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Book Review

Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds

By David L. McMahan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 264 pages, ISBN: 9780197661741 (hardcover), $29.95.

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David McMahan has once again presented a work that is likely to become a landmark. In his previous and persuasive *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, McMahan demonstrated that today's popular understanding of the term "Buddhism" is indebted to certain dominant cultural and intellectual dynamics of modernity. In *Rethinking Meditation*, McMahan extends this analysis to meditation and mindfulness. In this analysis he considers the history of Buddhist ideas and concepts that continue to influence popular understanding, as well as social and cultural factors—in particular the role of modern, secular, and elitist/transnational culture—in shaping current forms of meditation.

Like its predecessor, *Rethinking Meditation* challenges a variety of common assumptions and beliefs. In particular, it debunks the myth that meditation is a timeless practice passed down directly from the Buddha. Moreover, it dispels the notion of meditation as a science of the mind that enables practitioners to objectively discover something like the true, unchanging nature of reality. Instead, the book shows how different cultures and historical periods have reinterpreted and adapted Buddhist practices to make them culturally and temporally relevant, and how different mental maps within Buddhist schools influence the insights practitioners can gain through meditation. By lifting the veils of essentialist and universalist thinking, McMahan portrays Buddhist meditation as an adaptable practice situated within social and cultural contexts, from which it draws categories, concepts, and values, some of which it adopts, and others of which it rejects. Emphasizing the situatedness of meditation and underscoring the importance of context, the book serves a dual purpose: it takes its readers on a fascinating expedition through numerous historical and cultural facets of meditation and acts as a refreshing wake-up call to reconsider presumed certainties about the mind.

The book's approximately 250 pages begin from the religious-historical assertion that, in the development of what we today call "Buddhism," a nearly incomprehensible variety and diversity of practices have formed, which we now summarize under the term "meditation." Buddhists carry out such practices worldwide in many contexts, however those contexts do not embody those practices' historical abundance, nor offer a representative cross-section of their diversity over time.

The focus of *Rethinking Meditation* is on the evolution and selection of meditative practices and their adaptation to recent, and especially so-called "Western," contexts. Rather than providing a comprehensive history or overview of Buddhist meditation practices, McMahan explores specific strands in the historical development

of Buddhist meditation, with a particular interest in mindfulness, a meditative form prominent in North America and Europe and spreading globally. McMahan investigates why certain elements of 2500 years of Buddhist meditation have been selected to coalesce into this practice, which he calls the "Standard Version" of meditation (12).

I find this question to be more than justified. Following pioneers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, what is called mindfulness has gained considerable legitimacy and cultural capital in the U.S. and other industrialized countries, supported by scientific studies. Stripped of Buddhist language and religious elements, mindfulness has found its way into fields such as healthcare, education, the technology industry, and into human resources management in order to optimize employee performance and achieve corporate goals. At the same time, scholarly research has attempted to critically view these usages in the context of modern capitalism (see, e.g., Purser 2019).

In response to the mindfulness boom, McMahan presents a genealogical approach that shows that the Standard Version of meditation is not only rooted in ancient ascetic practices that have come down to us from early Buddhism in South Asia, but is also influenced by later Mahayana Buddhism, particularly Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan elements. Most importantly, it is shaped by modern discourses, ranging from the European enlightenment and romanticism to psychology, existentialism, alternative countercultures, cognitive science, and neuroscience. The Standard Version is a new interpretation of meditation, tailored first to the modern Western concept of the individual, which ascribes to each person a unique identity and the right to live a self-determined life, and second to the construction of Buddhism as a rational science of experience claiming objectivity. This claim of objectivity follows from the assumption that the observation of the individual mind provides a clear vision of a reality that is free from cultural conditioning and social influences. Mindfulness can therefore (so goes the claim) provide direct access to truth, an immediate transcultural knowledge of how things really are.

McMahan artfully weaves his critique of this view into the fabric of his genealogical argument. *Rethinking Meditation* exposes this claim as universalism, tying it to the conviction, found in neuroscience and psychology, that since meditation takes place primarily in the brain and central nervous system (which are essentially the same in all people), that we can determine "how meditation works" (16) by examining the brain functions of meditators. McMahan emphasizes that the functioning of meditation is not exclusively limited to neural aspects. Rather factors such as the role of meditation in meditators' social contexts, as well as their cultural repertoire of possibilities for identity formation, religious beliefs, social behaviors, political power relations, ethical dispositions, philosophical concepts, and much more in these contexts, matter. Because these factors vary widely—as McMahan puts it in an anti-neuroessentialist formula, "[meditation] 'works' as a systematic part of the ecology of a sociocultural system" (101)—meditative practices can contribute to the cultivation of very different kinds of people or "ethical subjects" (21).

The book is divided into twelve chapters that logically build on each other and are organized into three parts. Part one, "Thinking about Meditation" (3–58), provides a precise and structured introduction to the topic and lays a solid foundation for what awaits the reader in the further course of the book.

Chapter one develops the basic theoretical argument of the socio-cultural situatedness of meditation and explains how its Standard Version came to be. Illustrations show that each culture weakens or strengthens certain aspects of the Buddhist tradition and that their interpretations and practices of meditation thus also change over time. Chapter two begins a critical reflection on the scientific study of meditation, emphasizing that meditative practices in general and mindfulness in particular are situated, embodied abilities. This chapter responds directly to a neuroscientific discourse that views the human being as "a

separate and distinct, autonomous individual" (37) who can gain non-judgmental access to the contents of the mind through training within a system that seems to assume imaging techniques and biomechanical measurements can "arrive at some species of objective truth about subjective states of mind" (43).

Chapter three further develops McMahan's critique by drawing on philosophical theories of way of life. It plausibly argues that Buddhist meditation is "a type of *self*-cultivation" (52) within particular cultural, ethical, and cosmological contexts that shape our identity and actions according to certain values and norms. In particular, McMahan invokes Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, and Charles Taylor in supporting the argument that Buddhist meditation serves the formation of the self as an ethical subject, not by reinforcing the illusion that there is a permanent self, but in the sense of the insight that what is perceived as the self is subject to constant change and, not least, ethical development. A celibate Iron Age ascetic living in a forest hermitage may have contemplated the decomposition of the body in order to detach from an identity with it. A contemporary North American, on the other hand, might perform a body scan in order to experience their body more fully.

Part two, "Meditation in Context" (61–123), forms the heart of the book. Here McMahan deepens his analysis by drawing on selected historical sources of Pali Buddhism and various Mahayana schools, bringing them into dialogue with ideas from phenomenology and cognitive science. His investigation centers around three ideas. First, phenomena are not merely observed in meditation, but are themselves constructed in the process of observation. Second, understanding this is of great benefit to practitioners because it enables them to consciously cultivate certain normative ways of thinking and feeling, as well as ethical, social, and political attitudes that are helpful in their contexts. Third, Buddhist meditation has not only constructive but also deconstructive potential, preventing one normative understanding of self and world from simply being replaced by another.

Chapters four and five contextualize ancient Buddhist meditation within the monastic "countercultural tradition" (76) of ancient India, which formed an alternative system within the "already-alternative worldview of South Asian asceticism" (65). A number of texts, in particular the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and references to thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger and Daniel Kahnemann, help elucidate the extent to which meditation served to align with the norms of monastic life and to cultivate a habitual, embodied way of being in the world by internalizing certain categories. Meditation, McMahan argues, was not a matter of value-free, concept-free attention to the present moment leading to immediate, objective insight free of all cultural conditioning. Rather, it was a complex, embodied, and culturally embedded practice for the purpose of de- and re-conditioning habits. Meditation intended practitioners to unlearn certain habitual emotions, desires, and bodily activities provided by the normative social imaginary, and to learn new ones shaped by the "Pali imaginary" (80) that ultimately became "thoroughly naturalized" (189, with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*).

Chapters six and seven address the tension between the constructive and deconstructive aspects of meditation in Buddhist traditions. Initially, the constructed nature of meditation is highlighted by emphasizing the complex interplay of ideas, ideals, texts, and teachers that hold authority for practitioners. For example, it makes a significant difference whether the background of meditative practices is formed by Abhidharma lists or by innatist views regarding the revelation of an already existing Buddha nature. Subsequent sections focus on the deconstructive elements of Buddhist practice that have the potential to liberate thinking from fixed categories and to bring about transformation. As an example, McMahan invokes the well-known figure of the Bodhisattva from the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, standing in emptiness and "not grasping even at Buddhist teachings as if they are final endpoints in analysis or ultimate statements of truth" (112).

Part three of the book, "Meditation and the Ethical Subject" (127–217), turns to the introduction of Buddhist meditation into Western mindsets and societies and the transformation of mindfulness practices into an integral component of a modern secular lifestyle defined by a set of modern ethical ideals. Additionally, the text addresses the integration of Buddhist meditation and various conceptions of the ideal self, the role of meditation in the pursuit of individual authenticity, and the tension between Western notions of autonomy and Buddhist ideals. It also examines the extent to which meditative practices can facilitate the recognition, resistance, or rejection of affordances. Finally, it explores the interactions between secular ideals and Buddhist concepts.

Chapter eight traces how mindfulness outside of religious contexts adopts values and assumptions of secularism, rationalism, science and liberalism and their "rhetorical and conceptual apparatus" (132). McMahan emphasizes how mindfulness has been configured to the contours of secularism in the U.S., promoting an ethics of appreciation of the physical world and its pleasures—in sharp contrast to "the ethic of world-renunciation that dominates the early Buddhist literature" (138). Chapter nine takes these considerations further by focusing on the reinterpretation of Buddhist meditation in the idiom of the European and American ideal of authenticity—in particular, the idea of the unique, authentic self, which is revealed or produced by transcending cultural conditioning. The chapter critiques tendencies of self-centeredness and "disengagement with social and political realities" (155) by meditators, attempting instead to rehabilitate the ideal of authenticity through a more socially and politically committed interpretation of meditation.

Chapters ten and eleven continue to intertwine classical Buddhist and modern Western ideas by focusing on the tension between the inner freedom facilitated by meditation and the social embeddedness of the individual. They also shed light on the complex dynamics of "conformity and obedience versus personal freedom and autonomous choice" (197) within the intricate social, cultural, and political structures in which meditators live and must make ethical decisions beyond personal interests. In chapter twelve, McMahan draws on references to theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Baumann, and Kenneth Gergen, who have extensively explored the impact of modern society and the postmodern era on various aspects of human life, to support his arguments. This final chapter deals with current efforts within Buddhism to adapt to the challenges of the postmodern era: to reconcile the tension between "the sense of selfhood as singular, independent, and autonomous and the sense of fragmentation of the self into multiple identities" (203) through interpretations of two Buddhist doctrines—"no-self" (Sanskrit *anātman*) and "dependent arising" (Sanskrit *pratītya-samutpāda*). Both concepts have recently been popularized together in what McMahan describes as an "Ethic of Interdependence" (200) which reinterprets such fragmentation as interconnectedness of all things. Meditation within this ethical framework aims to cultivate a sense of permeability of boundaries between the self and others, encouraging one "to imagine all things as contiguous with oneself" (214) and emphasizing the responsibility for others and the planet—contrary to an exclusive focus on meditation as a means of cultivating personal inner peace.

Besides these interdependent ethics, McMahan suggests there are other ethical dimensions of contemporary meditation, including a focus on health and well being. However, he here draws a line. His book does not attempt to provide a definitive understanding of meditation but rather illuminates the diverse and often contradictory influences and effects of meditation—in particular mindfulness—in modern society, influences that can promote both "activity and passivity, agitation and serenity, acceptance and political urgency, self-containment and interconnectedness" (25).

The book is rounded off by four additions: a postscript (218–219), additional notes (221–226), a works cited section (227–236), and an index (237–246). While the final two of these additions offer a wealth of information,

the first two seem somewhat sparse. The title of the postscript, "The Iron Age and the Anthropocene," gives hope for a profound exploration of two significant epochs or terms for periods in human history or development. However, the ensuing reflections on the ultimately unknown origins of meditative practices "well beyond our temporal horizons" (218) and the role of meditation amidst contemporary global issues such as climate crisis and political instability reveal only a fleeting glimpse into these complex issues. Similarly, the book's endnotes could be a bit more extensive. The bibliography, on the other hand, although over-representing books from the U.S., testifies to how thoroughly the author has engaged with the work of both colleagues and researchers in adjacent fields such as philosophy, neuroscience, and psychology in order to rethink certain ideas about meditation circulating among scientists and practitioners. This engagement is also reflected in the index, which allows for efficient navigation of the book, with numerous sub-entries providing information, details, or nuances on particular aspects of each keyword.

Rethinking Meditation is a remarkable achievement in reader-friendliness. Not only is the book coherent and structurally consistent, but it also presents complex analysis and research in a language that is refreshingly clear, accessible, and elegant. These qualities make the book a treasure for readers of all backgrounds. It provides deep insight into the subject without overwhelming its readers with jargon or unnecessary complexity. Thus, it meets its intended audience, which, according to the author, includes not only scholars in the disciplines to which it explicitly refers, but also "non-academic practitioners of meditation" (25) who have a deep interest in scientific research on meditation, but do not necessarily have in-depth expertise in the field.

One example of this reader-friendliness is the metaphor of "filters and magnets," through which McMahan illustrates the selective adoption and transformation of elements of Buddhist traditions. "Filter" refers to ideas, concepts, and theories prevalent in modernity that sift out elements of the Buddhist tradition that are deemed incompatible with itself—for example, because they are inconsistent with the principles of the natural sciences and/or with the understanding of human beings as biological beings with an inseparable mind-brain connection. "Magnet," by contrast, highlights dynamics of attraction that traditions, movements, and currents in Christianity, rationalism, romanticism, transcendentalism, and psychology have for elements in the wealth of Buddhism—such as ethical and philosophical ideas or meditation practices—contributing to their transformation and dissemination beyond their original geographic and intellectual contexts.

As impressive as the quality of the book undoubtedly is, certain aspects warrant critical examination—beginning with the title. Especially since this study is the work of a religious scholar who specializes in processes of interdependence, exchange, and dependency in modern religious history across Asia, Europe, and North America, one would expect some sustained reflection on the concept of meditation, which appears twice in the title, first in nominative ("Rethinking Meditation") and then in adjectival ("Meditative Practices") form. Whereas the book's focus falls consistently on meditative practices, there is surprisingly little discussion on the concept of meditation itself, its origins and its historical development and variation. In European languages "meditation" derives from the Latin *meditatio*, and in European philosophical and Christian religious history it has acquired a variety of meanings (see, e.g., Renger 2021). Long before its transfer to Buddhist practices in the context of European colonialism, the term referred to forms of deep reflection. "Meditation"—the word and the concept—thus reveals something the book emphasizes, that current understandings of it fall short of comprehending that it is not (or not just) about not thinking (see page 10). This background provides a point of departure for a rich and productive conceptual critique, yet it remains untapped.

But above all, the book's title—and this is the more serious objection—leads one to expect a much broader global perspective than the book ultimately provides. There is much to suggest that the author, who is based in

the United States, has an American audience in mind, or at least a readership that is not bothered by how much the book's emphasis on American studies and experience steers the reader toward an American perspective. In my view, the title would benefit from an addition such as "...through a US-American Lens" or a similar cultural/geographical acknowledgment. The phrase "Modern Worlds" in the title, along with the mention on at least the first edition's back cover of "meditation today in North America and Europe—and increasingly in the rest of the world as well," raises the expectation that the book will cover meditation in many or all parts of the world that exhibit modern features such as technology, urbanization, industry, and complex social structures. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

In such a beautifully thoughtful book, it would have been beneficial to offer extensive side glances at recent studies on mindfulness in contemporary Asian cultures. Such studies impressively show that while the specific type of breath-based attentional focus (usually popularized as mindfulness) may be an American re-import in Buddhist countries, the understanding and perceived effects of mindfulness practices can be quite different from those in the U.S. due to the diversity of cultural environments and societal worldviews (see, e.g., Cassaniti 2018). It is also unfortunate that more colleagues from "Modern [Asian] Worlds" were not given voices regarding the difficult topic of "cultural baggage" (134) to express perspectives on white supremacy (Gajaweera 2021 exemplifies such perspectives). Lastly, it might have been valuable to acknowledge publications from Europe that have already dealt extensively with certain aspects this book addresses. For instance, European scholars have repeatedly argued for considering mindfulness as a cultural practice whose meditative exercises may be similar in their bodily focus and applicability to everyday life, but which are located in different contexts where the background knowledge and motivations of practitioners differ widely (see, e.g., Schmidt 2020).

A last critique: *Rethinking Meditation* incorporates ideas, concepts, and figures from European philosophy without always considering their open-endedness and ambiguity. An example is the metaphor of the "inner citadel" (164–180). McMahan uses it to illustrate a model of autonomy production that focuses solely on internal and individualistic freedom, emphasizing individual, rational free choice. He contrasts this with "situated autonomy," in which freedom is embedded in social contexts and linked to ethical action, making it more amenable to social and political engagement. While the description and analysis of these two ideal-typical understandings of freedom and autonomy are insightful, delving deeper into the origin and contemporary applications of the metaphor offers valuable perspectives. It goes back to the well-known text of Marcus Aurelius, called *ad se ipsum* or *meditationes* in Latin and known in English as *Meditations*, one of the most famous legacies of Stoicism. Book VIII, 48 states "Therefore reason, free from passions, is a fortress (Greek: *akrópolis*)." The significance of this passage lies in the assertion that true philosophy is a constant exercise aimed at protecting oneself from both internal impulses and external pressures, without withdrawing hermetically from the world. Rather, it is a constant practice of aligning one's understanding and judgment with cosmic rationality, serving the state and humanity in action, and desiring nothing other than a life guided by the divine.

With reference to this passage, Pierre Hadot wrote *The Inner Citadel* (1998), his guide to Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. This image of the inner acropolis has also been invoked by many others; it plays an important role, for example, in Isaiah Berlin's inaugural lecture at Oxford, "Two Concepts of Liberty," (1958) which we can understand as a response to the totalitarianism of the 20th century. The image appears, more recently, in an essay by Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz (2019) on mindfulness hype, self-optimization, and unconditional compulsion for happiness. *Rethinking Meditation* makes no mention of any of this, even though some of the insights and nuances of these antecedent texts on autonomy and freedom resonate within it. This is unfortunate, not because the book's way of applying metaphor to the model of autonomy is

inappropriate, but because metaphors are not static, but flexible, and can change over time and take on new meanings depending on context. It would have been fascinating if the book had addressed some of the philosophical ideas and debates behind the inner citadel image, thus developing an even more comprehensive understanding of autonomy and freedom in "ancient and modern worlds."

To conclude, let me be clear that none of my critiques tips the scales on this book. Let my minor qualms serve as mere counterpoints to the symphony of inspiration this work orchestrates. *Rethinking Meditation* merits accolades for its enchanting prose and its nuanced traversal of diverse themes interwoven throughout its pages.

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