Meditation in contemporary contexts

How to cite: Ville Husgafvel. 29 Oct 2020, Meditation in contemporary contexts from: Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies Routledge
Accessed on: 17 Jan 2022
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351050753-4
MEDITATION IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

Current discussions

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Introduction

Since the counter-culture of the 1960s, the practice of meditation has spread from more marginal spiritual and religious contexts into the western (and increasingly global) cultural mainstream. This is most visible in the introduction of mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs), such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), as institutionalised approaches in public and corporate settings (Mindful Nation UK 2015; Wilson 2014). The widespread application of Buddhist-derived mindfulness practices in healthcare, education and the corporate world is supported by a cumulative body of scientific research on their psychological and physiological benefits and the secular reframing of the aims, principles and premises of meditation practice. In recent years, academic research and public interest have created a positive feedback loop, providing increasing funding for mindfulness-related research and, in turn, scientific legitimation for the use of practical mindfulness applications. Reflecting this surge in both academic and general attention, the number of mindfulness-related journal publications has grown from one per year in 1982 to ten in 2000, up to six hundred and ninety-two in 2017 (AMRA Resources and Services 2018). The vast majority of these studies come from the fields of behavioural, cognitive and medical sciences, but lately, research within the humanities and social sciences has increased significantly as well.

In addition to standardised mindfulness-based programmes, other Buddhist or Buddhist-derived meditation styles are also attracting large numbers of contemporary practitioners, both within and beyond explicitly religious contexts. Globally, the most popular forms include Tibetan tantric approaches, various forms of Zen meditation and Theravāda-based vipassanā practices (taught, for example, by the Insight Meditation Society or the lineage of S. N. Goenka (1924–2013), as well as in more traditional Buddhist contexts).

The first worldwide wave of meditation practice was much indebted to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, which included the members of the Beatles as its celebrity evangelists. While TM is still active today, other contemplative practices with Vedic-Brahmanic roots have occupied the global mainstream more recently. In particular, the different forms of modern yoga represent another major driving force in the popularisation of meditation, even if the explicit emphasis on meditative aspects varies greatly between styles (De Michelis 2004). In fact, in both historical and contemporary contexts, drawing too rigid...
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a boundary between ‘yoga’ and ‘meditation’ is problematic. Historically, the early roots of yoga and meditation go back to a shared pool of practices, concepts and soteriological structures employed by śramaṇa (i.e. Buddhist, Jain, Ājīvika) renunciates (Bronkhorst 2007; Samuel 2008). Instead of distinct ‘origins’ and clear ‘lineages’, the early Brahmanic, Buddhist and Jain histories of yoga and meditation are completely intertwined and cross-pollinated (Maas 2018; O’Brien-Kop 2017; Samuel 2008; Wujastyk 2018). In contemporary contexts, the concepts of ‘yoga’ and ‘meditation’ may sometimes be equally overlapping, even if in popular imaginaries ‘yoga’ is more associated with practices involving physical postures and ‘meditation’ with mental exercises conducted in a paradigmatic cross-legged sitting position (De Michelis 2004: 8). This overlap is evident in the inclusion of yoga postures in the ‘mindfulness meditation’ techniques of well-known MBPs, such as the MBSR programme (Kabat-Zinn 2005 [1990]: 94–113), or the application of various sitting and lying-down meditation techniques in modern yoga classes (De Michelis 2004: 251–260). Moreover, it requires just a slight shift in orientation to frame some Buddhist-derived sitting meditation techniques as ‘postural’ practices (see, e.g. Suzuki 1973 [1970]: 25–28) or postural yoga āsanas as dynamic forms of ‘meditation’ (see, e.g. De Michelis 2004: 238–239). Thus, depending on the framing, historical context, and preferred definitions, ‘yoga’ and ‘meditation’ may represent two distinct conceptual categories; ‘yoga’ may be a subcategory of ‘meditation practice’, ‘meditation’ a subcategory of ‘yoga practice’, or the terms can even be used interchangeably.

Besides the formal contexts of modern mindfulness and yoga, meditation practices are often regarded as one signature element in the open-ended cultural formation known as ‘New Age’ or ‘holistic spirituality’ (Gilhus and Sutcliffe 2014; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). This refers to various ways of life, social networks and cultural products that combine ideas and practices from a wide range of religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions into eclectic combinations of both therapeutic and soteriological significance. While highly visible in the current cultural landscape, the phenomenon is analytically elusive; again, clear definitions and categorisations are difficult. Despite maintaining a certain level of ambivalence – or even distance – in regard to more institutionalised forms of meditation, contemporary ‘holistic spirituality’ represents one popular cultural milieu for various contemplative practices. However, meditation practice itself should not be regarded as categorically ‘spiritual’ or associated with ‘New Age’, as done in some characterisations that lump together practices like ‘(spiritual) yoga, reiki, meditation, tai chi, aromatherapy, much paganism, rebirthing, reflexology, much wicca and many more’ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 7). Many scholars and contemporary practitioners of meditation, such as cognitive therapists working in the UK National Health Services (NHS) and using MBCT in their daily work, are likely to find these associations foreign and problematic.

Alongside characteristically contemporary developments, practices that could be referred to as ‘meditation’ continue to be important elements in many traditional religious and indigenous contexts; various forms of concentration, awareness, recitation, or visualisation practices are found in practically all religions and cultures from the Catholic Church to Amazonian tribal lifeways. This has led some scholars and scientists to make universalist claims about ‘meditation’ as ‘a worldwide practice found in every major religion and in most cultures’ (Walsh and Shapiro 2006: 229). However, others are highly cautious about whether collecting a wide range of practices from various geographical areas, cultural milieus and historical eras under the conceptual category of ‘meditation’ serves any analytical purposes or is just a remnant of outdated ‘intellectual trends’. As Lutz, Dunne and Davidson (2007: 500) argue,

[I]n a typical discussion of this kind […] practices as diverse as the ritual dances of some African tribes, the spiritual exercises of the desert fathers, and the tantric
practices of a Tibetan adept are all forms of meditation. Historically, this attempt to categorize diverse practices under the same rubric reflects some intellectual trends in the early 20th century, most especially “perennialism,” that argue unequivocally for a certain genre of mystical experience as the essence of religion (Proudfoot, 1985; Sharf, 1998). … [T]he generic use of meditation as applying to such a wide range of diverse practices inevitably trivializes the practices themselves. For example, the unique techniques and context of Sufi zikr must be ignored if they are to be considered the same as the Taoist practice of T’ai Chi. In short, to make zikr and T’ai Chi describable with the same term, one must ignore a good deal of what makes them radically different from each other. This would be akin to the use of the word “sport” to refer to all sports as if they were essentially the same.

(quotations in original)

Whatever position one takes on these semantic and conceptual issues, it is worth keeping in mind that labelling something as ‘meditation’ is often more an argument in need of justification than a natural matter of fact just waiting to be ‘discovered’.

In the interest of space and scope, this chapter focuses on Buddhist-derived practices and especially the study of contemporary mindfulness, which dominates recent academic discussions on meditation. Besides the popular appeal of mindfulness training, there is much academic focus on Buddhist styles of meditation in the cognitive neurosciences, and the modernist narrative of Buddhism as a sort of ‘inner science of happiness’ seems to resonate well with contemporary cultural sensibilities (Lopez 2014; Lutz, Dunne and Davidson 2007; McMahan 2008; McMahan and Braun 2017). I have further narrowed my scope to a handful of themes, including challenges of definition, historical and comparative approaches, research positions and critical discourses. Through these, I hope to provide some insights into the current contributions and challenges of the humanistic and social scientific study of meditation.

Challenges of definition

Despite being widely used in both popular and academic discourses, there is no universally agreed-upon definition for ‘meditation’ as a specific category of human activity, and the term has a wide variety of context-dependent meanings and usages. The same applies for ‘mindfulness’ and much meditation-related terminology, which is usually rooted in the technical language of specific religious-philosophical traditions. When analysed in their ‘native’ contexts, the meaning of these terms may be defined in rich detail and precision, whether one is discussing the Greek term meléttē (Latin: meditatio) in early Christian asceticism and Stoic philosophy (Rønnegård 2013) or the Pāli sati (Sanskrit: smṛti, English: mindfulness) in certain Buddhist discourses (Dreyfus 2011; Gethin 2011 and 2015). However, problems arise when tradition-specific technical terms are used as signifiers for abstract conceptual constructions and universal categories of human experience.

In order to understand contemporary conceptualisations of ‘meditation’, it is useful to discern at least four basic stages in its conceptual history: (1) early Greek philosophy (Platonic, Stoic) and Christian asceticism; (2) medieval, premodern philosophy and Christian spirituality; (3) the comparative and historical study of ‘world religions’ starting in the colonial era (contributing to present-day usages in popular culture and cultural studies); and (4) contemporary medical, behavioural and cognitive sciences. In the first, ‘meditation’ usually refers to recitation, reflection and visualisation practices based on Biblical passages or other philosophical texts (Rønnegård 2013). In the second, these early usages are formalised in the sophisticated
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technical terminology of Christian theology. Here, ‘meditation’ is often seen as a preparatory practice for ‘contemplation’, which represents a higher, non-discursive form of devotion, prayer and insight (Baier 2009). In the third, many technical distinctions between ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’ are left aside, so that both terms are adapted for comparative analyses and taxonomies, serving as denominators for a variety of religious-philosophical practices, especially those related to newly ‘discovered’ Buddhist, Vedic-Brahmanic and Daoist traditions (see, e.g. Burnouf 1844; Müller 1859). This same time period, the late nineteenth century, also witnessed new approaches in western esotericism, such as the influential Theosophical Society, which had distinct ways of characterising ‘meditation’, building both on indigenous western traditions and influences from Asian religions and philosophies (Baier 2012). In the fourth, the focus is shifted from religions and philosophies to the scientific study of universal neurological, physiological and psychological processes related to meditative techniques and resultant states (see, e.g. Lutz, Dunne and Davidson 2007). While each of these discourses builds their specific definitions and usages on the basis of previous ones, there are significant divergences and gaps between them.

In contemporary discussions, conceptualisations of ‘meditation’ in Buddhist and cultural studies often differ significantly from the perspectives of medical, behavioural and cognitive sciences, where the focus is mostly on the cognitive, emotional and physiological processes involved. This is evident, for example, in the early work of Daniel Goleman, in which he connects Buddhist abhidhamma (Sanskrit: abhidharma) philosophy with western psychotherapy and defines meditation as ‘the self-regulation and retraining of attentional habits’ (Goleman 1976: 44). More recently, Roger Walsh and Shauna Shapiro (2006: 228–229) have continued the dialogue between western psychology and meditative disciplines, suggesting that,

The term meditation refers to a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration.

(italics in original)

Similar reasoning can be found in one of the most cited scientific articles on the definition and typology of meditation by Antoine Lutz et al. (2008: 163):

Meditation can be conceptualized as a family of complex emotional and attentional regulatory training regimes developed for various ends, including the cultivation of well-being and emotional balance.

Sometimes further methodical details are listed, as exemplified in the following influential attempt at standardisation by Roberto Cardoso et al. (2004: 59):

To be characterized as meditation, the procedure must contain the following operational parameters: Utilizes a (1) specific technique (clearly defined), involving (2) muscle relaxation somewhere during the process and (3) “logic relaxation”: a necessarily (4) self-induced state, using a (5) self-focus skill (coined “anchor”).

In all these characterisations, ‘meditation’ is defined and described in highly technical and individualistic ways with little explicit attention to its cultural and social aspects. This, of course, fits the overall objective of finding universal patterns in human physiology and behaviour.
which are not dependent on contextual factors. However, when compared to emblematic conceptualisations in Buddhist and cultural studies, the differences are striking.

Buddhist meditation – as a systematic methodology for uncovering and transforming the basis of our understanding of the world – can be seen as an essentially hermeneutical enterprise … The various Buddhist meditation techniques are deeply embedded in a larger world view. Buddhist meditation puts into practice the Buddhist understanding of the world.

(Gregory 1986: 5–6)

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.

(McMahan 2017: 38)

Here, meditation practice is not seen as an isolated individual enterprise; rather, it is inseparably embedded in history, culture and various socially constructed frames that give purpose and direction for the practice (see also Eifring 2015). Thus, while the intentional self-regulation of attention, awareness and other cognitive-emotional processes represent important technical features of meditation, this is only half of the picture. Without analysing the role of contextual factors, many aspects of meditation remain obscure. This highlights the need for interdisciplinary collaborations, as emphasised by David McMahan, among others:

The level of analysis that attends only to universal physiological structure and function […] 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 can help articulate these contexts.

(McMahan 2017: 43–44)

Even if the focus is purely on measurable and repeatable data in laboratory settings, scholars can help scientists to develop a more nuanced understanding of different meditative approaches in order to better define their research objects and control the many variables involved (see, e.g. Lutz, Dunne and Davidson 2007; Lutz et al. 2008). It is not difficult to understand the problems of making detailed conclusions on the physiological or psychological effects of ‘sports’ in general, instead of focusing specifically on long-distance running versus bowling, snowboarding and so forth. However, it might still surprise some that the same goes for ‘meditation’; there are profound differences, for example, between ‘focused attention’, ‘open-monitoring’, or ‘compassion’ practices (see Hofmann, Grossman and Hinton 2011; Lutz et al. 2008; Pace et al. 2009). Even if these differences are not always outwardly perceptible, they are no less significant, and they need to be understood properly in any meditation-related scientific research.
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Historical and comparative approaches

Mapping the history of specific meditative approaches and analysing their characteristic features represent established approaches within cultural studies. Early on, these descriptions appeared as part of broad introductory books on Buddhism and other Asian religions. Later, they became a topic in their own right, first through general works like Edward Conze’s *Buddhist Meditation* (1956), and then gradually with more specific areas of focus in works such as *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice* (Kiyota and Jones 1991 [1978]), *Theravāda Meditation: The Buddhist Transformation of Yoga* (King 2015 [1980]), and *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism* (Gregory 1986). This process of increasing the ‘resolution’ has continued steadily, and today there is a wealth of studies concentrating on particular techniques, lineages or historical and cultural contexts. Examples abound, such as Sam van Schaik’s *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Methods of Dzogchen Practice in the Longchen Nyingtig* (2004) or Eric Braun’s *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (2013).

Outside of discussions in Buddhist studies, Braun’s work is frequently cited in the study of contemporary meditation and mindfulness, as influences from Burmese Theravāda Buddhism are nowadays widespread. Many characteristic practices in the Insight Meditation Society, the *vipassanā* tradition of S. N. Goenka or MBSR, and related MBPs can be traced back to the practice lineages of Ledi Sayādaw (1846–1923) and his student U Ba Khin (1899–1971) or Mingun Jetawun Sayādaw (1868–1955) and his student Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982) (Fronsdal 1998; Husgafvel 2016; Stuart 2018). Burma is also the birthplace of the first large-scale Buddhist lay meditation movement, closely following (and related) to the colonial conquest of Burma in the late-nineteenth century (Braun 2013; Houtman 1990; Jordt 2007; Stuart 2018). However, there is more to the Buddhist origins of current mindfulness-based programmes than these influential lineages and developments.

While scholars are in broad consensus on the overall Buddhist roots of contemporary mindfulness approaches, arguments diverge significantly in more detailed discussions. A common narrative presents modernised Theravāda-based *vipassanā* traditions, such as the aforementioned Burmese lineages and the Thai Forest tradition of Ajahn Chah (1918–1992) (mediated via Insight Meditation Society teachers), as principal Buddhist influences for the pioneering MBSR programme and related MBPs (see, e.g. Bodhi 2016; Braun 2013; Fronsdal 1998; Gethin 2011; R. King 2016; Monteiro, Musten and Compson 2015; Olendzki 2014; Purser and Milillo 2015; Samuel 2016; Sun 2014). However, a number of studies question this approach as one-sided and simplistic. The impact of Theravāda-based *vipassanā* practices should be acknowledged, but attention must also be drawn to direct and formative influences from ‘non-dual’ Mahāyāna approaches, such as East Asian Chan (Zen/Thiền/Sŏn) schools and Tibetan Dzogchen practice, in both the practical methods and theoretical basis of the pioneering MBSR programme (Braun 2017; Dunne 2011; Husgafvel 2016 and 2018; Watt 2017).

Besides filling an important gap in the history and genealogy of contemporary mindfulness approaches, the recognition of signature Mahāyāna influences has significant implications for comparative approaches, which aim at discerning shared elements between current forms of mindfulness training and more traditional Buddhist practices. For example, a ‘world-affirming’ orientation or the emphasis on developing ‘non-judgemental’ awareness, both being characteristic of MBSR practice, are commonly pointed to as disparities in relation to ‘classical’ or ‘traditional’ Buddhist practices. However, when one’s examination of Buddhist sources is extended beyond the Theravāda tradition and Pāli texts, both of these aspects can be found in established Mahāyāna Buddhist commentaries and practice lineages (Husgafvel 2016 and 2018).

Different understandings about which Buddhist traditions are relevant and a lack of sensitivity towards their differences may partially explain why scholarly discussions have yet to reach consensus on the degree of continuity between Buddhist teachings and contemporary mindfulness
practices. Depending on one’s viewpoint, MBSR and other MBPs may represent ‘the original teachings of the Buddha’in a secular form (Cullen 2011: 189–192), a characteristically American form of socially-engaged Buddhism ‘streamlined for a secular clientele’ (Seager 1999: 214; see also Wilson 2014), ‘stealth Buddhism’ with possible covert religious agendas (Brown 2016: 84), or pragmatic mindfulness applications with early Buddhist antecedents (Anālayo 2018 and 2019). However, another common narrative depicts MBSR and related contemporary mindfulness programmes as privatised, de-ethnicised therapeutic techniques, which are a far cry from any authentic forms of Buddhist practice (Plank 2011; Purser and Loy 2013; Purser and Milillo 2015; Shonin, Van Gordon and Griffiths 2013).

Similarly, there are difficulties in fitting contemporary MBPs into dominant post-Enlightenment conceptual matrices, which dichotomize ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ into clearly distinct, binary categories. While scientific research literature usually presents mindfulness practices as axiomatically secular (Baer 2015; Didonna 2009; Lutz et al. 2008; see also Sun 2014), some scholars argue that they exhibit characteristically religious content (Brown 2016). Others see them as transcending the binary model altogether by sacralising the secular (Arat 2017), enchanting the natural world (Braun 2017), or forming cultural hybrids which are open for both religious and secular interpretations (Frisk 2012).

This ambivalence in scholarly categorisations is mirrored in (and reflects) broader societal discussions. Even if the implementation of mindfulness training in public contexts is generally widely accepted, in some instances this has been contested as a violation of religious freedom and the constitutional separation between church and state. Recently, these claims were made against the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, due to the inclusion in public school curricula of an educational mindfulness-based programme called ‘Calmer Choice’. A letter written by the lawyer Dean Broyles on behalf of the National Center for Law & Policy (NCLP) and ‘concerned parents’ states:

[T]here is a concern that mindfulness meditation involves well-established Buddhist religious beliefs and practices that may undermine rights of conscience and religious freedom because the curriculum may conflict with worldviews or religious beliefs adopted by students and inculcated by parents at home.

(Broyles 2016)

These claims repeat arguments of an earlier civil court case on the implementation of a yoga programme based on the Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga tradition of Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009) in the Encinitas School District (Mayer 2013a; Newcombe 2018) in California. The only major difference was that the more recent perceived danger to religious neutrality in school curricula came from ‘stealth Buddhism’ instead of ‘stealth Hinduism’, as framed by Broyles (2017 and 2016). These views follow the arguments of the religious studies scholar Candy Gunther Brown,4 whom the lawyer uses as his expert witness. Even if the two cases reflect concerns of particular political and religious minorities marked by ‘contemporary neo-conservative politics and conservative Christian faith’ (Newcombe 2018: 558; see also NCLP 2018), and both school programmes continue with wide support from local communities, these debates are good reminders that academic argumentation is not isolated from the wider society but completely embedded in it – with all the practical, political and ethical implications that follow.

**Research positions**

The unique position of each scholar towards his or her objects of study represents another, different example of the inevitable embeddedness of academic research. Besides societal
institutions, structures and debates, each argument and study reflects the personal motivations, backgrounds, beliefs and prior understandings of the researcher. Current mindfulness research provides a relevant context for understanding this, as personal religious or ideological backgrounds may sometimes play a considerable role, even if the topic is quite rarely explicitly discussed. (See Rahmani, Chapter 18 in this volume.)

Anyone studying the Buddhist history, ethical dimensions, commercial aspects or religious-secular nature of contemporary mindfulness-based programmes will soon discern some basic standpoints, which frame to different degrees the content and tone of scholarly argumentation. These may include, for example, personal and professional engagement in MBPs, commitment to Buddhist practice, adherence to conservative Christian values and beliefs, or emancipatory motivations based on anti-capitalist, feminist and postcolonial critiques. Thus, a critical reader needs to remain alert to ideological, religious, political or commercial interests and presuppositions potentially at play in various analyses and depictions. For example, a reader could question if and how my scholar-practitioner position as both an academic researcher in the study of religion and a trained MBSR teacher might affect the perspectives or sources I choose and arguments I make in this chapter.

Naturally, personal entanglement in religious practices, yoga and meditation – or the politics and businesses surrounding them – is not in itself a reason to question the integrity or quality of any particular study. Quite the contrary; in many cases the advantages of personal experience and engagement in the field are obvious, as many nuances in both ethnographic and historical source materials can go unnoticed without insight from lived experience. Moreover, despite positivist idealisations of ‘objective and value-free’ research, it is practically impossible to escape ‘subjectivity’ in any form of qualitative research (or even the natural sciences, at least when communicated through language). While unique personal positions towards research objects affect how they are perceived and framed, and the language which one uses to form and communicate arguments is only partially shared and understood by others, this does not diminish the value of the scholarly enterprise. It merely puts emphasis on the intersubjective nature of academic knowledge production. Only time and peer discussion (or a lack of it) will determine the value and authenticity of any particular work.

This being said, there are academic conventions that support the transparency of one’s position and the reliability of findings from the beginning. When the subjective situatedness or embeddedness of each scholar and ‘knowledge product’ is recognised, it is necessary to make one’s research position and agency explicit and visible. In this way, scholars can provide the reader with the possibility to better contextualise and evaluate the argument being made. These methodological standpoints, based on reflexivity and applied early on in ethnography and anthropology, are already ‘a major strategy for quality control’ in many areas of qualitative research (Berger 2015: 219). Through the growing trend towards ethnographic approaches in the study of MBPs (Cook 2016; Crane et al. 2015; Drage 2018; Rosch 2015; Wheater 2017), together with critical interdisciplinary discussions on methodology, explicit self-reflection by scholars on their personal research position is hopefully becoming standard procedure also in the study of contemporary mindfulness.

**Critical discourses**

While there is a great deal of enthusiasm about the possible positive effects of meditation and mindfulness practices for both individuals and society at large, more and more critical voices are being heard. In scientific critiques of mindfulness and meditation studies, the focus has been on possible positive reporting bias, apparent methodological flaws and a lack of attention towards
difficult meditation-related experiences (see, e.g. Coronado-Montoya et al. 2016; Goyal et al. 2014; Lindahl et al. 2017). These issues have contributed to overenthusiastic and exaggerated views on the benefits of meditation, even if empirical evidence in many cases is only promising and in need of further validation. In cultural studies, critical discourses tend to not target research and reporting standards per se, but rather the contemporary approaches and contexts of meditation themselves. Here, the individualisation, secularisation, decontextualisation, commodification, corporatisation and even militarisation of traditional Buddhist meditation practices are problematised and interrogated from various perspectives, including critical theory, postcolonial and feminist studies and also traditional Buddhist positions (see, e.g. Purser, Forbes and Burke 2016). According to these critics, ‘denatured’ contemporary forms of mindfulness practice may in the service of neoliberal ideologies, corporate profit-making and military objectives become ‘tools of oppression’ instead of beneficial and liberative practices. While recent ‘McMindfulness’ debates (Hyland 2015; Purser and Loy 2013; Shonin and Kabat-Zinn 2015) have perhaps gained the most visibility in popular discussions, these arguments can be traced to Slavoj Žižek’s much earlier critical (and polemical) takes on ‘Western Buddhism’ (see also Cook 2016).

One is almost tempted to resuscitate here the old infamous Marxist cliché of religion as the “opium of the people,” as the imaginary supplement of the terrestrial misery: the “Western Buddhist” meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his Protestant Ethic, entitled The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.

(Žižek 2006 [2001]: 13)

Besides Žižek’s writings, Michel Foucault’s analytical and conceptual tools are widely used in theorising contemporary contemplative practices from critical and philosophical perspectives. Foucauldian ideas on ‘governmentality’, ‘freedom as practice’, ‘care of self’, and ‘technologies of the self’ open possibilities for perceiving traditional and contemporary forms of meditation as both possibly oppressive techniques of social-political governing and disruptive, emancipatory practices of individual and social liberation, depending on the context and perspective (see, e.g. Ng 2016).

Finally, it may be added that more discussion on methodological issues is also needed in the cultural and historical study of meditation and mindfulness. As has been commonly recognised, the early orientalist works focusing on Buddhism and other Asian religions were dominated by philological approaches, which reflected particular Protestant Christian values and orientations in their focus on ‘holy scriptures’ as the prime location of religious ‘truths’ (see King 1999; Samuel 2008: 15–22). In the early study of Buddhism in the west, orientalist presuppositions contributed to problematic value-laden constructions of ‘true Buddhism’, which prioritised normative canonical texts at the expense of contemporary Buddhist practices (and archaeological evidence) and the Pāli Canon of the Theravāda School at the expense of other Buddhist traditions (King 1999: 143–160; Samuel 2008: 16–17; Schopen 1997: 1–22; Sharf 1995). Even if these dispositions no longer dominate the mainstream study of Buddhism, the idea of a “real” Buddhism that can be found in the Pāli Canon rather than the practice of historical and contemporary Buddhists remains alive and well (Samuel 2008: 17).

The persistence of orientalist ideas in academic research is evident in the study of contemporary mindfulness. Essentialist presentations of ‘classical’ or ‘traditional’ Buddhism, Buddhist meditation and Buddhist mindfulness are still commonly based on canonical Pāli texts and
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Theravāda commentaries (Husgafvel 2016). Sometimes, these normative ahistorical constructs of ‘true mindfulness’ are further contrasted with anecdotal ethnographic examples from ‘corrupted’ contemporary mindfulness approaches (see, e.g. Purser 2015: 32) in ways which repeat classic orientalist patterns (see King 1999: 146). While possibly serving some practical or argumentative purposes, these dispositions omit: the complex interplay between Buddhist textual descriptions and lived practices of meditation, the various versions and editions (i.e. Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese) of particular Buddhist texts, the different commentarial and practical traditions related to meditation and mindfulness practice (P. satipatthāna, S. smṛtyupasthāna) within Tibetan and East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism and the problems of asymmetrical data when the normative textual descriptions of one tradition (Theravāda Buddhism) are compared to prescriptive ethnographic descriptions of another (MBSR). Thus, the call for more rigorous methodological standards applies not only in the quantitative empirical sciences but also in the historical and comparative study of contemporary meditation and mindfulness, even if on very different grounds.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate to end this brief discussion on current debates in contemporary meditation studies by sketching possible future developments. Through questions of definition and classification, dialogue between scientific and cultural studies will continue to develop our understanding on the characteristic features of meditation practice in general and on the distinct features of specific contemplative approaches in particular. Attempts at defining ‘meditation’ as a universal conceptual category may be helpful in drawing the basic outlines of an emerging field of research, but in terms of actual studies the major contributions are likely to deal more with increasing an understanding of context-specific features and terminology than with abstract generalisations. It is precisely due to their contextual understanding of meditation practices and sensitiveness towards problems of essentialism and universalisation that scholars of Buddhism and other meditation-related fields are critically important for – and increasingly being called to collaborate with – cognitive neuroscience and psychological research projects.

While the use of conceptual categories is indispensable in making sense of the world in which we live, they are bound to particular cultural and historical frames, whether emic or etic, scientific or popular, western or Asian. Being aware of the history and limitations of particular semantic and conceptual frames is part of the expertise developed in cultural studies. Research on yoga and meditation does not comprise an exception, but rather the opposite. Both historical and contemporary forms of yoga and meditation occupy many different cultural spheres and spaces simultaneously; while some of these are clearly ‘secular’, ‘religious’, ‘Buddhist’, or ‘Brahmanic’ when compared to western prototypes or classifications of ‘world religions’, many others are ‘something in-between’ and challenge established systems of codification. For more theoretically oriented scholars, empirical data on contemplative practices provides both an impetus and a rich testing ground for much-needed, novel ways of conceptualising cultural phenomena. For everyone in the field – be they more or less entrenched in the use of ‘religion’, ‘secular’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Hinduism’, ‘yoga’, ‘meditation’, or ‘mindfulness’ as analytical categories – adopting non-essentialist, discursive, instrumental and situational approaches towards these concepts will likely turn out to be useful or even inevitable (see Masuzawa 2005; Newcombe 2018: 570; Taira 2013; Wilson 2014: 9).

In historical and comparative studies, a more nuanced picture of both contemporary mindfulness approaches, Buddhist meditative traditions, and the many links between them is likely to emerge. Currently, many arguments and assumptions are made about ‘contemporary mindfulness’ or the ‘mindfulness movement’ with little sensitivity towards the wide variety of
programmes, interventions, applications, products, teachers, motivations and contexts that can be connected to the fuzzy concept of ‘mindfulness’. To put it bluntly, when the branding of mayonnaise, clinical cognitive therapy, techniques for increased sexual pleasure and a way of life guided by ethical and philosophical ideals are all gathered under the rubric of ‘mindfulness’ and treated as ‘a movement’ (see Wilson 2014), it seems highly questionable whether any shared agendas, identities or arguments can be found. As is the case with meditation and yoga traditions overall, a more clear understanding and sensitiveness to the heterogeneity and subtle differences between (and within) current mindfulness approaches will greatly benefit future discussions.

Finally, while research will continue to be conducted from various points of view, the shadows of positivist idealisations will hopefully no longer haunt scholars and lead them to downplay their subjectivity and agency in argumentation. In order for peer discussion to separate the ‘wheat from the chaff’, there must be genuine dialogue between scholars, academic disciplines and preferred schools of thought. At the moment, there are many separate ‘pillars’ or ‘bubbles’ of knowledge in the study of meditation, mindfulness and yoga, to the detriment of all. Naturally it takes effort to keep track of different discussions and courage to challenge all views (especially one’s own), but these are foundational goals if we hope to avoid reducing academic debates and knowledge into parallel monologues of ‘alternative truths’. By means of continuing curiosity, self-reflection and critical discussion beyond disciplinary boundaries and personal comfort zones, there is much to learn – for the benefit of academics, practitioners and society at large – about the diverse complex of practices which fall under the rubric of ‘meditation’ in contemporary contexts.

Notes

1 Standardised programmes include, for example, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), mindfulness-based mind-fitness training (MMFT), mindfulness-based eating awareness training (MB-EAT), mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP), mindfulness-based childbirth and parenting (MBCP), and mindfulness-based elder care (MBEC).

2 In academia, these historical and contemporary premises question the conceptualisation of ‘yoga studies’ and ‘meditation studies’ as two clearly distinct fields of research, and also the earlier field-specific approaches of studying yoga in ‘Hindu’ (Vedic-Brahmanic) studies and meditation in Buddhist (also Jain, Daoist, etc.) studies. Thus, the name ‘yoga and meditation studies’ can be seen not so much as indicating a combination of two different research fields but as merely capturing different aspects of one shared field.

3 For a critique of ‘context-independent’ approaches in the study of meditation within the cognitive sciences, see Thompson 2017.

4 Candy Gunther Brown is an established scholar in religious studies, but her views on the religiosity of yoga and mindfulness appear to be influenced by her ideological and political positioning (see also Newcombe 2018). Brown has repeatedly worked as the main academic expert on behalf of the National Center for Law & Policy (NCLP), a non-profit legal group ‘closely associated with ideological positions of contemporary neo-conservative politics and conservative Christian faith’ (Newcombe 2018; NCLP 2018) in US court cases and legal concerns against the use of yoga and mindfulness practices in public schools. In the Sedlock v. Baird case on the use of yoga in the Encinitas School District, the court explicitly stated that ‘Dr. Brown is not objective and not creditable and Dr. Brown is biased’ (Mayer 2013a). Moreover, the judge considered Dr. Brown almost ‘to be on a mission against Ashtanga yoga’ (Mayer 2013b). For Brown’s responses and more discussion, see Deslippe 2017 and Brown 2013.

5 On the ‘invention of world religions’ see Masuzawa 2005.

Bibliography

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Ville Husgafvel


