

# Meditation, Buddhism, and Science

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# How Meditation Works

THEORIZING THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT  
IN BUDDHIST CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

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## Two Meditators

I would like to begin with a simple proposition: meditation works. Now to a qualification that makes things more complicated: what it means for meditation to work—the work meditation does—is different, sometimes radically different, in diverse contexts. Let me illustrate this by imagining two practitioners of the basic Buddhist meditation practice of mindfulness of the breath. One is a contemporary American female professional who practices modern insight meditation (*vipassanā*) and modern secular mindfulness practices.<sup>1</sup> The other is an ancient monk—let's say around the beginning of the common era—in the movement established by Gautama the Buddha. Both are serious practitioners, and both are drawing from the same text, the locus classicus of Buddhist meditation, the *Sutta on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*

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1. By “secular mindfulness practices,” I mean the variety of practices derived from Buddhist meditation techniques but adopted completely outside of Buddhist institutional settings and recast as psychological interventions. They have been used by clinicians in recent decades as part of treatments for anxiety, depression, stress, eating disorders, as well as for the general improvement of well-being. The most prominent is the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn, which has been adopted in numerous clinical settings (for more on Kabat-Zinn and MBSR, see chapter nine of this volume).

(*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, MN 10).<sup>2</sup> They both sit down in the same posture—legs crossed, back straight, hands in the lap—and bring their attention to the movement of their breath. If we could secretly scan their brains, the same parts might be lit up with activity, while blood flow to other parts is slowed to a trickle.

What does it mean for each of their meditations to *work*, and what work does their practice do? Let's look at our contemporary *vipassanā* practitioner. She is an educated middle-class professional who earns a comfortable salary and lives in a nice house with her husband and children. She attends a weekly group meditation at a *vipassanā* center, meditates nearly every day, and attempts to maintain mindfulness throughout her daily activities. She describes her practice as “spiritual” but also beneficial for her physical and mental health. She is selective with her foods and occasionally practices slow, mindful eating in order to appreciate her meals, as well as her good fortune in having enough to eat. She has used mindfulness to lose weight and to help her accept her body even though it is not at her ideal weight. Her view of the world is informed by modern science and has little room for supernatural beings, miracles, heavens, or hells. She is encouraged in her practice by studies suggesting that it will change her brain in ways that may positively affect her performance in many areas of her life. She tries to practice mindful communication with her family, coworkers, and friends, and it helps her to express her thoughts and feelings more clearly and less impulsively. Her practice eases the anxieties of her hectic life of negotiating a frenetic work schedule and family obligations. It makes her more patient with her children, more compassionate with her coworkers, more focused in performing her many tasks, clearer-minded with regard to personal problems, and less likely to be overwhelmed by destructive emotions. Mindfulness helps her to focus on the present and not dwell on the past or obsess about the future. Her avocations are theater and music, which she considers integral parts of her spiritual life.

Now let us imagine our monk in the early Buddhist community for whom the wide variety of meditation and mindfulness practices were originally developed. He is a celibate ascetic living in a forest hermitage with a few other male renunciates. He has a complicated taxonomy of states of mind, precepts, and elements of existence (*dhammas*) that structures his expectations and objects of contemplation. He spends hours each day in various meditation exercises, though he hasn't yet obtained any of their extraordinary

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2. Putting the monk at this time allows us to imagine him with a written copy of something like the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* we have today, which would not have been written down until around the first century.

side effects, like the ability to fly or read others' thoughts. He has left behind his family, possessions, and social position in hopes of training his mind to enter a timeless, transcendent, transpersonal state beyond the endless round of birth, rebirth, and suffering. If he cannot achieve such a lofty goal, he hopes at least to avoid rebirth as an animal, a hungry ghost, or a resident of an unbearably hot or cold hell-realm located beneath the ground. He must maintain constant vigilance against sexual impulses, laziness, restlessness, and debilitating doubts in his capacity to achieve awakening. Sexual life, having children, eating after noon, and enjoying physical comforts are mere temptations to be resisted. He is heedful of the *suttas'* warnings to be on guard against longing to return to the love of his parents and siblings. He eats mindfully yet is forbidden from preferring one food over another, from taking pleasure in his food, and from eating more than necessary to keep the body functioning. To help, he reminds himself of the repulsiveness of food and the entire digestive process. He is instructed to have an attitude of disregard for all physical pleasures and to cultivate a sense of disgust for his own body. His rejection of physical pleasure extends to plays and performances, which he is forbidden to attend.

## Self-Cultivation in Particular Lifeworlds

So I return to the question: What does it mean in each case to say that their meditation is working? Is it doing the same kind of work? In thinking about this question, I would like to set aside two possible attitudes. The first is that the contemporary practitioner is practicing a kind of banal, trivial version of “real” Buddhism—an attitude that some scholars tend to take today. The second is an attitude that celebrates the successful extraction of the “essence” of Buddhism by modern, rational people from the superstitious, institutional, and calcified traditions that have developed over the centuries and from the needlessly harsh and repressive asceticism of its beginnings—an attitude taken by some earlier Orientalist scholars as well as some contemporary practitioners. Instead, I would like to explore a different way of understanding meditative practices.

Instead of conceiving of meditation in terms of “states” that are the same at all times and places, I suggest seeing meditation as a way of self-cultivation or self-transformation that aims at creating particular ways of being in the world. I am borrowing this term “being-in-the-world,” of course, from Heidegger, and I want to emphasize that I am using the term “world” in the phenomenological sense of a “lifeworld” (*lebenswelt*), not as a location or set of physical entities, but our primary lived experience of our world. “World” in this sense

is not the world of molecules, electrons, and quarks. It is rather the world of things that are charged with meaning, feeling, significance—much of it supplied by a particular social and cultural context. The lifeworld is shot through with meanings, tacit understandings of the physical objects one engages with, the social intricacies present in one's society, and the larger cosmic picture in which all this is contained. It is the world in which the hand automatically reaches out for the doorknob that beckons one to the next room; in which a student suddenly stops his bantering with his friends when the teacher walks into the room; in which one looks out at the stars and is amazed by their unfathomable number and infinite distance from each other—or if one is in, say, ancient Greece, sees the night sky as a solid dome, the firmament, with stars and planets embedded in them.

I also want to extend the notion of lifeworlds to emphasize that they are shared social, cultural, and historical contexts—what some social thinkers have come to refer to as “social imaginaries.”<sup>3</sup> In the broadest sense, the social imaginary refers to the background of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld. While it includes explicit intellectual ideas and moral ideals, it, in Charles Taylor's words, is “something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004, 23). A social imaginary is constituted by a repertoire of concepts, attitudes, social practices, customs, ethical dispositions, institutions, power relations, and structures of authority. It determines what is normative, what is taken for granted, what goes without saying—one's default intuitions. But I would extend it to a cosmological context as well—how one imagines one's place in the world in the widest possible sense. It is not that everyone within a social imaginary thinks the same way; there may be a narrow or wide range in a given imaginary for individual personality types, quirks, and preferences. There will be diversity of opinion, conflict, factions, debate. But the terms of the debate are conditioned by the taken-for-granted background categories and sensibilities of the social imaginary.

The meditative practices we find in Buddhist traditions are, of course, many and varied, and have existed within many different social imaginaries

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3. This is a somewhat awkward translation of the French *imaginaire* that has, for better or worse, become common usage in English among social thinkers.

over the centuries. Trying to create one overarching definition goes against not only the stated goals of this chapter—to highlight the role of context in meditation—but also good sense. Yet I would like to offer this tentative definition: meditative practices are modes of self-cultivation, means of cultivating certain ways of being in the world. Or perhaps we should say being in *a* world—a particular lifeworld or social imaginary. These practices come pre-loaded with certain repertoires of possibilities for how one should be, of models for what one is and what the world is. They imply a complex taxonomy of categories through which to see the world, taxonomies that become deeply internalized. Meditative practices, therefore, will have different meanings, significance, and goals in different contexts.

So, again, how does meditation work? What work does it do? The typical picture is that a person meditates, and meditation simply *does* certain things: doing practice A creates state of mind X, after which the diligent practitioner will enter the next levels: states of mind Y and Z. These states are the same for an ancient monk, a Thai lay Buddhist, or an American businesswoman. This is generally the interpretation coming out of the neuroscientific study of meditative practices, which looks for physical correlates, visible on fMRI scans, for example, to particular states of mind generated by contemplative practices. What I am suggesting is that contemplative practices do particular kinds of work that can only make sense in terms of a complex network of contextual factors in a social imaginary: doctrinal, ethical, social, cultural, national, and ultimately cosmic. One meditates always and only in a particular time and place. One does not take up meditation with a blank slate, nor does meditation—at least for most of us—wipe the slate clean. Practitioners bring expectations and ideas to it (including the idea that they shouldn't have ideas and expectations!) and engage with these ideas through the practice—reinforcing them, breaking them down, letting them go, revising and reconstructing them, letting them subtly guide their experience. This is at least part of the work of meditation. It follows that even if two people are doing the “same” practice—mindfulness of breath, in our illustration—in widely different cultures, they may be cultivating very different ways of being in the world. The ancient Indian monk breathes attempting to let go of feelings of affection for his parents and siblings, feelings that *suttas* warn might tempt him to return to the householder life; the modern businesswoman breathes hoping to foster feelings of affection toward her husband and children. They may be doing the same practice outlined in the same text, but they bring different content to the practice, and that content—the very stuff of their lives—matters. And that content, moreover, is informed by the social, cultural, and historical worlds in which they live: a world of clan lineage, caste identity, slaves, horses

and chariots, gods, hungry ghosts, and hells; or one of office buildings, subways, nuclear families, democratic states, the Internet, synapses, subatomic particles, and far-flung galaxies.

Now I may have missed the point here. Meditation, on some accounts, is supposed to get us beyond all cultural context and provide an unmediated encounter with reality as it is, beyond all cultural lenses, beyond all that messy content. I am not going to discuss whether this is possible or not, but I do imagine that most people, for most of the hours they spend meditating, are struggling with the content of their lives in particular times and places. Some might also take exception to my describing Buddhist contemplative practices as modes of *self*-cultivation, given Buddhism's reputed rejection of a permanent, independent self (*ātman*). We need not be thrown off, however, by the use of the term "self" here. I am using the term "self-cultivation" in the sense it has been used by some modern thinkers—including other scholars of Buddhism<sup>4</sup>—not in the sense of trying to achieve some permanent self, but more in the Foucauldian sense of "practices of the self" or "technologies of the self" by which "individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct" through "self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object" (Foucault 1978, 29). While the view of the "self" here entails self-reflection, this "is not simply 'self-awareness' but self-formation as an 'ethical subject,' a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practices, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself" (28). Far from the ontologically static *ātman* that Buddhists reject, this "self" is a process of human subjectivity in constant transformation, more a matter of activity than static being. The assertion that Buddhist practices of self-cultivation are "not simply 'self-awareness' but self-formation as an 'ethical subject'" is central to my interpretation.

A further objection to thinking of Buddhist meditation as self-cultivation comes from certain very common characterizations of meditation as precisely *not* a matter of cultivating anything, doing anything, or trying to *be* a certain way rather than another. In this understanding, meditation is not about trying to make oneself into something that one is not, but simply to observe what is present. The most important point in Buddhism, one contemporary

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4. For example, Cook (2010); Mroziak (2007); and Samuel (2005).

author suggests, is “to be yourself and not try to become anything that you are not already. Buddhism is fundamentally about being in touch with your own deepest nature and letting it flow out of you unimpeded” (Kabat-Zinn 2005b [1994], 6). On this model of meditation, now quite widespread, one should forgo expectations and goal-oriented behavior and simply accept what is. And while the delicate balance between having goals and relinquishing them is a complex matter, the characterization of meditation as goalless and void of any attempt at self-improvement does not apply to the earliest historical strata of Buddhist meditation, which I am using as my main reference point here, and is also a problematic interpretation even of those traditions that seem to espouse it (I return briefly to this point at the end of the chapter). In their origins, Buddhist meditation practices had explicit goals, both distant (transcending the world entirely in the bliss of *nirvāṇa*) and more proximate (creating and reinforcing certain attitudes, ethical orientations, sensibilities, and cognitive maps). The practice of “bare awareness,” without judgment, thought for the future or past, or explicit goals—a frequent modern characterization of meditation—clearly *works* in certain modern contexts, for particular purposes. But it does not capture how meditation worked in ancient India, a subject to which we now briefly turn.<sup>5</sup>

## Contemplative Practices in Pali *Suttas*

We cannot, of course, know exactly how meditation worked for monastics on the ground in ancient India, and our portrait in the preceding is mere speculation based on normative texts. These texts, however, reveal ideas, ideals, and practices that were important on the ground. While some forms of meditation in the *suttas*—in particular practices encouraging calm concentration (*samatha*) and the states of absorption (*jhānas*)—detail techniques aimed at bringing concepts and mental activity to a minimum, many invite monks to cultivate and contemplate particular attitudes, ethical judgments, future goals, and philosophical concepts. If we think, for example, that meditation in the Pali literature is solely a matter of sitting down and watching one’s breath, we should take a look at the *Arittha Sutta* (SN 54.6), which introduces this technique:

THE BLESSED ONE SAID: “Monks, do any of you practice mindfulness of breathing in and out?”

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5. For a discussion of the relationship between contemporary clinical mindfulness practices and more “traditional” Buddhist forms of mindfulness, see Bodhi, Dreyfus, Gethin, and others in a special issue of *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011).



ARITTHA REPLIED: “I practice mindfulness of breathing in and out.”

“But how do you practice it, Arittha?”

“Having abandoned desire for past sensual pleasures and having gotten rid of desire for future sensual pleasures, and having completely subdued perceptions of aversion regarding internal and external events, I breathe in mindfully and breathe out mindfully.”

[THE BLESSED ONE REPLIES]: “There is that mindfulness of breathing in and out, Arittha. I don’t say there isn’t. But listen and pay careful attention, and I will explain how mindfulness of breathing in and out is brought in detail to its culmination.”

The Buddha then presents a more complicated method of mindful attention to the breath, instructing the monks to tether the breathing to various thoughts, feelings, aspirations, and bodily sensations. He instructs them to sit down with crossed legs and erect body and use the breath as a vehicle to concentrate on a succession of sixteen different objects. First is the breath itself, then the body, then various objects of thought and states of mind: rapture, pleasure, mental fabrication, the calming of mental fabrication, the mind, satisfying the mind, concentrating the mind, liberating the mind, impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment. Each of these terms is like a little doctrine package that opens up into a network of ideas. The monks would have known, for example, in contemplating impermanence, the important place that impermanence has in the larger schema of the teachings, and that “relinquishment” (*paṭinissagga*) meant abandoning the destructive states of mind (*kilesa*), often construed as greed, hatred, and delusion. These are not just open-ended observations of present states of mind but contemplations of various facets of the teachings. The Buddha is not saying, for example, “when rapture arises, notice it,” though that too might be implied. He is evoking rapture, asking the monks to consider it, to think about its place in the larger context of the dharma—to imagine oneself in rapture, to foster it, to recognize it when it happens. In this sense he is encouraging vigorous engagement with it, not just to recognize it but to establish it as a specific category of possible experience. So it is actually a rather complicated cognitive task the Buddha is suggesting: observing the breath while at the same time considering these various categories.

It gets even more complicated in the *Sutta on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness* (MN 10), the text that both of our hypothetical meditators are using and the most important and comprehensive meditation text in the Pali

*suttas*.<sup>6</sup> While today many think of meditation as just calmly watching the breath, this *sutta* recommends a rich and wide variety of thinking, feeling, and imagining. After monks are asked to mindfully observe their breath and their physical movements—and many meditators today, like Arittha, essentially stop here—the text takes them through an array of complex, content-filled, cognitively challenging, and emotionally vivid contemplations. One is asked to contemplate the body from head to toe, inside and out, not for relaxation and even less for body acceptance,<sup>7</sup> but to bring to full realization its utter repulsiveness, coursing as it is with blood, phlegm, and pus. From being grossed out, one is then invited to be existentially freaked out by vivid evocations of human mortality—the charnel ground meditations—which elaborate in loving detail the decomposition of the body, from its turning blue, to being picked apart by animals, to being reduced to a skeleton, to turning to dust blowing away in the wind. The text also provides a specific set of states of mind to be cultivated—the seven factors of awakening—and another to be resisted—the five hindrances. It attempts no less than the dismantling of the very sense of a unitary and enduring selfhood and provides an alternative model for what a human being is—the five aggregates (*khandhas*; Skt. *skandhas*). It ends with a sketch of the fundamental problem of human existence—the endless cycle of craving and frustration—and its solution, the eightfold path, which is a comprehensive set of attitudes, intentions, views, ethical commitments, and meditative practices that are also little doctrine packages that can be opened up and related to ever-more nuanced and complex ideas.

Far from a manual on calmly, non-judgmentally, non-conceptually attending to one's breath in the present moment, this *sutta* lays out an entire way of being in the world, filled with judgments of right and wrong, attitudes to take toward various phenomena, goals to be achieved, philosophical concepts to be mastered, emotions and intentions to be cultivated and others to be avoided. Moreover, it, along with other *suttas* and especially later texts in the Abhidharma, erects a complex taxonomy that maps out the fundamental elements of sentient experience.

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6. There are two versions of the text, this one and a longer version, the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN 22), which contains an expanded discussion of the four noble truths and the eightfold path. For translations of the shorter *sutta*, see Bodhi (1995, 145–155) and Thera (1998, online resource). For translations of the longer version, see Walshe (1995, 335–350) and Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2000, online resource).

7. These are among the goals of the “body scan,” a modern descendant of this practice, found frequently in the modern mindfulness movement.

So how did meditation like that described in this text *work* in its early Indian social imaginary? First, it is important to remember that the Buddha-dharma was a countercultural movement in a period of social change. Meditation was part of the attempt to retrain monastics to see things in a way that went against the mainstream ideas, institutions, and values of the culture: caste, family life, material accumulation, the idea that rituals could coax the gods to secure a satisfying life in the world. The early Buddhists were trying to set up an alternative worldview that went “against the stream” of the dominant cultural formations of the time, the “natural” ways of seeing things and living life. So part of meditation involved not only dismantling the cultural conditioning of the broader social imaginary, but also reconditioning and habituating thoughts, senses, emotions, and sensibilities to experience the world within the categories of the dharma.

What is the way of being in the world that the earliest meditators were trying to actualize? Certainly it involved all the things many today are familiar with in the Buddhist teachings—compassion, wisdom, ethics, and so on. But these contemplative practices were invented for monastics who had renounced possessions, social position, wealth, family, comfort, and work. For them, one way that meditation worked was, no doubt, in helping them accept the discomfort of a hard bed and a growling stomach or in preventing them from being beguiled by physical beauty. With regard to all pleasures of the senses, even the subtlest, the aim was to become “disenchanted” (*nibbidā*) by them and always on guard against being taken in by them. For the monks, mindful eating was decidedly not a matter of appreciating the subtle flavors and textures of their food. They were actually discouraged from taking this kind of sensual pleasure in their nutriment—indeed the fifth-century scholastic Buddhaghosa provides contemplation exercises on the repulsiveness of food and digestion. Mindful eating for the ancient monastic cannot be understood without keeping in mind the dozens of rules in the *Pāṭimokkha* (rules for monastics) for eating, including not hiding bits of almsfood in order to get more, putting the entire hand in the mouth, puffing out the cheeks, or licking the fingers.<sup>8</sup>

If we are to keep to the historical context of the early Buddhists and understand the challenges of monastic living, we must conclude that part of the purpose of becoming aware of the body and its movements, impulses, and activities was to discipline and gain more control over the temptation to

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8. For translation, see Norman and Pruitt (2001) and Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2007, online resource).

be “enchanted” by sense objects. This continued vigilance (*appamāda*) and intense discipline were necessary simply because doing the things required of a monastic—abstaining from all sexual activity, resisting sensual pleasures like eating after noon, or indulging in physical comforts—were difficult. But it also involved a complex process of reconfiguring and transforming a person on an individual level, as well as creating an alternative community at the social level. The ordinary movements of the body and habits of mind needed to get along in ancient Indian society were, of course, deeply cultural. Walking and eating came already laden with context-dependent meanings. To do something radically different required a disruption of the tacit level of ordinary activity in order to bring this activity to explicit cognition and intentional direction. Only then was it possible to control and transform the deep, habitual, and culturally conditioned way of being in the world, not to mention the biological urges for sex, indulgence in food, and other luxuries forbidden the monk. If one is to vigilantly observe all of one’s movements, explicitly cognizing and labeling them, one is less likely to let one’s hands drift toward a forbidden evening meal or prohibited sexual activities. Constant attention to one’s movements of body, mind, feelings, and objects, therefore, not only was directed toward cognizing their true nature, but also was part of being on guard against the impulse to infraction.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the focus of meditative practices, therefore, aimed at cultivating ethical dispositions, establishing discipline over the senses and impulses, and developing detachment from—even distaste for—the phenomenal world. Unlike some contemporary mindfulness practices, this was a way of being in the world that strove to keep objects of the senses at a distance and to reconfigure one’s natural and cultural stances toward them. We need not revive tired old stereotypes of Buddhist “pessimism” and world-negation to assert that its position was at heart unworldly. This is only a brief sketch of some of the purposes and contemplative practices as described in the Nikāyas, one intended to contrast to the far more world-affirming uses to which meditation and mindfulness practices—both within Buddhism and in “secular” mindfulness movements—are put today.

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9. One caveat to this emphasis on the challenges of the monastic life is the evidence that many monastics did not necessarily adhere rigidly to the ideals of monastic life set forth in the normative texts (see Schopen 2004). My point, however, is not to make a historical argument about how monks lived, but rather to suggest how meditation practices may have worked in the lives of those monks who tried to practice them as the texts suggest. The larger point is that their meditation was deeply embedded in the particular social imaginary of Buddhist monasticism—an imaginary that was constituted in part by normative texts.

## Meditation in Contemporary Lifeworlds

If Buddhist contemplative practices aim at cultivating ways of being in the world, and if they only make sense within a context of ideas, aspirations, ethics, and cosmology that are embedded in a particular social imaginary, then how do they work when they are imported into an altogether different social imaginary with its own ideas, aspirations, ethics, and cosmology? What kinds of dispositions, ethical commitments, and sensibilities are people trying to cultivate when they practice? These practices, of course, have traveled wide and far over more than two millennia, across most of Asia and more recently to Europe and the Americas. Buddhist contemplatives have developed many new practices, written many texts on meditation, fused their practices with shamanic practices in Tibet, Daoist practices in China and, more recently, psychotherapeutic practices in Europe and North America. To illustrate a few points about how social and cultural context shapes such practices, I want to look at just a few ways that practices drawn from the material I have just discussed work in the modern world, at the opposite end of the spectrum of ancient and modern.

### *Meditation and the World*

First, let me hazard a sweeping claim: that the normative attitude across much of the globe today, especially in the West, toward “the world” itself is, in contrast to the early Buddhist attitude, one of world-affirmation. A shaken but fervent faith rooted in the Enlightenment and the Reformation in the power of human beings to improve the world and achieve happiness and satisfaction in it remains strong. In the most prominent discourses of the modern West, physical enjoyment, including sexual pleasure, is considered natural and healthy within normative limits. Labor, family life, entertainment, enjoyment of food and wealth—all things forbidden the monastic—have achieved a new valorization in the modern period (Taylor 1998). Asceticism and world-negation are largely out of favor in public discourse, carrying a whiff of social irresponsibility in a world filled with threats and crises. It is in this wide framework of thinking about “the world” that meditation today has been reframed in terms of both mindful *appreciation* of the world of the senses—something pervasive in contemporary articulations of mindfulness—and mindful political or social activism to help *improve* the world, a prominent feature of Engaged Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

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10. I have discussed this world-affirming attitude more fully in Chapter 8 of McMahan (2008).

Examples of meditation within this modern orientation toward the world abound, and I will illustrate the general trend with only a few. The contemporary movement that has made most use of the Pali meditation texts I've referred to—especially the *Sutta on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*—is the *vipassanā*, or insight meditation, movement, which employs it as its central text. And yet in this era we find the text and the meditation practices it recommends significantly reconfigured from its ancient world-transcending purposes. The modern *vipassanā* movement is mostly a lay movement in which contemplative practices are called upon to address issues that have never before been part of its charge.<sup>11</sup> The record of a conference entitled “Vipassana: Its Relevance to the Present World,” which took place at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi in 1994, demonstrates the broad swath of human life upon which *vipassanā* meditation is now brought to bear (Vipassana Research Institute 1995). It documents presentations on the use of *vipassanā* in children's education, prisons, government, the business world, mental and physical health, and in the effort to control the environmental crisis. Presenters described *vipassanā*'s positive effects on discipline, stress, and “management culture,” as well as improved creativity in the business environment, a more ethically responsible stance toward society, and better communication between management and employees, while at the same time countering the “ever-spreading ‘profit orientation’ evident in almost all walks of life” (ii). One motif repeated throughout the conference was the emphasis on the stressful and frenetic character of modern life—its “tensions, stresses, strain, conflicts” (3). “Modern life,” says one presenter, Usha Modak, “is moving at such a rapid pace that there is no time even to breathe. Our fiercely competitive world is like a rat-race where, in spite of all the technological improvements and multifarious pleasures, people are still unhappy” (11). Another author, P. L. Dhar, laments that “society today is being devoured by the twin evils of acquisitiveness and unabashed consumerism,” resulting in “corruption, strife and violence,” along with ecological problems (16).

Bringing meditation to bear on these multifarious issues is not news to us today, but from the perspective of the history of Buddhism, it is extraordinary. Historically most meditators have been monastics, and Buddhist contemplative practices have been presented mostly as a soteriological and

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11. I am drawing here mainly from the branch of the *vipassanā* movement represented by S. N. Goenka, who described *vipassanā* as an “art of living.” It is noteworthy that this articulation has been criticized for being too worldly and diminishing the importance of escaping *saṃsāra*.

ethical endeavor, not something to help social institutions function better or to aid laypeople in navigating everyday life. It is not that ancient Buddhism was solely concerned with escaping *samsāra* and had nothing to say about ordinary, worldly happiness and the greater social good. The Buddha gives lots of advice in the *suttas* on how householders might live a happier life in the world, such as how kings should rule and how a businessman should care for his money and how a householder should ensure a good rebirth, longevity, health, and security. He discusses how to be a good friend, how children should treat their parents, how spouses should treat each other. Yet in all of this advice to the laity, one thing is conspicuously absent: meditation. With a few exceptions, generally meditation is presented as something monastics aspiring to full awakening do, an activity that is part of a way of being in the world that is ultimately aimed at exiting the world, rather than a means to a happier, more fulfilling life within it. Whether this exclusion of laypeople from meditative practice has been true from earliest times or not is unclear; after all, the eightfold path, which was to be practiced by laypeople as well as monastics, includes mindfulness and concentration. But as the tradition took shape, it seems to have concluded—until quite recently—that it was simply too difficult and time-consuming to do serious meditation practice in the midst of the obligations and activities of lay life. The large-scale introduction of contemplative practices not only to the laity but to non-Buddhists—and with the explicit intent of improving the world—seems to be a modern development and, moreover, a move toward a secular, this-worldly Buddhism.<sup>12</sup>

### *Meditation and the Secular*

Another important development is that meditation and mindfulness today are often conceived of and promoted as explicitly secular activities. In their articulation of *vipassanā* meditation, for example, S. N. Goenka and his followers often insist on the non-sectarian and non-religious character of the practice. Another author at the Indian conference on *vipassanā* put it this way: “[*Vipassanā*] is not a rite or ritual based on blind faith. There is no visualization of any god, goddess or any other object, or verbalization of any *mantra* or *japa*” (Vipassana Research Institute 1995, 11). According to another author, it is “a purely scientific technique, a universal culture of mind, which does not subscribe to any sectarian beliefs, dogmas or rituals. It should be universally

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12. For an investigation of how meditation became prominent in the modern period, see Braun (2013).

acceptable, therefore, as an integral part of education” (21). This characterization of meditation as non-religious and non-sectarian illustrates the broader trend, quite beyond the *vipassanā* movement, of paring down the complexity of meditation as it is found in the canonical and commentarial texts, often to a single technique like mindfulness of the breath or sensations. This paring down is part of what has enabled Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditative practices to spread all over the world so quickly and to infuse themselves into many areas of life. In their new streamlined forms, they have been flexible and adaptable, gaining wide appeal among (mostly) educated and relatively affluent people around the world.

If we look further afield from contemporary Buddhist movements to the broader mindfulness movement in its various forms, we see how Buddhist-derived mindfulness techniques have been infused into countless domains of contemporary life. The mindfulness movement—the most prominent manifestation of which is Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)—takes Buddhist-derived mindfulness techniques and adapts them to contemporary therapeutic models, stripping them of most of their markers of Buddhist identity and origin. Thus stripped, mindfulness has been enabled to penetrate into virtually all aspects of modern life. A look at current book titles containing the words “mindful” or “mindfulness,” for example, yields works on mindful pregnancy, birthing, parenting, relationships, teaching, management skills, coaching, overcoming shyness, traveling, social activism, knitting, crafting, politics, sex, money management, leadership, investing, weight loss, consulting, tennis, writing, efficiency at work, hiking, selling, horsemanship, cooking, gardening, playing musical instruments, and overcoming addiction, stress, and grief. One subtitle reads “mindful reflections for living *your* purpose,” suggesting that the ends to which mindfulness can be put are entirely the choice of the individual.

Another gleaning of the way in which mindfulness and meditation practices are called upon to work in people’s lives: summarizing studies at the University of Wisconsin, University of Washington, Emory, and Ohio State, a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece enumerated the many benefits of various meditation and mindfulness practices, including the ability to concentrate and pay attention, regulate emotions, perform complicated cognitive tasks, and complete more efficiently several office-related tasks in quick succession (Konnikova 2012). Citing studies of meditation and neuroplasticity—the ability of the brain to generate new synaptic pathways and neural connections—the author claims that mindfulness “build[s] up neural real estate that is better able to deal with the variegated demands of the endlessly multitasking, infinitely connected modern world.” And in contrast to the cultivation



of solitude and isolation from society recommended for meditation in the *suttas*, mindfulness today is said to “shift frontal brain activity toward a pattern that is associated with what cognitive scientists call positive, approach-oriented emotional states—states that make us more likely to engage the world rather than to withdraw from it.” Suffice it to state the obvious: that these benefits are deeply ingrained in modern post-industrial culture, its notions of a good life, its particular demands (especially regarding working professionals), and its unique forms of anxiety. But more to the point, similar meditation practices are apparently accomplishing aims—for example, “engag[ing] the world rather than withdraw[ing] from it”—nearly the opposite of the ideals of ancient meditation practices, which explicitly recommended withdrawal from the world. The work meditation does, therefore, is determined by the surrounding ideas, aims, attitudes, and cultural context of the practitioner. Again, such practices do not simply produce particular, precisely reproducible mental “states” that are the same across time and space. They are part of larger complexes of ways of being in the world in particular social imaginaries.

## Taxonomies, Symptoms, and Cultural Contexts

In contrast to the view, implicit in many of the neuroscientific studies of meditation today, that meditation simply produces mental “states” that are the same across time and space, let me offer an alternative view that attempts to theorize more adequately the role that cultural context plays in contemplative practices. I begin with perhaps an unlikely analogy: that of psychological—especially psychosomatic—illness, an illustration that I believe can be expanded to other kinds of experiences. Anthropological thinkers, cross-cultural psychologists, historians of medicine, and philosophers who study psychological illness in different cultural or historical settings have demonstrated not only that the theoretical categories and explanations of psychological illness are quite different across cultures and historical periods, but also that the symptoms themselves vary considerably. Take, for example, the widespread phenomenon of hysterical paralysis among upper-middle-class women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, according to most sources, the disorder is very uncommon, and we have a variety of new illnesses—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anorexia nervosa, borderline personality disorder, and so on—that appear very much to be products of a particular culture. Medical historian Edward Shorter (1992) claims that each historical period (and by implication, cultural milieu) has its own

“symptom pool” shaped in part by the available categories, templates, and models of illness established by the medical community itself and by the surrounding culture. Ethan Watters (2010), expanding on this point, suggests that psychosomatic illnesses in particular “are examples of the unconscious mind attempting to speak in a language of emotional distress that will be understood in its time” (32).

Shorter (1992) argues that symptom pools emerge through a dynamic negotiation between the patient, the patient’s unconscious, the doctor, and the broader culture:

In psychosomatic illness, the body’s response to stress or unhappiness is orchestrated by the unconscious. The unconscious mind, just like the conscious, is influenced by the surrounding culture, which has models of what it considers to be legitimate and illegitimate symptoms. . . . By defining certain symptoms as illegitimate, a culture strongly encourages patients not to develop them or to risk being thought “undeserving” individuals with no real medical problems. Accordingly there is great pressure on the unconscious mind to produce only legitimate symptoms. . . . [The unconscious mind] will strive to present symptoms that always seem, to the surrounding culture, legitimate evidence of organic disease. This striving introduces a historical dimension. As the culture changes its mind about what is legitimate disease and what is not, the pattern of psychosomatic illness changes. (ix–x)

Patients, according to Shorter, present symptoms that accord with the medical diagnostics of their time and place—what he calls the “medical shaping of symptoms” (1). The authority of the doctor and the medical establishment is essential to this shaping. Watters (2010) expands on the point, arguing that public recognition of a disease leads to people manifesting the behavior in order to seek help:

Patients and doctors would then engage in what is called “illness negotiation,” whereby they would together shape each other’s perceptions of the behavior. In this negotiation the doctor would provide the scientific validation that the symptom was indeed indicative of a legitimate disease category, and new patients would increase the attention focused on the new symptom in the professional and popular press, creating a feedback loop that further established the legitimacy of the new symptom. (33)

This suggests something important not only about the historical contingency of the categorization of mental illness, but also about illness itself: that at least some mental disturbance manifests in culturally available ways and that authoritative taxonomies penetrate the unconscious, structuring the illness itself.<sup>13</sup> In Shorter's view, people have vague, undefined anxieties that manifest through a repertoire of available forms that are authenticated by the medical establishment's taxonomies of illnesses and symptoms.

If this is true of mental illness, then it makes sense that other modes of human life are similarly structured—including “symptoms” of mental health and human flourishing, meditative states, and religious experiences. Contemplative practices are modes of self-cultivation that strive to produce certain experiences and cultivate certain ways of being in a world—a world that contains particular normative understandings of a good life, a holy life, a successful life, as well as conceptions of the person, the mind and its features, the potential for human development and cultivation, and various experiences that meditators will have at different stages on the path. In the early Buddhist example, the tradition supplies a view of the human being (the aggregates, sense capacities, etc.), moral and attitudinal valuations of various phenomena (the body, sexuality, sense objects), taxonomies of the many phenomena of the lived world (*dhammas*), and markers of progress in meditation (e.g., the progressively more rarified states of absorption [*jhānas*]). These provide ways of directing attention and navigating what is significant and insignificant in meditative practice. They provide guidance on fostering or constraining certain thoughts, feelings, emotional dispositions, and ethical motivations, and on developing valued skills and creating (and disrupting, or perhaps transcending) certain culturally available personal identities.

Various articulations of the dharma contain complex maps of the lifeworld in a particular social imaginary, and these maps guide practitioners toward the goal of human life, identifying various important markers of progress and dangers along the way. This progress is not merely a matter of private mental states but is something worked out between the individual practitioner, his or her teacher, the tradition, and the culture more broadly. Practitioners are always in a dialogue with all of these—dialogue in which the significance and meaning of their experiences are not only interpreted but also shaped. Like patients and their doctors, meditators often have intensive interactions with their teachers—we might think of it as “experience negotiation”—in which

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13. Some, no doubt, are physiologically based, but even these are mediated and interpreted through available categories.

they attempt to discern the significance of their meditative experiences and interpret them according to the teachings (the Zen tradition of *dokusan* or *sanzen* is most notable here). Stages of the path found in texts, narratives of others' meditative experiences, teachers' instructions, and dharma talks are in a similar relationship to the practitioner as the relationship of a patient to physicians and authoritative maps of illness such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

Most meditators have likely considered their maps to correspond to a pre-existing architecture of the mind and reality; therefore, they have considerable incentive to interpret and produce experiences that conform to the map. Buddhist meditators, therefore, have striven to identify the markers of transition between the first *jhāna* and the second, to look for signs that they have attained stream entry, or to discern whether they have truly had insight into the Buddha's teachings on impermanence. They have questioned basic intuitions, like that of a continuing, enduring self, and instead have tried to isolate and identify the five aggregates in their own experience. In later traditions that insist that all phenomena are illusory, practitioners must train their minds to see the world itself as a dream. In some traditions, they must try to imagine the world and themselves as having Buddha nature, perfect and already awakened, despite the ample evidence to the contrary. They must, in other words, reimagine themselves and the world in ways suggested by these maps, not only interpreting but also cultivating their experiences accordingly.

In this way, inchoate and unconscious impulses, impressions, and notions emerge into consciousness to take the shape of available categories in the tradition, the "always already" available ways of understanding. The various narratives of progress, maps of the path, models of enlightened persons, suggestions, and instructions all constitute templates that shape how meditation works in configuring consciousness. These templates guide meditators toward attending to certain features of their experience, interpreting their significance, categorizing them in certain ways, acting upon them according to prescribed purposes—and simply not noticing what is not on a particular map. The many detailed maps of the path—the *jhānas*, *lam rim*, *bhāvanākrama*, and so on—are in this view best seen as constructive models that do not simply represent a certain territory, but figure it according to particular understandings of the dharma. And if we recall again the *Sutta on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, we can appreciate anew how little space it devotes to bare attention to the breath and how much to deeply internalizing the teachings and taxonomies of Buddhist doctrine by contemplating them in a concentrated, systematic way, not just deconditioning but reconditioning the mind and body according to the dharma.

## Two Meditators Again

With all of this in mind, let's for a moment be playfully speculative and try to imagine our ancient Indian monk and our contemporary *vipassanā* practitioner attempting to put some aspects of the *Sutta on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness* into practice. As he sits down to focus on his breath, the monk attempts to disregard fond memories of his pre-monastic identity, his caste, his sense of belonging to a particular clan and family, the physical comforts of home, and the emotional comforts of parents and siblings. He struggles to examine and release his ordinary sense of being an "I," with specific fixed characteristics. Instead, he focuses on trying to identify the five processes he has been told he really is, the aggregates. Here is the body, but how to differentiate this present sense of the body (*rūpa*) from *feeling* (*vedanā*)? Is *this* a feeling or a perception (*saññā*)? Is the twinge of desire to give up on monastic life and return home a volition (*saṅkhāra*)? He suspects that his mind is beginning to get caught in one of the five hindrances—restless worry—and attempts to let it go and replace it with serenity. A sexually charged image arises, and he replaces it with an image of a corpse in the cremation ground. He remembers the vivid portrayal of hell realms his teacher described and feels longing for the realm of the gods, where one lives for thousands of years without pain. He remembers that he should not be content, however, with aspiring to this realm and tries to form an image of the true goal, *nirvāṇa*, beyond time and space, beyond even existence and non-existence. Frustrated by the attempt, he recognizes that his mind is in a stream of conceptual rumination (*papañca*) and returns to the breath with a lingering image of the vast undifferentiated space of *nirvāṇa*.

In this focused, effortful process, the monk is recreating himself in particular ways; he is shifting his sense of himself as he disregards certain aspects of his experience as illusory and cultivates others as more true. He is alert to subtle movements of his body, thought, and emotions, interpreting their significance according to the categories that he has been taught. After repeatedly struggling to identify the aggregates, his sense of subjectivity eventually becomes reconfigured based on his reimagining of himself as five aggregates rather than a permanent self. He must manage his desires as well, steering them away from sensual pleasures and even from the pleasures of the *deva* realm to the more abstract goal of *nirvāṇa*.

Now let us return to our contemporary meditator. She sits down and calms her mind, trying to bring to attention her deepest aspirations. She has been told to acknowledge all thoughts and feelings and let them go, not judging them, repressing them, clinging to them, or letting them proliferate into an internal

conversation. Yet when an angry thought emerges toward a colleague at work, she cannot help judging it unworthy of her spiritual aspirations, and she has to force her mind back to her breath to avoid developing an imaginary and heated conversation with the colleague. When a wave of well-being sweeps over her, she identifies *that* as more of what she is after, then calls this into question, remembering her instructions to just observe thoughts and feelings and not prefer one to another. This is followed by a memory of her brother, who is having trouble with his marriage. She is briefly angry with him, but then a small eruption of love arises—no matter what he has done to complicate his life, she accepts him. *That*, she guesses, may be the unconditional loving-kindness that she should feel toward him described by the Pali term *mettā*. Maybe it is even the unconditioned love she recently read about in a modern Tibetan teacher's book, a love that dwells in each of us and is our fundamental nature, waiting to be discovered. She tries to remember if there is anything like this idea in the *vipassanā* books she has read, then refocuses on her breathing, trying to put away all of these speculations. At some point her mind becomes focused so that she is continuously attending to her breath as it streams in and out of her body. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise but dissipate before taking root in ongoing narratives. As a peaceful feeling permeates her body, she briefly wonders if her amygdala has become less active and if blood is flowing freely to her parietal lobes. She is pleased that her meditation may be creating new neural connections that will allow her to think more clearly, pay closer attention, and be more compassionate. After a few more minutes of calm focus on her breath, her electronic bell rings, and she is off to work, trying to maintain a sense of calm and clarity, feeling better about how she might interact with her colleague.

By many accounts, this might be considered a rather superficial meditation. Some might say that she only was really meditating in the last few minutes when her mind became calm and focused. But despite the apparent superficiality, there is nevertheless real work, real self-cultivation, happening throughout. She attends to certain aspects of her experience rather than others; she imagines herself in certain ways according to dominant scientific theories; she envisions certain ends she wants to achieve through her practice. She struggles, as do most meditators who read an eclectic array of authors/teachers from different traditions, to reconcile different strands of thinking in the Buddhist traditions, to reconcile *doing* with *not-doing*, to reconcile trying to actualize certain states of mind, moral intuitions, and aesthetic sensibilities with allowing whatever emerges to emerge without judgment or interference. In judging her thoughts and feelings, trying not to judge them, subtly choosing to try to foster compassion rather than resentment, noticing deep levels of resentment, struggling to identify what might be a hidden and more profound

level of her own being, she is engaging in a technology of the self using several interlacing taxonomies—Buddhist, therapeutic, neuroscientific—all taking place in the wider, more tacit and unconscious structures of life within her social imaginary—all of this even when she is being asked to *just sit*.

Are the modern professional and the ancient monk doing something utterly different? Certainly there is overlap: both follow their breath, calm their minds and bodies, try to cultivate compassion and avoid hatred, greed, and delusion. But the familial, institutional, social, cultural, civilizational, and cosmic contexts in which they enact these values could hardly be more divergent. The modern professional has a family to which she is deeply committed, a job that sustains her, arts and entertainment, and broader commitments to gender equality, human rights, individual choice, and many other non-negotiable goods. She lives, in other words, in an entirely different social imaginary with different default intuitions and a different repertoire of possible ways of being. Some of the things that mindfulness helps her with are expressly forbidden the monk: parenting, money-making, love-making, play-watching. So mindfulness and meditation help to cultivate a very different kind of person in this case than in the earliest contexts (as well as monastic contexts today). Moderns have discovered new uses for ancient tools. Clearly these are flexible practices that have been adapted today to quite different ends within very different lifeworlds.

## Context and the Scientific Study of Meditation

That the meaning, significance, and purpose of contemplative practices, or any other human activity, would be deeply shaped by their social context is obvious for anyone in the humanities and social sciences. The point I am arguing, however, goes a bit further. It asserts that meditation “works” as a systemic part of the ecology of a sociocultural system. It may be used to cultivate available ways of being in a given culture, to challenge them, or to create alternative ones; but it cannot operate in a vacuum. Even if it is introduced to a culture stripped of much of its earlier contexts—as arguably it has in some modern situations—it immediately absorbs culturally available ideas, values, and aspirations, which provide a structure in which the practices become meaningful. This must challenge any account of how meditation works simply in terms of universal states of mind, be they articulated either in the normative terms of tradition or in modern scientific terms.<sup>14</sup>

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14. Perhaps this more contextual conception of *experience* may help us recover a way of talking about experience in contemplative practice in a way that avoids at least some of the

This is not to say that the recent plethora of scientific research on contemplative practices is not valuable in helping us understand how meditation works or that context is absolutely determinative. Determining neural correlates of first-person meditative experience and understanding the relationship between meditation and neuroplasticity, for example, may help us understand something important. Clearly the basic architecture of the brain and central nervous system is the same across cultures and recorded history, so there are certain aspects of meditation that will no doubt *do* roughly the same things for all people. If a monk in Sri Lanka and an artist in Los Angeles with equal experience meditating both spend twenty minutes in relaxed but alert attention to the movement of their breath, their fMRI scans and EEGs may look quite similar. And perhaps at some point, dedicated meditators from vastly different cultures may come to very similar states through the same contemplative practices. Just as some psychological conditions are rooted in biology and cut across cultures, so might certain meditative experiences. But their meaning and significance still may be quite different. So in emphasizing the role of cultural context, I am not offering a thoroughgoing culturally deterministic view. We should not simply suppose that all experience is absolutely prefigured by cultural and traditional categories. Novelty happens, individuals find themselves in states not accounted for by tradition, people leap beyond normative ways of being, and categories change and merge to accommodate the new and unexpected. But much of the way in which contemplative practices work on the everyday, unexceptional level in which most human beings spend most of their lives is deeply structured by the contexts I have been discussing.

The level of analysis that attends only to universal physiological structure and function, therefore, cannot adequately account for how these practices work in practitioners' lives. If we are to take seriously the first-person perspective of contemplatives, we must understand how they conceive of the meaning, purpose, and significance of their practices in their doctrinal, social, cultural, and cosmic contexts. To understand contemplative practices in a comprehensive way, therefore, scientific study of meditation must work hand in hand with philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars of religion who

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problems elucidated by Robert Sharf in his influential article (1995a). Meditative experience, as elucidated here, is not the bare empirical observation of mental contents, nor an isolated and private Cartesian perception mirroring reality, but a dialogical process that is always in relation to the tradition and the broader culture, its categories, and ideals. It recognizes the rhetorical use and scholastic origins of much "experience language," yet also acknowledges the importance of interiority and self-reflexivity in the lives of meditators.



can help articulate these contexts. By all means we should measure what is measurable, but we should not think that such measurements—be they oscillating brain-waves, blood flow to various parts of the brain, respiration, and so on—get down to the real “facts” about meditation to which all other “data” (beliefs, social situation, cultural factors, relations of power) are extraneous. We must understand all of these factors together systemically. The study of meditation should not succumb to the modern cult of calculability in which something is only real when it is measurable and measured.

## Postscript: Do Not Apprehend

At this point, though, I must confess to providing an incomplete picture. In the *Large Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra*, there is a version of the *Sutta on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness* quite similar to the one found in the Mājjhima-Nikāya. The minor differences include the instructions being given to a bodhisattva rather than a monk. A major one, however, indicates an important doctrinal shift:

Here a Bodhisattva knows, when he walks, “I walk,” when he stands, “I stand,” when he sits, “I sit,” when he lies down, “I lie down.” In whichever position his body may be placed, whether in a good way or not, he knows that it is in that position. And that through nonapprehension (of anything). (Conze 1975, 153)

As in this passage, at the end of each set of instructions, the text essentially says that everything the bodhisattvas do in the various contemplations, any states they attempt to produce or eliminate, virtues they try to actualize, the very eightfold path that they attempt to follow—and later in the text, virtually all of the various meditative states discussed in canonical Buddhist texts—are known through “non-apprehension” (*anupalabdha*); that is, seeing them all as empty (*śūnya*) of inherent, independent, permanent existence. All of the many categories enumerated in the Pali literature—the maps, templates, and models of the path we have discussed as essential to structuring the ways of being that meditators have tried to cultivate—are enumerated here, yet the essential insight proposed in this influential Mahāyāna text is that they are all conceptual constructs and have no inherent, independent reality.

Something that will no doubt have occurred to many familiar with Buddhist traditions is that part of the genius of these traditions is that they themselves have recognized something of the constructed nature of all such maps and

models, templates, and taxonomies—even Buddhist ones. The Buddhist understanding that all categories are conceptual constructions is based more on linguistic and philosophical considerations than observations about culture and history—the latter seem to be a modern insight—nevertheless, it is undeniable. Indeed, one of the fundamental creative tensions in and between Buddhist traditions has been between their constructive and what we might call their deconstructive aspects. I have offered a constructivist approach to meditation, in which people attempt to actualize particular ways of being, laid out by authoritative Pali texts, Zen masters, or modern therapists within the broad taxonomies, possibilities, and limitations of particular traditions and social imaginaries. This entails not only conscious effort to *be* certain ways—compassionate, insightful, calm—but also unconscious processes that guide the mind to actualize ideals of the tradition and the culture laid out in various maps, models, and templates.

I have presented this process as reliant on the authority of tradition, texts, and teachers, which makes these ways of being, rooted in the available taxonomies and forms of life available in a particular social imaginary, appear uniquely real and natural, based on the authority of enlightened beings. This cannot help but seem to put me, the scholar *qua* scholar, in a position of knowing something the practitioner does not know—that these taxonomies and forms of life are contingent constructions, not built in to reality itself. But the tradition itself winds back around to tap me on the shoulder. Buddhist philosophers have often recognized the constructedness of their own categories and taxonomies and have worked in sophisticated and creative ways to explore the issue. Perfection of Wisdom literature, for example, plays with the tradition's sacred conceptions, positing them, then gleefully dismantling them, challenging readers to find solid conceptual ground to stand on and insisting there is none, taking the reader to the very boundaries of propositional language in order to reveal the shimmering fragility of all categories. Some Zen literature takes this deconstructive route to the extreme—playfully inverting cherished binary oppositions—purity and impurity, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*—sweeping away taxonomies, tearing up the scriptures, killing the Buddha. Words attributed to Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Chan, say, “Trying to find a Buddha or enlightenment is like trying to grab space. Space has a name but no form. It's not something you can pick up or put down. And you certainly can't grab it. Beyond this mind you'll never see a Buddha. The Buddha is a product of your mind. Why look for a Buddha beyond this mind?” (Bodhidharma 1987, 9–10). Indeed, many philosophical debates between Buddhist schools have been about where to draw the line between what is fabricated by consciousness and what is not.

The more deconstructionist modes of Buddhist discourse have had an effect on meditation, especially when combined with the Mahāyāna doctrine of Buddha nature. I have used contemplative practices in the Pali texts as my reference point in this chapter and have concluded that they are modes of self-cultivation, means to actualize a way of being in the world. But later traditions cast suspicion on meditation as cultivating particular ways of being—or indeed cultivating anything at all. Traditions that espouse the idea that all beings are already innately awakened—Chan/Zen, Mahāmudrā, and Dzogchen, for instance—insist that meditation does not involve cultivating good qualities, ethical dispositions, and so on, since these are all innate. All that is required is uncovering them. John Dunne (2011) has referred to this approach as “innateism,” in contrast to the “constructivism” that characterizes Pali literature on meditation:

For the innateist, progress along the path mostly involves eliminating the obscurations that prevent our innate buddhahood from emerging. For the constructivist, the path involves eliminating obstructions, but it also requires carefully acquiring or constructing the qualities that eventually result in buddhahood. . . . These two positions fall at the ends of a spectrum, and various Buddhist traditions can be located at one or another point along that scale. (76)

Innateist traditions, especially Zen, have contributed significantly to the contemporary notions of Buddhist meditation as a practice with no goals, no self-cultivation, no effort to make one into something one is not. In the West these traditions have combined with European Enlightenment-influenced notions of the goodness of humanity and romanticist intuitions of a deep, pure, interior self, as well as therapeutic ideas of self-acceptance. Even in these conceptions of meditation as “not knowing,” “not-doing,” and “non-striving,” there is a dance, inherited from a combination of different Buddhist traditions, between the constructivist and innateist approaches. And even innateist traditions, classical and modern, still require cultivation of certain ways of being in the world that are unique to particular social imaginaries. They must negotiate between the form and emptiness, between the cultural constructions and the vast mystery beyond them. But exploring this issue will have to wait for another time.