

PUTTING THE BUDDHISM/SCIENCE DIALOGUE ON A NEW FOOTING

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CONTEMPLATION IN CONTEXTS: TIBETAN BUDDHIST MEDITATION ACROSS THE BOUNDARIES OF THE HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES



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Contemplation in Contexts: Tibetan Buddhist Meditation between the Humanities and Sciences

David Germano, PhD.

Germano framed his presentation with the personal context of his long involvement with Tibetan Buddhism, including decades spent living in religious communities in Asia, teaching religious studies at the University of Virginia, working on educational projects in Tibet, and in recent years, a leadership role in adapting contemplation as a resource for public education in America.

As a keynote speaker at the Mind & Life 2014 meeting,¹ he explored the challenge of “deep disconnects on multiple registers” between scientists and humanities scholars on the exploration of contemplation, and the possibility of consilience requiring collaboration and willingness on the part of scientists to be more open to practices and values basic to humanities, including hermeneutics, discourse analysis, and awareness of the history, ethnology, and ethics of contemplative sciences as a field, and of scientific research more generally.

This is was part of an interest by Germano in creating a long-term project to improve the dialogue between science and humanities by systematically exploring Buddhist meditative practices and their diverse contexts in Tibetan culture. He is questioning his own blind spots as well as those of scientists. In questioning how context mediates the practices’ impacts, he became aware of the difficulty of distinguishing what we think of as “context” from other fundamentally constitutive factors, insofar as all context is constitutive to various degrees.

The project’s initial steps involved categorizing thousands of Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices, reviewing narrative, philosophical, and procedural literature related to the practices, and reviewing scientific literature on contemplative practices to identify the problems of decontextualized research. One result was a 12-fold typology of Tibetan Buddhist meditation:

1. Ordinary Preliminaries
2. Mindfulness
3. Calm
4. Insight
5. Forty Objects of Meditation
6. Emptiness
7. Compassion
8. Extraordinary Preliminaries
9. Deity Yoga
10. Somatic Yogas
11. Great Seal
12. Great Perfection

¹ Contemplation in Contexts: Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Across the Boundaries of the Humanities and Sciences; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEciElaAUMM>

Characteristics of this typology include a formal structure comprising beginning, middle, and end, applicable to both individual practices and integrated practice sequences; the problematic character of drawing clear distinctions between meditation and ritual; and hundreds of variations for each practice, with a diversity that cannot be distilled to a single set of norms.

This complexity is typical of Tibetan Buddhism even in a form like Dzokchen, which rhetorically values extreme simplicity. It is also related to the Buddhist understanding of emptiness underlying our existence as embedded in an array of interdependent constituent threads too complex to define completely. Contemplative practices likewise have an infinite number of constituent threads that escape the scope of human understanding and cannot be easily isolated. Thus the project requires both humility and de-reification. Threads can't be isolated like pulling a yak hair out of butter, to use a simile rich with associations in Tibetan culture.

Germano observed that existing scholarship on meditation is generally still a very young and limited field (with exceptions noted below), and often is focused on procedure with limited attention to its rich contexts and their potential to illuminate its interpretation. He notes that the tension between nomothetic and idiographic approaches, where science and humanities have typically diverged, may now offer opportunities for transdisciplinary exchange through more contextualized research on meditation. Where mainstream science has tended to view individual differences as chaotic noise from which a signal must be isolated, a movement toward idiographic approaches sees individual differences as variations where context becomes a source of insight. The humanities in turn are beginning to use new computational techniques for data analysis nomothetically.

Germano identified twelve contexts that are valuable in understanding contemplative practices:

- **Boundary conditions**
As examples, shamatha and mindfulness, both the focus of recent scientific research, are traditionally internally diverse rubrics with particular practices described at a much finer level of granularity. The terms that translate as “mindfulness” are used in complex ways in Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan, which do not describe precisely to current usage in North America.
- **Dependencies**
Integrated path structures are typical of Tibetan Buddhism. A dizzying array of meditations, breathing techniques, physical yoga, prayer, ritual, pilgrimage, visualizations, ethical norms, diet, sexuality, medical treatments, salves, etc. are combined to form sequences prescribed for varied purposes or customized for individuals. These sequences were extremely diverse and often debated. If a practice is isolated or shifted from its normal order, its effects may differ.
- **Intention, motivation, and expectations**
The setting of intention and review of motivation play an essential role in Tibetan Buddhist meditation, and a complex traditional literature sets expectations by identifying different signs or outcomes (whether external or internal, material or experiential) that gauge progress in a contemplative practice. What impact these factors may have on meditation is an open question.

- Philosophy
 - Most Tibetan meditation was deeply influenced by theorizations around mind, body, and collective existence, whether or not explicitly invoked in the procedural literature. This includes non-conceptual meditation, visualizations, and narrative forms of meditation, as well as explicitly philosophical forms of analytical meditation.
- Cultural belief paradigms
 - (These are elaborated below in examples of good scholarship.)
- Aesthetic factors
 - Examples include the impact of the built environment on psychology, biophilia, practices prefaced by music, chanting, or aphoristic poetry, and the liturgy itself. Aesthetic factors are typically absent or negative when studying meditation in laboratory settings.
- Social settings
 - Meditation may be affected by group settings versus solitary practice, and the specific nature of the group.
- Environmental factors
 - Tibetan literature tends to specify an isolated natural spot as ideal, but specific practices may also prefer high or low altitude, forest, grasslands, cool or warm places, high or low humidity.
- Emotional dimensions
- Physical embodied contexts
- Temporal contexts
- Individual differences

These contextual factors may be explicit in the procedural literature, or may be implicit in the form of shared cultural knowledge. Such highly specialized knowledge is challenging to share usefully with scientists working to understand contemplative practice. Instead of isolating individual practices we should look at broader ontologies of practices in complex and sophisticated contexts, and be aware of variability. As an example of specialized historical context that is valuable to researchers, Germano described a large body of elaborate literature on Dzokchen practice sequences that appeared in the 11th century. Earlier Dzokchen literature had no, or limited, procedural instructions, often using poetic reflections to invoke a technique-free practice of pure awareness. These forms of practice came to be repackaged in the eleventh century as one amongst many practices now presented within a complex sequence.

He offered three exemplars of interesting scholarship on meditation over the last few decades, each demonstrating a rich approach that bundles social, environmental, and cultural contexts in ways that might be useful for scientific exploration of Buddhist meditation.

- Ron Davidson² examines the emergence of Indian tantric Buddhism as a creative response to social, political, economic, and intellectual crisis, when the Buddhist world view was being diluted by the relativity of Madhyamaka philosophy and

² Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, Columbia University Press, 2003.

- participation in pan-Indian discourse on epistemology and logic, at the same time as political and economic changes weakened the monasteries' patronage networks. The tantric revisioning of Indian Buddhism focused on power, violence, and sexuality in ways both problematic and inspiring, which, however, acquired quite different meanings when later translated into Tibetan culture.
- Kate Crosby³ describes how a complex form of meditation that was ubiquitous in the Theravada world (and bearing interesting relationships to Tibetan practices) was systematically dismantled over the last few centuries in relationship to colonial pressures to be replaced especially by modern Theravada Vipassana practices as an adaptive response, though it continues in isolated pockets as well as in modified form in the Dhammakaya movement in Thailand.
 - Thomas Ots⁴ compares two very different forms of qigong practice, linked to confessional diary writing, that emerged as a way of dealing with emotions that were severely repressed during China's Cultural Revolution.

Germano offered also, from personal experience, the case of Khenpo Jikme Phuntsok, founder of Tibet's largest contemporary monastic community in Larung Gar, who traveled the country revealing hidden scriptures that reanimated the landscape of sacred sites and revived memories of cultural traditions at a time when Tibetan culture had been devastated by the Chinese occupation.

These examples of richly bundled contexts represent the kind of communal, cultural, and institutional settings in which practices were actually performed and transmitted. (In Tibet there is a longstanding deep concern with the integrity of transmission, given the harsh geography, small population, and political disruption.) Germano drew a parallel between the traditional transmission of culturally and institutionally embedded practices, and the transmission for purposes of scientific research of the complex contexts surrounding a practice. Both involve the transmission of whole worlds. With characteristically wry humor, he described how some might see his own role in this transmission as a bellhop for cultural baggage.

In summary, the transposition of contemplative practices from religious to scientific contexts is never a literal translation dependent solely on accurate procedural or philological knowledge, but is rather an inspired translation rooted as much in the future context as the past. In keeping with the Buddhist concept of pure vision, the daily shared cultural context and values that ground contemplative practices and establish their validity in daily life are as much the real concern of Buddhism as any extraordinary contemplative experiences.

The discussion that followed Germano's presentation explored practical methods of bridging the divide between sciences and humanities in the study of Buddhist

³ Kate Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-era Suppression*, Buddha-dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2013.

⁴ T. Ots, "The Silenced Body—the Expressive Leib: On the Dialectic of Mind and Life in Chinese Cathartic Healing," in T. J. Csordas, Ed., *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 116-136.

contemplative practices. Germano offered the example of his own experience working in digital humanities, including computational scholarship that combines statistical analysis with hermeneutical sensibilities, as a path to reducing humanities scholars' fear of science and quantitative approaches. For scientists, awareness of individual difference as a methodological problem and introduction of humanistic reflection into science and engineering education offers similar potential for bridging. He also noted the need to call out scientists' communication style in mixed science/humanities groups, when they present interpretive comments with limited empirical evidence as if they are established facts.

Probing how understanding the complexity and diversity of Tibetan practices might guide research, Elena Antonova asked whether typologies described in the traditional literature might serve as scientifically testable behaviors or have recognizable neural signatures regardless of practice sequences or individual variation. Germano emphasized that scientists could use such typologies as a heuristic for navigating complexity without assuming that they reflect underlying reality or an exhaustive account. He suggested testing, for example, whether a goal state such as non-dual awareness, which is similarly described in quite varied practice sequences, is recognizable regardless of that context. As a counter-example he hypothesized that the twenty-one types of shamatha practice, each using different objects of focus, could have quite different neural signatures despite the common label. In both cases scientists would need context to make sense of variation. Clifford Saron reiterated an important caveat that Germano had noted earlier: we have no idea how closely or successfully any individual practitioner follows the procedural instructions; longitudinal studies comparing individuals' experiences over time could help to solve this problem.

Germano concluded by returning to his work introducing contemplative practices in American educational systems, and his awareness that students lack a cohesive and common world view to contextualize the contemplative skills they are taught. Constructive change will require understanding the specific realities of those students' lives and the organizational culture of educational institutions in much the same way that researchers need to understand the specificity of traditional contexts of contemplative practices in Tibet.