

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



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Contemplative Life: An Anthropological Perspective

Martijn van Beek, PhD

In introducing the anthropological perspective that he had chosen as his focus, Van Beek acknowledged earlier presentations that had discussed how scientists' culturally bounded assumptions about meditation had influenced their experimental designs in inappropriate ways. The broader implication he identified is that the proper object of contemplative studies is not isolated contemplative practices but an entire way of life and a way of being in the world. This may not be possible within the constraints of scientific research but, in the same way that micro-phenomenology examines a much finer level of detail than previously studied, we can attempt to take a broader perspective that encompasses not just texts and other cultural resources but the very purpose of contemplative studies in relation to alleviating suffering.

As an anthropologist, Van Beek is concerned to understand what happens when the traditional forms of contemplative life and wisdom traditions engage with modernity, and how this might inform the potential shift from a knowledge society to a wisdom society. There is a huge, unprecedented experiment going on, he observed, trying to recreate a space for a deeper and a fuller contemplative life that has not existed, except in isolated pockets, since the Reformation in Europe and the rise of modern science in the 15th and 16th centuries. For example, having lost our culture's spiritual literacy, we are now introducing decontextualized contemplative practices in schools that may trigger processes we are not equipped to handle, as the work of Jared Lindahl and Willoughby Britton suggests (Lindahl et al. 2017).

More optimistically, he saw the expectations that people now bring to meditation and contemplation as a potentially important contribution to the resolution of current global problems. He quoted Francisco Varela on the supposedly antagonistic relationship between science and spirituality: "I would rather say that spirituality is a kind of perspective that pervades every human activity. If science is not able to live within that ecology, there is something wrong with science." It is not intrinsically a problem, but only problematic "when science takes itself to be the high-priest of knowledge." But the best science doesn't make this hegemonic claim, Varela said (Hindriks 1990), and Van Beek noted that the participants in this meeting shared a more appropriately humble view.

He described where we stand now at a critical juncture of global crises: environmental crises, global warming, inequality, a culture of greed and selfishness, the resurgence of violent intolerance and nationalism. But the urgency of this crisis brings with it the imperative to change our lives. Information has not accomplished shifting people's denial; rather what is needed is a reorientation of the heart to a sense of universal responsibility and care for the interconnectedness of all life. We are no longer at the center of the universe.

Looking back to the decline in contemplative life that began in the 15th and 16th centuries, he quoted Thomas Merton's observation that the concept of discipline began to be emphasized in Christian theology around the same time as the concept of the scientific method arose. Discipline became corrupted into a methodology where, if the correct conditions were created, the results should be reliable—a development, in Merton's

words, “fatal to Catholic contemplation” (Merton 1971). Van Beek observed that this orientation towards results is comparable to the secularization of mindfulness today, its “scientific” application in the service of neoliberal capitalism, and the pharmacological approach to contemplative practices.

He then turned to how anthropology might contribute to the reorientation that needs to happen. Whereas anthropology used to aspire to observation of other cultures as a fly-on-the-wall, avoiding any intervention that might change supposedly pristine conditions, the reality is that there is no longer—if there ever were—any circumscribed culture unaffected by modernity. Anthropology emphasizes participant-observation. The researcher becomes immersed in the culture to be studied, learns its language, and gains an embodied sense of habituation to its ways of seeing, without losing the ability to shift perspective. This participant-observation practice is in tension with the taboo of “going native,” which is reflected also in a tension between emphasis on differences versus emphasis on commonalities shared generally. Similarly, the relativity of inescapable situatedness is balanced with the privilege of partial perspective.

Van Beek offered an account of his personal trajectory, with its interwoven professional and contemplative threads as illustration, noting that some might argue that he has gone native in an experiment in contemplative life.

An involvement with Tibet as a political cause first led to him study anthropology in order to do field work in Tibetan refugee communities, and to understand what cultural and religious factors had made it possible for the diaspora community to remain viable. He had worked in Ladakh for several years when a movement agitating for regional autonomy began scapegoating the local Muslim community, challenging his understanding of Buddhist values. This led him to do a PhD at Cornell on ethnonationalism and religious conflict, looking at the situation in Ladakh as an example of why communities create specific, exclusionary representations of collective identity through opposition with others. In the past decade, his research has moved to study the global dynamics of transmission and translation in the encounter between Buddhism and modernity. The relationship with science intrigued him as one important aspect of that encounter, and he became involved in neuroscientific studies on experienced meditators as a way of understanding what issues were raised by this type of research. In a similar way he participated in his role as an anthropologist in meetings related to the encounter of Buddhism with modernity, including the Mind and Life Summer Research Institute, gradually becoming more involved as an active participant in the Mind and Life Institute in the US and in Europe. At the same time he was feeling a sense of discomfort at the distance between this work and contemplative life, and the responsibility involved in doing research that could have consequences that were difficult to discern.

He described two studies he was involved in that used fMRI and EEG to try to capture the neural signature of a particular practice taught by Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, which involves a repeated subtle momentary mental shift. The experiments were conceived carefully in close collaboration between the scientists and the contemplatives, and provided rich insights into the methodological challenges in this type of research. Additionally, the translation of contemplative practices into the context of conventional neuroscientific research created such a distance from the lived experience of contemplative life that it was difficult to see the relevance of the research for contemplative practice. It was interesting, he said, from an anthropological viewpoint to

consider the beliefs of practitioners and the media who bought into the popular idea that it was possible to see what goes on in the brain in a meaningful way and that meditation changes the brain. “But what’s the point?” he asked provocatively. “As far as practice is concerned, it makes no difference.”

Other participants challenged him on that sense of purposelessness, offering examples of practical applications of research on contemplative practices and asking for a micro-phenomenology of the sentiment expressed. He acknowledged the importance of this kind of research, both strategically and genuinely, and attributed the source of his dissatisfaction to what he perceives to be a general lack of humility in regard to the limitations of the studies and the danger of an impoverished understanding of contemplative life in a fuller sense, given the lack of spiritual literacy in our societies.

Van Beek then turned to his own involvement with the Vækstcenteret community in Denmark with which he has been affiliated for 15 years, as an illustration of the challenges raised by integrating contemplative practice into the contemporary world. The community is also the focus of a research project he is working on. He is also gathering accounts of other contemplative communities, looking to learn from others’ experiences, motivated by the need for a variety of viable models. We cannot simply reproduce systems that worked in Tibet or pre-Reformation Europe, which were dismantled for good reasons both political and institutional.

The Vækstcenteret community was founded in 1982 by Jes Bertelsen, formerly an associate professor of the history of ideas at the University of Aarhus, who had lectured there on Jungian depth psychology and a variety of Eastern and Western contemplative traditions. Together with a group of people that he worked with, they were inspired to create a lay monastic community that prioritized spiritual life while also maintaining a rich engagement with lay life in society. Currently about 85 adults and their children live in their own homes in a remote (by Danish standards) village of 3000 people, chosen deliberately in a relatively unattractive setting to ensure that people’s motivation to join would be focused on the practice. Eight people including Bertelsen live in a central common building with a meditation hall. Joining as a full member is a process that takes several years of increasing commitment and mutual evaluation by the community and the prospective member. The daily management of the community is organized by a democratically elected council that is accountable to the board of the Vaekstcenter Foundation. Daily practice and contribution of volunteer labor of about an hour per week are expected, and there is a separate retreat center at some distance from the main community. Members represent several different faith traditions, particularly Christianity and Buddhism. The goal is to balance contemplative life with engagement in the world rather than being full-time monastics, and “to have tasted enough of the world’s temptations to know what they are letting go of.” The community offers a mutually supportive and self-aware environment in dealing with the inevitable tensions and trade-offs of living as part of a contemplative community, and for example the sacrifices in professional life that come with long retreats. Membership has been fluid to some extent around families’ different situations, children leaving as they grow up and sometimes returning later, members leaving because of new relationships or else their partners joining.

Van Beek noted that recognizing that the development of one’s practice and its integration in daily life are priorities does not detract from the value of scientific studies

of the neural mechanisms of meditation. But there is a need for contemplative studies to look at outcomes beyond the brain and the lab—a need for more careful and detailed ethnographic descriptions of these different experiments for comparison, including long-term studies of individuals and communities involved in a wider range of forms of contemplative life, because these are embodied existential pursuits, and not merely cognitive or emotional techniques.

The discussion following the presentation continued in this very personal vein. Asked whether he is writing about his experience at the Vækstcenteret community as part of his work, he explained that his intention is to devote less time to academic work and to spend more time in retreat. His academic writing has been slowed by the realization that “so much of the work is about taking positions and judging others, usually by misrepresenting what they’re actually doing, and I find that no longer satisfying.” His awareness of the complex nuances of critiquing work, such as commercialized mindfulness training, that may still help to alleviate suffering even if flawed or limited when seen from a sociological perspective, is another obstacle to his writing. He described the writing that is typical of the fields of sociology and anthropology as often simplistic, jumping for the low-hanging fruits and often caught up in jargonistic theoretical pursuits with little immediate bearing on the challenges of our world. The research that will prove valuable in the long term will be more situated, embodied, and engaged. The kind of engagement that would motivate ten years or more of work on a dissertation comes from caring—“from recognizing something as either really important or really problematic”—and thus becomes part of one’s contemplative life in the sense of providing meaning.

References

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