belonging, and transformative experiences. Kanha was seen as the container that nurtures a sense of belonging, which led to transformative experiences. Several sub-themes contributed to each of the three key themes. See Figure 1 for graphical representation of the themes and sub-themes.

Theme 1: Container

- Peace
- Positive Energy

- Ineffable Magic

Theme 2: Belonging

- Family
- Falling in Love
- Integrating Inside/outside

Theme 3: Transformative Experiences

- Affective Opening
- New perspectives on Self
- New Possibilities

Kanha as a Container which nurtures Belonging, leading to Transformative Experiences

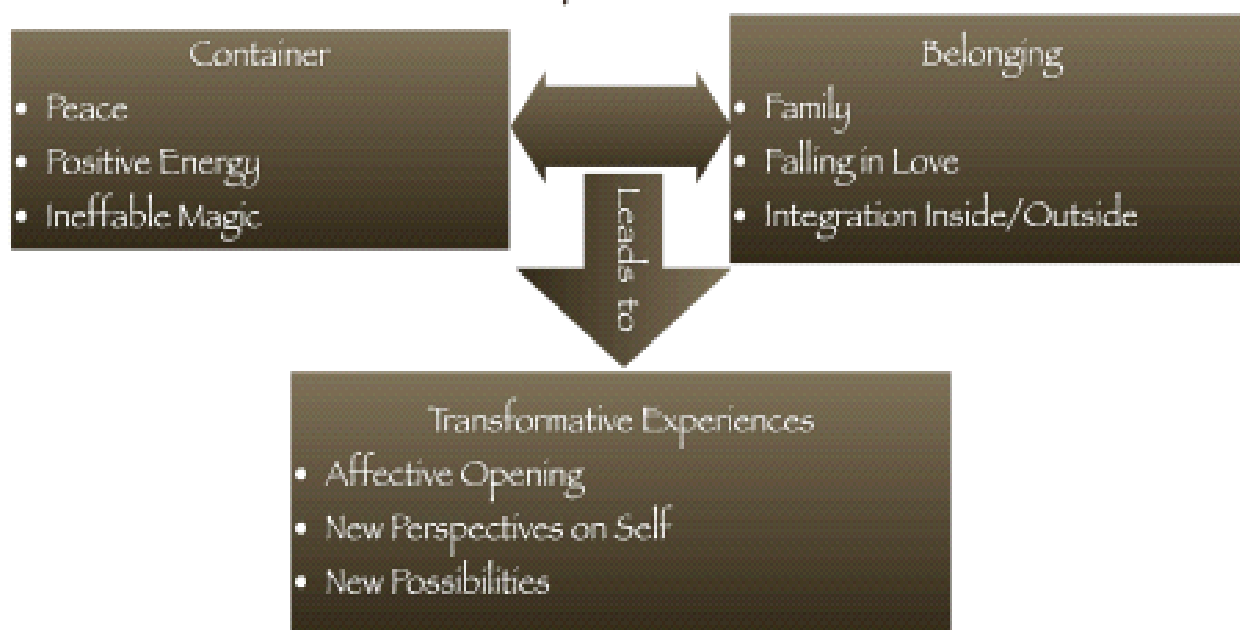


Figure 1 Visual Representation of the Themes of Heartfulness at Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center as a Transformative Space.

Verbatim excerpts from participants' accounts accompany the presentation of themes and subthemes to illustrate and substantiate the analytic interpretations. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were selected to preserve participants' gender and to reflect their cultural context (for example, Sita was replaced with Parvati, and Ali with Rizwan).

4.1 Theme 1: Container

The "container" theme reflects participants' experiences of the meditation center as a nurturing environment. Inspired by Bion's (1962) [23] concept, containment refers to a relational process through which unprocessed emotions are held and transformed into meaningful experience. For participants, Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center functioned as such a container: a safe, supportive space that enabled exploration, healing, and reflection. When participants described

healing spaces as peaceful, filled with positive, or transformative energy, these accounts may be interpreted as experiential markers of containment. Their accounts of peace, positive energy, and ineffable magic illustrate how the environment fostered containment.

4.1.1 Peace

The participants described their experience of peace at Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center as more than an internal achievement but as a state directly supported by the specific qualities of the environment itself. The environment allowed them to overcome the emotional turmoil of fearing they might let their families down—a fear rooted in the belief that their loved ones' social standing depended on their own academic success (not atypical in an Indian social context). This allowed them to find a sense of calm and the mental space to process overwhelming thoughts. Hamzaa felt peace as a pervasive atmospheric quality everywhere on the campus, stating, "Every inch of that campus gave me peace, immense calm. It was all the environment that gave me such happiness."

Nayana described her experience of peace as an intense, almost overwhelming feeling she was reluctant to relinquish: "My experience was so good, I was shivering to leave Kanha Shanti Vanam. I did not want to leave Kanha. That was so peaceful, so good."

While Nayana and Hamzaa talked about peace as an enveloping, visceral feeling, Nitin's sense of peace, associated with the natural beauty of Kanha Shanti Vanam, evoked a sense of home and transported him to his peaceful village surroundings. He appreciated Kanha's distance from the chaos of city life:

"I go to my village whenever I am free, and there the surroundings are very peaceful. That's why I like this place so much. It is outside the city and very peaceful and very much beautiful, natural beauty."

Sakhi's experience of peace was linked to how the environment supported the practice of meditation, something she was still learning: "I don't have that much experience. But I'm feeling so peaceful after starting meditation." She described a state where her thoughts were "like gone," and she felt "fully empty." This emptiness was not viewed as negative, but as a state she valued deeply. Shalabh emphasized its practical benefits: "I got two things and two very important things. Peace of mind and how to stay focused on one thing."

Collectively, these accounts highlight peace as both a receptive state of quietude and a foundation for deeper engagement with the self. Sakhi's experience of peace appeared to arise from a sense of respite from overwhelming and intrusive thoughts. This inner quietude functioned as an allowing state, creating psychological space in which other, often more positive aspects of her being could surface and be experienced more fully. Beyond this receptive quality of peace, participants also described a more proactive dimension of the Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center experience: a dynamic sense of positive energy that actively fostered healing and emotional restoration.

4.1.2 Positive Energy

Beyond calm, participants described the meditation center as infused with a dynamic, restorative energy. Although many participants could not specify precisely what made the retreat at Kanha

Shanti Vanam meditation center feel uniquely right for them, they described a pervasive sense that something about the place “clicks,” that nature, the atmosphere, and the spiritual practice combined in a way that resonated deeply. Shalabh captured this “click” when he said, “Nature is providing some kind of energy, some sort of positive energy. It’s a transfer.” Linking the restorative effects of nature to the succor often associated with spiritual practice, he added:

“So, it’s kind of like, just like whenever we remember our God, we feel energy. We feel some kind of positive vibe. Similarly, whenever we attend the event, whenever we meditate, we feel some kind of positive vibe, some kind of positive energy inside us, which draws from that misery.”

Taniska, contrasting Kanha’s atmosphere with her college campus, noted that although many settings include trees or greenery, Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center’s environment felt distinct in its positive energy in the way this energy alleviated her stress:

“The nature, I mean, here, you know, our college also, we feel there are so many trees and that. But the environment over there is so much different. There is so much positive energy that we can’t live in stress over there.”

For Taniska, the positive energy went far beyond a feeling; it had very real healing effects. As Taniska reflected, “It is a physical healing and a mental clarity. The environment in Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center has so much energy, and that energy has healed. I could hear my inner voice in Kanha. It was so magical.” Kanha meditation center was considered not only a setting for psychological rest, but also a space where inner voices are heard, clarity is restored, and bodily discomfort is attenuated. For Taniska, the healing space worked to diminish the pain and distress caused by her illness. For Shalabh, the healing space worked to eliminate thoughts and focus attention. He aptly summed up the feeling of most participants when he said, “I really feel the magic. I feel like the trees are giving positive vibes to me. Trees are making me clean my body, my mind, and my soul.” The third dimension of containment was the sense of wonder that participants described in the experience - that they could feel its mystical or magical quality but struggled to articulate it.

4.1.3 Ineffable Magic

The participants’ accounts indicate that the retreat at Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center did more than restore calm; it evoked a profound sense of wonder. Many described perceiving the place as imbued with a magical quality. This sense of something extraordinary seemed to emerge almost immediately, as if it had been there virtually from the moment they entered the grounds. One of the first things they remarked on was how well organized the retreat was. As Saumya observed, “All the things related to Heartfulness are arranged in a very proper manner. There was a perfect timing for all things.”

Taniska repeatedly uses the word “magical” to describe her wonder because the experience defied her expectations, provided seemingly miraculous healing, and caused a sustained, powerful shift in her internal state.

“Yes, I mean, my body, I was ill. From last two days, I was sick from last two to three days. But it was not painful for me. Actually, I don’t know how; it was magical. Nothing. I mean, it

happened. I just, I don't know how to tell. I mean, I was sick, but I was not having any pain. I was happy.”

She further explains how this experience was not a few moments here and there, but throughout her stay: “We didn’t know what is going to happen and how it is. And from the moment we entered in Kanha, it was just amazing. I did not imagine that it will be that awesome. And each and every moment we spend there, it was just fabulous.” Even after returning home, Taniska remained affected: “I am unable to express it in words. It was magical, the best days of my life. I am still mentally over there in Kanha and just physically here (in Maharashtra).”

None of these participants had exposure to Heartfulness or Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center before this visit, but both resonated with Saumya: “I am brand new to Heartfulness. I am speechless about Heartfulness. It is the most amazing place I have seen in my life.” Finally, she summed up her experience neatly: “I can’t explain this place in words. I can only feel it.”

The participants’ comments suggested that the impact of the retreat was not only cognitive or procedural, but also had a visceral, emotional, and sensory dimension. The language used—“amazing” “magical” “cannot express in words”—points to an ineffable or transcendent quality of experience, one that exceeds ordinary description and suggests deep emotional or spiritual resonance. Part of what makes the participants’ experience seem so powerful is precisely this lack of ready reference or adequate language.

In sum, what psychoanalytic theory identifies as holding, metabolizing, and repairing was expressed by participants as peace, healing, and transformative energy. In this sense, the themes that emerged from their accounts represent contemporary lived experiences of containment as the relational process through which needs, once suppressed or unmet, could re-emerge, be acknowledged, and integrated into a fuller sense of self.

4.2 Theme 2: Belonging

People require not only attachment to primary caregivers but also a sense of membership in larger groups—family, community, place—that validate their identity, provide recognition, and reduce feelings of alienation [24]. The theme of belonging captures the participants’ descriptions of a need that the Kanha environment allows them to express and, to a certain extent, fulfill safely. The participants’ narratives move from a state of missing a sense of belonging or feeling pressured to please family to a space where they feel they could belong. The belonging theme emerges in three ways: like being part of a family, falling in love, and merging inside/outside, each based on how the participants expressed this need.

4.2.1 Family

Shankar explicitly called people he met at Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center family, and in doing so, revealed his transition from missing belonging to feeling it: “Actually, I like visiting places covered with nature and natural forests. But the way I felt here, it was completely mesmerizing, to be honest. I felt like this was heaven. Because you know, every person here is like family.” The phrasing “every person” is significant because it indicates an expansion in the field of belonging from my family unit to humanity as family. He also described an almost maternal presence in nature:

“For example, I felt like I am in the lap of my mother after coming here. Because I am here in Hyderabad and my family is there in Bihar. So somewhat, I was missing that bond with my mother. After coming here, I felt this nature as another mother. So that's why I told that this is what I needed in my life. That, you know, your mother can't be with you every time.”

Nature became maternal, and spaces became familial, suggesting that the retreat operated as a container that offered both relational belonging and place-based belonging. Shashikant echoed this relational identity, linking belonging to care and reciprocity: “I am from Hilly Station, my father taught me, my mother taught us. The hills taught me. What are we doing for the hills, what are we giving them back?” This concept was further reflected in his attitude toward what nature provides. “So, a single grain of rice has also importance, like we should not waste like that.” The desire to give back was significant in his statements because he feels protective of nature, which he had received so much from, as one would in a family.

While Shankar and Shashikant placed their belonging in familial warmth and nature, Sraddha and Nayana framed belonging in relation to family expectations. Sraddha's belonging starts in relation to her family's expectations and ends in the reframing of self in response to failure: “I went for MBBS exams twice. The first time during Covid, I could not focus and clear it—the second time I was not prepared. My parents used to say -- Just don't get stuck in one situation. God has different plans for you. And maybe this (agriculture) was the thing he has for me”

Nayana talked about internalizing motivation and extending belonging outward to humanity:

“My mother used to tell about me. Do meditation. Do this. Do yoga. But now, after visiting Heartfulness. It is like. I have to do it. On my own. Not by anyone's force. Because it is like. For me and the whole humanity. If I change, I could change people; I could change the way they think. So, this kind of feeling got me to do meditation. not by force.”

Both Nayana and Sraddha shifted toward a sense of belonging and agency in their own ways.

In each case, the experience at Kanha offered something that filled a void. Nature as mother, community as family, personal journeys—all have echoes of home, a yearning for something that once was or could have been. During the 3-day retreat, participants appeared to internalize these three, moving from feeling unbelonged to an embodied feeling of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging.

4.2.2 Falling in Love

During their three days at Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center, in addition to feeling a sense of family, the participants also expressed developing an emotional bond with the place. The feeling was best expressed in Hamzaa's words: “It was all the environment that gave me such happiness. I felt love in that whole campus. In the bookstore of Kanha Ashram, every book. I felt it is mine, or it is something that love is between. So, every inch of the plant, everything, every flower, every fruit, which is in Kanha Ashram. So, I feel the feeling of belonging with it also. I am an introvert. In Kanha meditation center, I saw employees, visitors, students, and faculty which are very calm and very polite.”

Her sense of belonging, rich with sensory details, extends beyond people to things and speaks to ownership. The description of feeling love emanating from every part of the campus is indicative of

a relational field where material elements were experienced as personally meaningful and relational, evoking feelings of intimacy and ownership.

Nayana's description of her experience had a more visceral tone to it:

"The meditation we did there was absolutely heart-touch... (My experience) was so good, I was shivering to leave Kanha... I don't want to leave Kanha. That was so peaceful, so good. I fell in love with Kanha. Literally."

Yet the very physical reaction of "shivering to leave" indicates an emotional investment. Belonging is no longer something only thought about; it is felt deeply, even painfully, in the moment of separation. While the group was en route to Hyderabad to catch the train, they visited a few sites. Saumya's words aptly described the contrast between the two places. Of Kanha, she said, "I love that thing that the people in Kanha are so soft-hearted and they are very nice to other people," and "In Kanha we experienced very cleanness, a very clean place it was." She also loved the peacefulness she felt at Kanha meditation center. But she had this to say about Hyderabad: "From peacefulness, from that peaceful place, I was thrown to the hell. I was just experiencing that there was so much traffic, so much sound, and the people. From that clean place to the hell." The orderly and clean environment of the meditation center appears in sharp contrast to the chaos and messiness of the outside world, which, by contrast, is likened to "hell".

4.2.3 Integrating Inside/Outside

A key aspect of belonging that emerged from the participants' reflections, in addition to acceptance and emotional attachment, was the ability to lower their defenses and allow their inner selves to emerge. To Shashikant, to let what is "inside" show outwardly, is what the Heartfulness practice is about, "Whatever we are doing, that should be pure. Like, whatever we are inside should be reflected in your actions and your talk. Like that I... Till now, I'm observing like that. With heartfulness. Whatever you are inside, you have to show outside. For that, we have to practice more and more."

He further seemed to suggest that his experience at Kanha had supported that integration of inner and outer, with a rather bold statement: "Whatever is there in the heart, it's in the universe—A flame of earth. Something is shifting in that flame in Heartfulness. I feel positivity everywhere here, feel good from the plants, soil, people. I am doing research in desert land. I love plants."

His words appeared to indicate that he felt a connection with nature and community that was opening his heart—the internal becomes permeable to the external. Such permeability supports authentic belonging, and the heart's state echoes in the universe. Shashikant felt the boundary separating him from his surroundings dissolve as he resonated with plants, soil, and people.

Nitin, on the other hand, felt the integration of inside and outside, simply as being at ease in a social way that allowed gentle conversation and unforced interaction—spaces in which one can bring oneself without pressure to perform. In Nitin's words, "The place was very nice, it was not only for eating food, but it was very pleasant to eyes also. We can sit and have a chat with friends and others, and it was pleasant, beautiful, and pleasant both from inside and out."

Collectively, these accounts suggest that belonging at Kanha was not only relational but existential, enabling participants to experience permeability between inner and outer worlds. When asked to sum up his stay at Kanha, Shashikant said, "You can say beyond Anand (Sanskrit: Bliss).

Paramanand (Sanskrit: Ultimate Bliss),” suggesting that this integration went beyond mere functionality; it evoked a deeper spiritual fulfillment.

4.3 Theme 3: Transformative Experiences

The theme of transformation captures the life-altering shifts in perspectives that arose from the experiences at Kanha. Most of the participants came out of the retreat with a more growth-oriented mindset—expanded sense of self, new ways of relating to self and others, and the empowerment to change the world in ways they had not thought possible before.

4.3.1 Affective Opening

Hamzaa’s account illustrated how the boundary between self and environment can dissolve, opening her to an experience that transcended ordinary affective boundaries. It allowed her to find spiritual meaning in their experiences.

“All that I need in my life is only love. And in Kanha, I felt love in every inch of that. What I am feeling. I’m actually speechless. What I am feeling about that can’t be expressed in words. You know, it is a completely old feeling... When I went back from Kanha, I’m thanking God... I’m an introvert person. So, when I visited Kanha, I saw employees, I saw visitors, I saw the students, other faculty members, which are very calm, which was very polite... We share special bond with each other. Even though we didn’t talk with each other, but we shared a special bond with each other... It is another kind of love, which I hadn’t experienced before. That you belong to Kanha... My heart is beating, my veins are pumping. My mind is working. So, every inch of my body, I felt that. And secondly, I felt my soul.”

Hamzaa described her experiences as beyond the ordinary, and similar feelings resonated among most participants, who described their experiences as suffused with love and belonging. For instance, Shankar echoed having received what he most needed, which allowed him to venture beyond his capabilities:

“You will definitely feel the love of the nature. So that's why I told that this is what I needed in my life... You know, you go beyond your strength for what you love. So, I don't see MBBS as just a career. I am loving medical field more than just a career.”

Nitin, who is a self-described introvert like Hamzaa, can step out of his comfort zone. He shares: “I am an introvert... We (a group of new friends) were walking and talking and getting completely wet (in the rain). It was very nice. I suggested it.”, which is a shift from a shift from self-focused cognition toward a more expansive mode of awareness, which he attributes to a love that is expansive and inclusive.

Although the details differ, most accounts shared overtones of an existential reorientation that had experiential depth and altered self-boundaries. These narratives suggested that affective opening is marked not so much by doctrinal insight, but by a reorganization of experience—from fragmentation to wholeness, from isolation to belonging. Furthermore, these experiences were transformative - they induced a revision of these participants’ identities and values.

4.3.2 New Perspectives on Self

Following the opening, which led to greater self-awareness, participants reported shifts in how they relate to their internal lives, their minds, memories, emotions, and sense of agency. Shalabh described the entire arc of his journey as, “I felt that deep peace... I'm completely stress-free now... I feel I can do anything.”

For Saumya, the design of the buildings on campus became a physical metaphor inspiring openness: “We don't have doors at the dormitory... the meditation hall also. All the places are open... I feel it is telling us to stay open-minded.”

Nitin and Sakhi talked about more tangible benefits, with Nitin noticing improvement in the ability to sustain attention: “By doing meditation, I was like focusing on things... I am very much surprised. Because earlier, I was not able to concentrate on one thing. I got bored with one thing very often... And I will move on to some other activity, but by focusing I have increased capacity. I'm not bored with meditation after all these three days.”

Sakhi offered evidence of undeniable benefits in the areas of emotional regulation, fatigue management, and working memory:

“About my mood before, I feel not that much, but I had anger issues, but now I can ignore it... They (her parents) will notice my calmness, my freshness. My habit of sleeping in afternoon, it's, not anymore... (When I read), So what I had felt, wh I can remember the things very fastly. Means before I was reading it ten times. Right now, I can read for three or four times.”

Taken together, these changes don't seem to be superficial attitude shifts of a “feel good” variety but a deeper internal shift, leading to a greater capacity for calm, concentration, and self-regulation.

4.3.3 New Possibilities

The most compelling narratives of transformation are those about how participants reimagine their life project, agency, and relationship to the world.

In the discussion of the belonging subtheme, we noted Sradhha's reframing of self in response to failure: “God has different plans for you. And maybe this (agriculture) was the thing he has for me.” This reframing indicated a turning point. After twice failing the medical exam, the door to a socially valued career path, she began to accept that her purpose may lie elsewhere, perhaps in agriculture. This shift indicates both reclaiming agency by choosing a different domain and selecting a life project that aligned more authentically with her sense of what was possible for her, rather than what was expected.

Shankar, having come out of even more devastating setbacks on his journey—six failed attempts at getting into medical college, a battle with depression, and a suicide attempt—was able to provide a more positive reframing of switching his career from medicine to horticulture. Instead of being a doctor of medicine, he decided, “I will be called as a doctor of plants.” The metaphor suggests healing and growth, but a reframe of the value of his contribution as an agriculturist allowed him to retain his core value of providing care while adding the dimension of nature and sustainability.

Nayana is the most articulate when describing this transformative journey. Hers begins with a sense of belonging and parental input shaping her behavior, but through her experiences during the retreat, she internalizes the value of the practices. Her self-structure was becoming more robust and less dependent on external validation or pressure:

“Nowadays, only people think that I have to become something, only for themselves. But by visiting Kanha, I got a feeling like, no, I have not, I have to do for only myself. I have to do it for all of them which are on this planet. Okay, everyone... I am so happy that I visited Kanha. It has changed my whole, whole view, whole vision of thinking about myself and the whole world.”

Having made this shift for herself, Nayan sees her learning and purpose as oriented beyond self toward communal, even universal, responsibility:

“But there, there, I got a feeling that you have to study for yourself. You have to do for the world, not only for your family, but for the whole world to save it, to change their minds, to change people's minds, thinking toward themselves and the whole universe.”

Nayana's life project became not only about personal achievement or acceptance, but about moral and relational change in others and in the world.

Taniska, similarly, voices a concrete sense of mission, tying her chosen career to a global concern: “Yeah, I want to do something for that. I mean, there is so much hunger problem in the whole world. And we have to overcome that, and we can change it just by this world... Agriculture can change this.”

The retreat experience at Kanha did more than alleviate stress and foster acceptance; it prompted participants to reframe their identity and purpose. The participants' accounts of transformation illustrate how they moved from predefined trajectories (often pressured by family, society, or self-expectations) toward life projects that reflect agency, meaning, and relationship to the broader world.

5. Discussion

The Youth Unite study suggests that participants may have experienced the residential retreat at Kanha meditation center as a safe and nurturing environment. Their descriptions appear to resonate with both individual and group psychoanalytic constructs. This resonance suggests an important interplay between individual and group processes that contribute to the overall impact of participants' experience during the retreat. The individual concepts of holding [25], containment [23], the secure base within attachment theory [24], and Foulkes' concept of the group matrix [26] offer helpful concepts for making sense of the experience of participants. This set of individual and group theories offers a possible framework to understand how settings that are not familial or in formal therapeutic settings may also facilitate emotional regulation, the recognition of unmet needs, and processes of psychological integration.

Winnicott's [25] notion of the holding environment might help illuminate how the meditation center functioned as a space of attuned responsiveness, enabling participants to tolerate and explore some previously avoided internal states. Similarly, Bion's concept of containment [23] may offer insight into how the environment—and the social relationships within it—appeared to support the transformation of raw affect into manageable experience. Participants' (Tanishka, Sakhi, and Shalabh) accounts of feeling “held,” accepted, and able to lower their defenses seem to suggest that the retreat provided a maternal-like container in which some suppressed needs and fragmented aspects of self could safely re-emerge. Attachment theory [24] offers an additional layer within the developmental lens. Just as consistent caregiving fosters secure attachment and emotional

regulation in infancy, the retreat's structure and supportive atmosphere appeared to cultivate trust, self-reflection, and emotional repair among the young adults.

Furthermore, Foulkes' group matrix extends the understanding of the importance of the social aspects of the Youth Unite retreat. The matrix is a way to describe the complex relationships among individuals, subgroups, and the whole group. The matrix can be understood as the common shared ground that determines the meaning and significance of all that happens within the group. Group matrix theory recognizes the deeply social nature of the human personality [26]. In the context of the Youth Unite retreat, the environment may have functioned as a group matrix, offering a safe, containing space where participants could express and explore individually and collectively in ways that were novel for them. While attending the retreat, the agriculture students did not have the usual pressures they faced within their college environment. The pressures of studies were suspended for a few days. Participants were exposed to new opportunities not previously experienced either individually or collectively.

On the other hand, there may be questions about the extent of unconscious dynamics at play among the participants attending the Youth Unite retreat. Bion's theory of basic assumption functioning in groups [23] offers a helpful lens to consider this question. These behaviors act unconsciously as defenses against the pain of the task or the anxiety associated with the group's work. In particular, Bion's Pairing assumption could be at work in a search for magical solutions to solve the problems of the group (Sub-theme 1.3: Ineffable Magic). It is also possible that the group was framing societal expectations as a common enemy, as in Bion's Fight-Flight basic assumption, and was seeking an escape from the challenges posed by these expectations rather than facing them [23].

Heartfulness meditation practice emphasizes becoming one's own researcher into one's own experience with Heartfulness practice. This may mitigate the dominance of basic-assumption behavior. However, this ability to become one's own researcher develops over time and with diligent practice. Therefore, it would be helpful to be alert to the basic assumptions at work in settings such as the Kanha meditation center. It is possible that at times the group was operating to defend themselves from anxiety that may have resulted in basic assumption behavior, and at others, focused on the task as a functioning workgroup. Further research could seek to examine questions about unconscious behavior patterns within groups of this nature.

Within both individual and group psychoanalytic theory, there's an interplay between individual and group processes, with one facilitating the other. The meditation offered at the meditation center is a silent practice in which the practitioner connects with their own heart and sits in silence for approximately 30 minutes. A sense of inner safety tends to develop over time [17]. Winnicott's holding, Bowlby's secure base, and Foulkes' concept of the group matrix suggest that feeling held and supported within one's environment helps to create the capacity to be alone, providing safety, predictability, and stability for exploration.

The experiences reported by participants included healing spaces, feelings of safety, peace, positive energy, and even the "magical" within the meditation center's environment. Participants' descriptions of "positive energy," peace, and even "magical" qualities can be understood as metaphors for the transformative potential of a reliable containing environment in adulthood. Such settings may enable the symbolization and integration of difficult emotions, fostering new perspectives on the self. Taken together, the lineage—from Winnicott's holding environment, Bion's containing function, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Foulkes's concept of the group

matrix—provides a theoretical scaffold for understanding participants' therapeutic and communal healing contexts for this group of Agriculture college students' collective 3-day journey. These findings align with Pearmain's [18] application of Bachelard's [27] idea of "really inhabited space," wherein certain environments evoke familiarity, grounding, and the possibility of inner growth. The meditation center could be viewed as such a space, offering both psychological centrality and existential "verticality." In Bachelard's [27] terms, such space fosters a sense of centrality and verticality—metaphors for a grounded and elevated mode of being. Centrality refers to the psychological center we return to within ourselves, while verticality evokes spiritual or existential ascent, the possibility of inner growth and deepening.

While not generalizable, the study contributes to understanding how communal contemplative settings can facilitate developmental and therapeutic processes typically associated with early caregiving relationships. The themes capture participants' experiences over a short time frame; a longitudinal study would be ideally placed to address the valid question of how long the gains and positive experiences were maintained. Methodologically, the study's interpretative phenomenological approach situates these insights within the specific context of a self-selected sample of retreat participants. It is possible that participants coming out of an immersive experience may still be in the afterglow, which might account for some of the overly positive narratives. The researcher's affiliation with the hosting organization introduces potential bias, as does the cultural and hierarchical dynamic between interviewer and participants. Although reflexive practices were employed, complete neutrality cannot be assumed.

6. Conclusions

This study conceptualizes Kanha Shanti Vanam meditation center as a container that nurtures a deep sense of belonging, facilitating transformative experiences among youth participants. The findings, when viewed within both individual and group psychoanalytic literature from thinkers such as Bion [23], Winnicott [25], Bowlby [24], and Foulkes [26], are relevant beyond the therapeutic dyad and demonstrate their application in communal and contemplative settings. Within Kanha's residential environment, participants described a holistic form of nurturing that enriched their meditation practice. The space was experienced as welcoming and safe, fostering both intrapsychic belonging (a sense of coherence and self-acceptance) and social belonging (connection with peers and the larger community).

Through participants' narratives, containment emerged not merely as a developmental mechanism but as a model for therapeutic and communal healing in adulthood. In environments characterized by psychological safety, acceptance, and a sense of being "held," unintegrated aspects of the self can resurface and begin to be metabolized. Participants often articulated their experiences using affectively charged terms such as "peace," "positive energy," and even the "magical," suggesting that the environment functioned simultaneously at psychological, relational, social, and symbolic levels. These conditions appeared to enable processes of transformation and the re-emergence of self-states previously deemed unsafe or unavailable for expression.

In the sociocultural context of Indian youth, who often face intense academic, familial, and societal pressures, the findings underscore that belonging may be as critical as competence or achievement for mental well-being. Interventions for young people, whether in counseling or educational settings, could benefit from attending to relational repair, belonging, and self-object

experiences. Educational and social institutions, originally envisioned as nurturing spaces, often fail to provide adequate psychological holding. Until systemic reform enables such institutions to offer these experiences internally, external spaces such as Kanha meditation center may serve as vital transitional containers where youth can experience restoration and repair.

Future studies could systematically investigate which environmental and interpersonal elements (e.g., exposure to nature, structured silence, meditation, diary writing, community living, peer relationships, guided activities) contribute most powerfully to the sense of containment and transformation described in this study. Longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches could assess how long these transformative and belonging experiences endure after participants return to everyday life, and whether they correlate with measurable outcomes such as enhanced psychological well-being, self-efficacy, and reduced anxiety. Further research might also explore whether the “environmental self-object” [28] function of nature persists beyond the retreat and whether belonging-based interventions can mitigate depressive symptoms, academic stress, or social alienation among youth populations.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist. Both Authors are actively involved with the Heartfulness Institute as volunteers.

Data Availability Statement

The authors declare that the data collected is confidential and adheres to the MAARG Independent Ethics Committee. However, limited access to data can be made available for audit purposes.

Additional Materials

The following additional materials are uploaded at the page of this paper.

1. Annexure 1: Unstructured Open-Ended Interview Guide.

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