

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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IMPLICIT ANTHROPOLOGIES AND EPISTEMOLOGIES OF MINDFULNESS



MANGALAM RESEARCH CENTER
FOR BUDDHIST LANGUAGES

This project was made possible through the generous support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this video are those of the speaker(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

Implicit Anthropologies and Epistemologies of Mindfulness

David McMahan, PhD

McMahan began by sketching the historical context of the relationship between Buddhism and science, which began in a time of crisis for predominantly Buddhist countries as they were being colonized by European powers in the late 19th century. The framing of Buddhism in scientific terms was an effort by Buddhist reformers to defend against European military and political hegemony, Christian missionary efforts, and the racial denigration of colonized people.

Aware that Christianity was threatened by Darwinism and progressive rationalism, Buddhist leaders like Anagarika Dharmapala emphasized the role of causality in Buddhist philosophy and minimized aspects that could be considered superstition or supernatural, highlighting its compatibility with science and contrasting it with Christianity. In Burma, Ledi Sayadaw saw colonialism as an apocalyptic sign of the decline of Dharma and took the radical step of teaching meditation—formerly a limited monastic practice—to the masses.

In a second phase, meditation and mindfulness came to be seen as a science of the mind, offering access to an objective view of the world, with judgment deferred until a careful examination of the facts had been made. By the mid to late 20th century, a further shift is seen when Goenka describes Vipassana as a scientific technique beyond Buddhism or any religion, a secular medicine that should be universally available. When meditation became popularized in the West, it was seen as a personal private practice that enhanced individual freedom, and was interpreted through the lens of enlightenment rationalism, romanticism, transcendentalism, and various schools of psychology.

In the third, “neuro” phase, meditation is interpreted through cognitive and neurosciences, with a heavy—and often exaggerated in the popular press—reliance on neuroimaging and focus on advanced meditators. Meditation practices are isolated from their traditional philosophical and ethical contexts, and taught in secular programs.

McMahan paused to consider how extraordinary it is from a historical perspective that practices developed over 2500 years ago by “ragtag counter-cultural ascetics”—who renounced the world, their possessions, and sex—and which had survived until recently with their only institutional home being the Buddhist monastery, have now found homes in the most powerful secular institutions in the history of the world, from Goldman Sachs and Google to the American military.

Breaking for discussion, Francisca Cho noted that the secular/religious distinction is a very modern construct, and queried how relevant that distinction was to Buddhism, particularly East Asian Mahayana Buddhism that stressed integration of Dharma in worldly life rather than a separation of monastic and lay life. McMahan responded that, while Buddhism has always had much to say about worldly matters, meditation was until recently reserved for monks. David Germano observed that Tibet was an exception both in terms of colonial history (missing the European encounter, but suffering later under Chinese occupation) and the involvement of the masses in meditative practices, given that ritual and meditative practices are inextricably combined in Tibetan Buddhism. He also challenged the account of Sayadaw’s promoting meditation in response to

colonialism, referring to Kate Crosby's work (covered in his own presentation) on a complex form of meditation and ritual practice integrated in community life before the colonial encounter. Other traditions of mass meditation were mentioned, as well as practices that blend meditation with ritual or with affective ethical exercises. McMahan agreed that what we call meditation now has become more and more limited and needs to be seen in much broader terms. Elena Antonova raised the point that guided meditation has become a standard format in Western secular mindfulness and is common in Western Dharma practice, unlike more traditional instruction given separately from actual practice done in solitude. A meditator experiences these two approaches very differently, and we need to be aware of any assumptions around this that we bring to the research.

Cortland Dahl mentioned the difficulty he and Richard Davidson had encountered in trying to include analytical meditations in the scope of a project to study a broader range of types of meditation, because it was impossible to separate the meditative process from the discursive content, which traditionally was explicitly Buddhist in nature. They had mentioned this to the Dalai Lama who suggested swapping it with scientific content using the same contemplative methodology, leading to an interesting discussion about deepening scientific insight through contemplation.

McMahan continued his presentation in what he described as a slightly more critical mode. He noted that contemporary accounts of mindfulness, such as the standard definitions given by Scott Bishop or Jon Kabat-Zinn, show the influence of European enlightenment epistemology and emulate secular scientific aspirations to nonjudgmental, non-reactive observation, free of bias, emotion, and religious influence. Mindfulness is seen as a refined method of observing interior states on the model of a theater of the mind containing representations of the world, a container with private contents uniquely accessible to the individual, where the primary "data" of experience is considered "real," while concepts and value judgments are not. He explained how Evan Thompson has come to reject that definition, as well as any purely neurological account of mindfulness—analogue to a purely neurological account of parenting—and instead sees it as a complex social and cultural activity that integrates "a host of cognitive, affective, and bodily skills in situated action."

A related fallacy that surfaces in neuroscience and its reflections in popular culture is the equation of personhood with the brain. Examples of how this manifests include envisioned technologies that will assess one's progress on the path to enlightenment, replacing the authority of a spiritual teacher. McMahan noted a circularity in this ideal of a machine that can determine truths beyond ordinary human judgment, masking the reality that the machine's design and functions are constructed and delimited by human judgment.

He saw potential remedies for these assumptions in a broader conversation that is developing around meditation and its role in society. The 4E model of embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition is relevant, if not yet widely known. A reemphasis on context includes attention to the ethical implications of meditative practices, their relationship to broader social and political issues, and how secularized meditation practices relate to established Buddhist traditions. Inasmuch as contemplative practices are technologies of self-cultivation and self-transformation, they create particular ways of being-in-the-world that engage the social imaginary in totality—far from the popular perception that such practices strip away cultural baggage and neutralize

context. Thus, people doing the same practice in very different social imaginaries may be cultivating very different ways of being. A Buddhist monk may do a breath meditation with the intent of breaking attachments to family as the Vinaya instructs, while a modern businesswoman might do the same practice to improve her social relationships with family and colleagues. The context is constitutive of the experience and effects of meditation.

Emphasizing that meditative practices involve reconditioning as well as deconditioning, McMahan quoted from the Arittha Sutra, an early Buddhist meditation text that showed how a practice of mindfulness of the breath was not meant to be isolated from, but instead deeply integrated with, one's emotional and imaginative life world. Meditative practice is not simply a matter of getting the brain into a certain state, but is systemically intertwined with the practitioner's social, cultural, and cosmic world. Isolating it for the sake of scientific study may inevitably distort how it works in people's lives, and simplified practices that can be most easily isolated for study become privileged by their survival value, while practices that are harder to decontextualize become marginalized.

The discussion that followed returned first to the neuro-centric focus of meditation studies. Giovanna Colombetti related her initial disappointment that neurophenomenology neglected the embodied aspects of experience, but that Evan Thompson had described it as a Trojan horse with the intent of gaining traction for embodied cognition in neuroscience. Kalina Christoff voiced the objection she had heard often from neuroscientists, who don't deny the embodied, enactive aspects of cognition, but claim that the brain remains the proper focus of study as it reflects all these aspects. She offered that a more effective way to make progress on including enactive cognition in neuroscience would be to focus on how consciousness can be changed to relieve suffering, which then obliges researchers to take account of external factors that influence that state. Michael Sheehy observed that this pointed to two trends emerging in contemplative science that are separate though in dialectic, one focused on the nature of the mind, and another on understanding meditation. Clifford Saron proposed that the positivist view of scientific objectivity during the colonial era had now evolved to a scientific understanding of how much bias and suggestion is involved in all cognition, and that this might contribute to an awareness of these processes in meditation practice.

Shaun Gallagher asked whether there was a difference in a meditator's experience whether meditation is done in isolation or along with other people. David Germano spoke of how little we know of the myriad social contexts of these practices traditionally, and framed a way of posing the question to Tibetan teachers that drew on our understanding of the cognitive science of synchronized physical activities. Dahl added how the language difficulties around precise translation of Tibetan terms, and their much richer and more nuanced terminology related to meditation, blurred the definition of what constitutes meditation. Given the contextual complexity of meditative practices that may be enacted in interpersonal relationships, working with ethical values and emotional experiences, Saron emphasized that the neuroscience is completely inadequate to describe what is going on. Nevertheless, Michael Lifshitz foresaw that trends in precision psychiatry might soon lead to using brain imaging or bio-markers to individually prescribe specific meditation practices.