Rethinking Meditation

Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds

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Introduction

Dispatches from the Worlds of Meditation: 1a

A young Tibetan Buddhist nun, Sherab Zangmo, enters a pitch-black room for a "dark retreat," in which she meditates in complete darkness for forty-nine days, the same number of days one spends in the *bardo*, the realm in between death and rebirth. During this time, she has a vivid vision of Yeshe Sogyal, an influential eighth-century female Buddhist teacher believed to be the consort of Padmasambhava, who brought Buddhism to Tibet and with whom Sogyal performed *karmamudrā*, meditative sexual yoga. In the vision, the legendary heroine makes three symbolic hand gestures (*mudrās*), after which another historical figure, Yang Gyamtso, the founder of Sherab Zangmo's monastery, also appears. Sherab Zangmo then merges with Yang Gyamtso. "He came to rest on my head and then he dissolved into my body, speech and mind. We became one. I cried and cried. That moment I had a direct experience of the nature of my mind. I have had many experiences, good and bad, but my mind has remained stable, neither good nor bad."[1]

Dispatches from the Worlds of Meditation: 1b

A young woman in a puffy gray dinosaur costume, its head careening and bobbing several feet above her own, walks across Westminster Bridge in London. She is joined by several thousand others who block bridges throughout the city, snarling traffic and carrying signs: "rebel for life"; "fossil fuel era over"; "system change, not climate change." Other actions by the activists, who call themselves Extinction Rebellion, have included a topless protest in which women blockaded Waterloo Bridge with messages written across their bare chests: "climate rape," "climate abuse," and "climate justice"; and another in which men and women in nothing but their underpants stormed Britain's House of Commons during Brexit negotiations, gluing their hands to the glass partition that divides the public from Parliament. Many members of the group are Buddhists or practice Buddhist meditation. At some of their blockades, protestors can be seen sitting cross-legged in meditation posture. Online notices for Extinction Rebellion DC include a meditation and discussion in Malcolm X Park:

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"This event is part of an ongoing, peer-led exploration of how we can respond to the climate and ecological emergency with the support of Buddhism, meditation, and other contemplative practices. Our intention is to strengthen our internal and social resources for the challenging work of standing up for a livable and just planet. In recent months, our conversations have focused on the pandemic and racial justice along with the climate crisis. Many of us are members of Extinction Rebellion, a nonviolent international movement demanding action on the climate crisis through non-violent civil disobedience."[2]

Dispatches from the Worlds of Meditation: 1c

A shaven-headed man sits stone-still, legs crossed, back straight, lined up with two dozen others identically clad in black robes on two long, raised platforms in a Zen training monastery in Japan. Another man slowly walks between the two rows of meditators carrying a long wooden stick flattened at the end. He turns to the seated meditator, and they bow slowly to each other, each with his palms pressed together in front of his chest, the meditator bending his head a bit lower than that of the stick-wielder. The meditator remains bent as the other man gently taps his stick on his shoulder, then raises it in the air and smacks the shoulder four times, the staccato cracks echoing sharply through the hall. After he repeats the blows on the other shoulder, they bow solemnly to each other again, and he moves on. Later, on the way to the dining hall, the meditator passes another senior member of monastery and briefly allows his gaze to meet his. The superior punches him in the chest.[3]

Dispatches from the Worlds of Meditation: 1d

A small group saunters into the multipurpose room of a Unitarian church. They are men and women, mostly white, some young but most graying, wearing t-shirts, jeans, sweatpants, and yoga pants. Some bring their own cushions and place them alongside some chairs for those with bad backs. They chat casually until the meditation teacher rings a bell and they take their seats. She welcomes everyone and goes through a brief set of instructions, which most have heard before: straighten the back, relax the body, focus on the breath and count each one silently in cycles of ten; if your attention wanders and you lose count, don't fret about it, just calmly bring it back to the breath and begin the counting again at one. Try to remain in the present moment and not drift to anticipation of the future or rumination about the past. Observe your thoughts or feelings; do not judge them. She rings the bell again, and meditators sit for 25 minutes. Afterward, another participant reads aloud a short chapter from a book on Buddhism written

by a well-known contemporary meditation teacher. The group discusses the reading for fifteen minutes or so, then they disassemble the makeshift meditation room, chat a bit more, and make their way home. The next day, the teacher gives the same instructions, purged of any reference to Buddhism, to employees at a midsized tech company.

Meditative Practices, Ancient and Modern

These snapshots of Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditative practices today represent only a few of the dizzying array that have emerged in the long and culturally diverse history of Buddhism, spanning many cultural and geographic regions and over 2,500 years. Others include practices aimed at transcending the world entirely and existing eternally in a state of disembodied bliss; practices in which meditators imagine external images of a buddha being inhaled through the nostrils, deposited, and arranged in specific places in the body, where they will grow like babies in the womb into a fully awakened buddha within (Crosby 2013); practices involving the detailed visualization of corpses decaying; meditative programs requiring a period of three years and three months isolated in a mountain cave or retreat (Kongtrul 1994); practices involving intricate visualizations of energy-channels, written letters, and deities circulating within the body (Hatchell 2014); practices that require the gathering back of *kwan*, "spirits of the person," that normally inhabit the body but have strayed, causing depression, ill-health, or affliction by malign spirits (Cassiniti 2017).

Yet if you are seeking out meditation today in North America and Europe—and, increasingly, in the rest of the world as well—you will likely encounter one particular type, the one illustrated in the fourth example above, often under the label "mindfulness." There are many places in the United States, where I live, to encounter Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditative practices under this label: Zen monasteries, Insight Meditation centers, health clubs, colleges, psychologists' offices, corporations, liberal Christian churches, and cardiac rehabilitation centers. If you pursue meditation or mindfulness practices in any of those widely diverse settings, you will likely get the same basic initial instructions and the same concept of what mindfulness is and what it does. One of the most influential formulations is that of one of the pioneers of the contemporary mindfulness movement, Jon Kabat-Zinn. Mindfulness, according to Kabat-Zinn, is "the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (2013 [1990], lvii). Although the term has a long and diverse history, mindfulness today has come to mean the nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment mentioned

above—what I have come to think of as the Standard Version of meditation. There are many variations, but the basic approach is strikingly similar in all of them, whether you are at a YMCA in Salt Lake City or a Buddhist monastery in the Catskills. When I refer to it as the Standard Version, I don't mean it in a derogatory way. I have done it myself and have recommended it to those I think it might benefit from it. But as a historian of religion, I am struck by the way one particular form of meditation has quickly become dominant in so many settings, and I decided it was worthy of historical, cultural, and philosophical investigation.

Indeed, this practice has become ubiquitous across "the West" today and has circulated back to Asia, where, for example, a resident of Tokyo might be more likely to meditate at a mindfulness class in the neighborhood gym than at the local Buddhist temple. Countless articles in popular magazines promote its benefits, often depicting it as a panacea for problems as wide-ranging as anxiety, depression, heart disease, relationship issues, inability to focus, eating disorders, and psoriasis. It is widely used in psychotherapy (Helderman 2019), and there are bestselling books on mindfulness and meditation not only by Buddhist monks but also by medical doctors, psychologists, computer engineers, business consultants, and a US congressman (Tim Ryan (D), Ohio). It is taught in public schools and universities, corporations, hospitals, prisons, and the US military, and is offered by Britain's National Health Service. In North America, several basic forms of Buddhist meditation began gaining traction in the counterculture movements of the mid-to-late twentieth century and more recently have seeped into countless cultural niches, including the most mainstream. In the 1980s, when I first encountered it, it was still a fringe activity, the province of Beat poets, avant-garde musicians, and ageing hippies. Now it is something your family doctor recommends, along with exercising and eating your vegetables.

The way I came to be interested in the subject is a familiar story, nearly an American cliché. I began to explore meditation in my teens in reaction to my growing skepticism of the conservative Christian faith I grew up with. The virgin birth, Christ rising from the dead, the miracles, the atonement, and the stark division between the saved (a vanishingly small number of "true Christians") and the lost (almost everyone outside a few small denominations)—my already enfeebled faith in all of these ideas seemed to reach a tipping point and collapse in the face of the surrounding culture and my education. Far from a crisis, it was liberating to indulge in pleasures that I previously suspected might imperil my immortal soul. But equally exciting was the intellectual space that I felt open up. In a soulless shopping mall bookstore, I gathered several random volumes on Buddhism, Hinduism, "perennial

philosophy,"[4] and "mysticism" in an effort to rebuild a coherent worldview. These books informed me that there was a singular Truth at the heart of all major philosophies and religions, and that the road to this Truth was through various meditative practices. This appealed to me, in part, because it promised something other than doctrines to be "believed"; it promised experiential verification shared by centuries of mystics. Meditation, they claimed, was an internal science, as exacting as the various "external" sciences, that would bring meditators to a Truth as certain as the law of gravity.

Two early and profound experiences with meditation convinced me of its value. One occurred while I was in college and studying meditation with a Zen teacher in the lineage of the famous Shunryu Suzuki, Rōshi. I got the hang of it pretty quickly and began a regular practice. One Sunday afternoon, I sat on my bed listening to Steve Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians* and fell into a deep state of calm. As the piece ended, I shifted to my makeshift cushion, and the calm became more pervasive as I saw for the first time how many of the things that worried, concerned, and vexed me were creations of my own mind and not fixed impositions of the world upon me. It was profoundly freeing. Later, I went downstairs to the food counter in my building and noticed the other students in line. They all exuded a jittery nervousness and anxiety that I hadn't noticed before, and I wanted to tell them—what, exactly?—that they didn't have to worry so much, that their anxiety was just a trick their minds were playing on them, that everything was alright. Of course, I didn't tell them that, and the next day I dutifully rejoined the jittery, worried masses, but with an insight into how the mind constructs at least some of its own problems. I was newly impressed by the Buddhist analysis of this phenomenon that I was learning about.

The second experience occurred one day a few years later when I was sitting cross-legged on a saggy single bed in my musty one-room apartment. As I sat watching my breath, suddenly the boundaries between myself and the world seemed to disappear, and I perceived myself as something like a bubble in an infinitely vast, all-encompassing, frothing sea of consciousness. Everything I thought I was seemed thoroughly insubstantial, and what little was left threatened to dissipate into the endless plenum. The experience seemed to match perfectly the literature I had been reading on meditation, mysticism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It was the famous vision of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a cosmic infinity of which I was a part, but to which "I" was utterly insignificant, even illusory. It was at once ecstatic and utterly terrifying. At one point, I felt my heart pounding so rapidly I feared that my body would not be able to survive and, illusory as my ego now seemed, I was not ready to relinquish it. I sent forth a kind of prayer, a plea for help to no one

in particular, and the sea suddenly became calm and enveloping, taking on a feminine, maternal, comforting quality.

I tried to capture what I had experienced in writing, and it came out gibberish. For every statement that I wrote, it seemed the opposite was equally true. One sentence wrapped around in a circle to join its own beginning. It seemed inconceivable that I would go back to my ordinary life. "This was the big day," I told a worried friend that evening. After I tried to relate the experience, he asked what I was going to do now. "Just live," I said with the placid confidence of the newly awakened. After a few days, I was no longer "just living," but doing all of the other things college students do: morosely studying for exams, wondering if the woman I was dating was right for me, hanging out with friends.

In many Buddhist traditions, it is considered gauche at best to discuss one's meditative experiences, especially one's "accomplishments." I don't relate them, however, to convince the reader of the meditative prowess of my young self, nor to suggest any particular insight or spiritual development. Just the opposite, in fact. For, while I had felt such assurance in the moment, as the experiences faded and as the years passed, inevitable questions arose that eroded my certainty that I had encountered transcendent truth. If I had been steeped in a study of Christian literature, would I have understood the infinity I encountered as God? Would Jesus have been my savior and comforter rather than the mysterious feminine presence? Was my experience simply the result of an altered consciousness, perhaps some neural misfires, rather than seeing things as they truly are? Was it a bit suspicious that it seemed to confirm the Asian philosophical and religious literature—and its western interpretations—that I had been enthusiastically reading? Was this really an experience that propelled me beyond all of my beliefs, assumptions, and learning, or did it just magnify them?

My exploration of these questions in personal reading, in graduate school, in my academic research as a historian of religion, in my travels in Asia, and in conversations and interviews with meditators, from monks living deep in forest retreats to urban professionals—as well as in my continuing, lifelong experiments with meditation—has convinced me that the Perennialist, or "mysticism," explanation of what these practices do is inadequate. Thus, my second loss of faith was in the promise that meditation breaks through to a pristine, unmediated, unambiguous, and universal Truth beyond the "trappings" of particular religions and all culturally informed assumptions, biases, and conditioning—and that all meditative traditions culminate in that Truth. Steeped in universalist assumptions, this view seems incapable of dealing with the questions above, questions ultimately of the relationship

between meditative practices and cultural context. Similar questions have been taken up previously by scholars, for example, in a debate between Robert Forman and Steven Katz that revolved around the question of "pure experience." Forman insisted that there is, in fact, a universal mystical experience that transcends all cultural, linguistic, and historical conditioning, while Katz declared that "there are no unmediated experiences" (Katz 1978, Forman 1990). I am not interested in rehashing that debate here, and, in fact, I make no pronouncements on the question, perhaps ultimately unanswerable, of whether experiences that are unmediated by language, concepts, and culture are possible. More modestly, I want to examine how cultural context does impinge on meditative experiences and, along the way, suggest that there is a strong tendency in contemporary discourse on meditation to dismiss such contexts and thereby mistake culturally mediated experiences for achieving a universal view from nowhere. David Germano puts the issue well: "Practitioners, secular adaptors, many scientists, and some humanists often share a dismissive attitude toward culture and context when it comes to the religiously charged question of contemplation, assuming that meditative experience is primarily about extraordinary individual states, so extraordinary that we might identify and extract a particular practice from all its cultural context, and somehow it might come out clean."[5]

And yet, though meditative practices are about more than just "extraordinary individual states," I have no doubt that they have profound effects on individuals, are conducive to novel and valuable personal insights and ethical reflection, and can be truly transformative. So how does meditation work, then? In what follows, I don't attempt anything like a comprehensive answer to that question, but I do want to explore the issue of how culture informs and interacts with meditative practices. My approach focuses less on big, dramatic experiences than on the mundane, everyday work that such practices do in people's lives—lives inevitably embedded in particular cultures and subcultures. It draws upon a variety of philosophical, anthropological, and psychological approaches that examine how people form character, develop capacities and dispositions, cultivate ethical orientations, and come to embody particular modes of being in the world. This inquiry is also inevitably bound up with a genealogical question: how did the particular forms of meditation that have become ubiquitous today—the various forms of the Standard Version—come to be what they are? That is, what are some of the factors by which modern and late-modern cultures created spaces for contemporary Buddhist and Buddhist-derived mindfulness and meditation practices?

Currently, tumultuous "mindfulness wars" perturb the worlds of meditation, and it would be timely and tempting to dive into these debates: to

interrogate whether the current mindfulness movement is, on the one hand, a truly revolutionary psychospiritual technology that can transform individuals and societies, a therapy for bringing much-needed peace for frazzled citizens of a frenetically changing world, and a treatment for numerous physical and mental health problems; or, on the other hand, a tool of neoliberal capitalism, a fetishistic distraction from real-world problems, an appropriation of ancient indigenous practices by colonial powers and their descendants, or a dangerous practice that can sometimes lead to psychological harm rather than peace of mind. Much of what I discuss here will have bearing on such issues, but instead of aiming directly at them, I instead want to poke around underneath these questions, to examine some of the assumptions, history, and forms of life on which they rest, to rethink the underlying forces that animate them in the contemporary moment.

I realize that "thinking" about mindfulness and meditation—let alone, "rethinking"—may strike some as an oxymoron. Isn't meditation, after all, about *not* thinking? While it is true that some meditative practices involve cutting off ordinary thought-processes, part of my argument is that this is actually a too-limited way to, well, think about them. And, indeed, rethinking meditation is something that Buddhist philosophers themselves have been doing for centuries in countless volumes on how meditative practices relate to the mind, to ethics, and to the understanding of what human beings are. I do so in a similar spirit.

Filters and Magnets

Consider for a moment how unlikely it is that practices developed by celibate recluses in South Asia over twenty-five centuries ago who renounced their possessions, homes, caste, and family identities to search their minds for a way to transcend sickness, ageing, and death—indeed the entire world—would be adapted to help middle-class professionals function better at work, bond with their families, manage their health, and find calm amid the frantic pace of modern life—even improve their golf game or sex life. How did this happen? The answer to these questions proffered by popular books is simple: meditation works. It is a simple, effective means to calm the mind down, examine it, get beyond impulsive reactions, and allow new insights and possibilities to emerge, making space for distancing oneself from one's own emotional tumult and internal narratives. Today, it is often described as a kind of scientific technique or technological enterprise—a way of "mind hacking." Meditation

teachers will sometimes say that what I have called the Standard Version is the foundational meditative practice that the Buddha taught over 2,500 years ago, and which has been transmitted virtually unchanged down through the centuries to us today. The "cultural baggage" surrounding the practices has changed, but the essence is intact, and what it does for people, whether you're a Buddhist monk or a corporate executive, remains the same. These stories, I believe, are misleading. The one I will tell is more complicated; it is one of filters and magnets.

Most of the vast array of meditative practices that have emerged in Buddhist traditions have been filtered out of typical contemporary practice.[6] The filters are generally accepted ideas, tacit notions, and background ideologies prevalent in modernity (let's say, beginning with the European Enlightenment) and late modernity (roughly the second half of the twentieth century to the present) that screen out things that don't make immediate sense in those cultural contexts. For example, the dominant ideas of what human beings are and how they are constituted—we are biological beings whose minds are inseparable from our brains—filters out the likelihood that a long-deceased person might appear above your head, descend into your body, and become one with you for the rest of your days, as in the account above of Sherab Zangmo, the Tibetan nun. What makes it through the filters of modernity are practices that can make intuitive sense and find a home within the categories in which we are accustomed to think, the affective domains in which we habitually feel, the aesthetic sensibilities through which we typically perceive things, and the social, political, and institutional realities within which we are embedded. These filters have allowed only a trickle of meditative practices through to the mainstream of our world. Now, granted, Sherab Zangmo had American and European devotees who revered her and may accept quite literally the extraordinary things she reported. Moreover, contemporary Americans and Europeans have endured years-long meditation retreats in Himalayan caves, month-long retreats in pitch darkness, complex tantric visualizations, and the challenges of rigorous Japanese Zen monastic training. Such things, however, remain on the margins at this point, while the Standard Version has proliferated widely.

In addition to filters, there are magnets that attract certain practices from Buddhist traditions and leave behind others. Elsewhere I have discussed how, for example, ideas in Romanticism, Transcendentalism, scientific rationalism, Christianity, and psychology have magnetically attracted certain features of Buddhism—basic meditation practices, certain ethical and philosophical ideas (McMahan 2008). These ways of thinking and being have

drawn forth particular resonant practices from the great diversity of practices in the Buddhist traditions—and not just drawn them forth but transformed and repurposed them. Magnets only pick up things with certain properties, remaining indifferent to the rest. They serve as the conditions of possibility for the growth of these practices outside their native geographic and intellectual homes. For example, as we shall see in chapter 8, Henry David Thoreau and others in nineteenth-century America extolled the value of attentiveness to the natural world and to the mind itself as an antidote to the increasing mechanization of life in the emerging industrial age, with its factories and assembly plants disrupting the agrarian rhythms attuned to the world of plants and animals. Concerns about young people's ability to focus—which, it turns out, were not exclusive to the age of cell phones and social media apps—led to interest in systematic training of the attention in the nineteenth century, creating fertile ground for the introduction of Asian contemplative practices. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Buddhists in Japan, Ceylon, and China presented Buddhism as a rational system of philosophy, ethics, and techniques of "scientifically" investigating the mind and world, thus magnetically drawing it to lettered Americans and Europeans disenchanted by "religion" and "superstition." Part of my aim in this book is to provide some examples of such filters and magnets that created the conditions for the development of Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditative practices as popular practices of self-transformation.

Themes of the Book

Historical and Genealogical Study

I have a few aims in my examination of these practices. First, I want to explore some relevant threads in the historical fabric of Buddhist meditation. This book in no way attempts to be a comprehensive history or survey of the many such practices; rather, it presents a genealogy of some specific elements in classical Buddhist traditions that have fed into contemporary meditative practices—those that have made it through the filters of modernity. It asks: out of the many forms of Buddhist meditation that have developed over two and a half millennia, how and why were particular practices selected to coalesce into the Standard Version today? Part of the answer might be simple historical accident. Certain people from certain traditions had opportunities, for example, to bring their preferred practices to the West, where they happened to

encounter people who promoted them, developed them, reconfigured them to contemporary purposes. Such encounters were certainly numerous. But they were not just dictated by random chance. Certain features of the modern world—social and political conditions, scientific developments, literature, historical crises—created a network of conditions, a historical context, that *called forth* particular practices into this context.

This book will help clarify where certain features of the Standard Version come from as well as how they have become reinvented in recent decades. This complicated lineage goes back to accounts of ancient ascetic practices outlined in the early Buddhist scriptures, picks up bits and pieces of later Mahāyāna Buddhist ideas, along with Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan elements. These then weave their way into the discourses of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, psychology and Existentialism, midcentury countercultures, and, more recently, cognitive science and neuroscience. This coalition of historical forces brought these pursuits together and produced something new—novel interpretations of meditation, what it does, what it is for, and how it works: it reveals the unconscious mind; it unveils laws of nature in the psyche, like a scientist discovering laws of nature in the physical world; it uncovers hidden motivations, desires, thoughts, allowing one to steer them more consciously; it discloses an authentic and natural self, deeper than the one conditioned by one's particular culture and society. None of these interpretations is derived exclusively from Buddhism itself—they emerged as these practices were alloyed with modern discourses. These novel interpretations and adaptations tell us something about the context itself—how we think and feel, what we take for granted, and how we live in our world, and what are our anxieties, fears, and aspirations.

The point is not simply to insist that contemporary forms of Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditation differ from classical forms or that they are irreconcilable opposites. Rather, I want to show how the Standard Version does, in fact, inherit particular bits of its DNA from ancient accounts of meditation while at the same time reformulating them in novel ways peculiar to modern modes of thinking and feeling, as well as social and political circumstances. I will present various practices as navigating certain binary oppositions, not to suggest that classical versions of meditation always aim at one thing (renunciation or transcendence, for example) and modern versions the opposite (overcoming stress or heightening efficiency at work); rather, the various forms of meditation I address negotiate generative tensions between various possible tendencies: personal and collective, constructive and deconstructive, active and passive, enchanting and disenchanting, modern and ancient.

Theoretical Argument

Individuals, Cultures, and the Underlying Conceptual Architecture of Late Modernity

There is a theoretical and philosophical component to this work interwoven with the historical and genealogical part. It involves a critique—not of contemporary meditation per se, but of how it is conceived in popular and, sometimes, scholarly literature, particularly that coming from the scientific study of meditation. My purpose here is not to complain that more of the vast number of meditative practices from the Buddhist tradition have not made it through the filters, though that might be an implication. Nor am I piling on to the heap of critics assailing contemporary mindfulness as too superficial, corporatized, appropriative, or inauthentic. My critique will overlap with some of these but I am aiming at something a bit more particular: I want to theorize, broadly, the role of culture in meditative practices. I ask the general question, what role does culture play in meditation?—as well as the more specific question: what role has modern, western, secular, and elite-transnational culture played in its constituting its current forms?

These questions might seem strange for some readers. It seems on the surface that meditation would be the ultimate *individual* practice, a decisive turn away from the external world to the internal. Indeed, many popular descriptions insist that meditation gets you in touch with something essential and authentic inside, uncorrupted by society and culture. I will argue that culture is much more important to meditation than is often assumed and that meditation is actually as much a social and cultural practice as a personal one. I present a picture of meditative practices as cultural practices that do particular work in specific cultural contexts rather than seeing them on the (idealized) model of science—a practice of simple observation that discovers universal truths and frees one to act in light of them. Many accounts today see meditation as something that simply has particular effects on the mind, the brain, and the body. Meditation will make you happier, better at your job, calmer, kinder, more socially adept. And there is little doubt that various meditation techniques will have particular effects on neurological and physiological structures. If you relax your muscles and focus on your breath successfully, your blood pressure and cortisol levels will likely decrease, serotonin may increase, and you might feel a sense of calm and well-being. But how these rudimentary psychophysiological phenomena are processed through the intricacies of thought and emotion is deeply interwoven with the specific concepts, expectations, and affective inclinations that are readily available in particular cultural contexts. They cannot be analyzed in a vacuum.

Even when these higher-level processes are short-circuited by the circumventing of discursive thought common in some meditative practices, how the experience gets integrated into your life when you rise from the cushion—its significance to your ethical decisions, the effect it has as you move about during the day, the hope that it inspires for your general emotional state—is deeply shaped by the web of ideas and values surrounding the practice. And this web is supplied by culture, which shapes not only one's default intuitions about how to behave—as a citizen in a democracy, a consumer in a neoliberal economy, or a subject to an emperor in a medieval aristocracy—but also how one exists in various subcultures, including professions, families, churches, and spiritual communities.

Taking a fuller account of the ways such social and cultural factors shape not just meditative experiences themselves but how meditation is integrated into practitioners' lives, complicates another popular assertion: that meditation circumvents "cultural conditioning," allowing meditators to transcend the apparently pernicious influence of society and allow something authentic and uncontaminated to emerge. My argument is not that meditators do not come to genuinely novel, meaningful, and even liberating insights and experiences through their practice—in fact, I think they do. Rather, seeing these insights and experiences as a matter of transcending the influence of society and culture, or of anything outside of the mind itself, oversimplifies the matter. Ironically, the very idea that culture and society are an impediment to the autonomy of the individual is itself derived from modern, post-Enlightenment *culture*. Meditation has, in other words, been adapted to the post-Enlightenment view of the autonomous individual for whom being with others, being in society, and living in concert with social norms is considered a potential imposition on the individual's freedom. Meditation is thus reframed as the ultimate individualistic practice of the singular mind gazing at itself and discerning the truth of things in isolation. It has become tailored to the modern, western concept of the individual as "essentially the proprietor of his own person, owing nothing to society for them" (MacPherson 1962). Part of what this book attempts is to map out some parts of the underlying ideological infrastructure of modern conceptions of selfhood and to show how modern meditation has been tailored to it.

That infrastructure, however, is not fixed. There are different, overlapping and sometimes competing models of selfhood, including the classical liberal understanding of the rational, autonomous self derived from Enlightenment thought; Romantic versions of the self, emphasizing feeling and internal depths; the political self as the possessor of rights and responsibilities; the calculating self of utilitarianism; the psychological self, with unconscious depths

and neuroses; the cerebral self, identified with the brain and its functions. Add to this many religious conceptions of selfhood involving souls or, in the case of Buddhism, a fluid, interdependent process that is *not* a self, and this architecture of modern subjectivities may seem complex and cavernous, containing many tunnels, side-closets, and alcoves. Indeed, I resist the notion that the Modern Self is one thing and, instead, suggest that there is a repertoire of possibilities for imagining what a person is, all in creative and sometimes conflictual tension with one another. Part of the story I tell here is how Buddhist meditation has taken up residence in these various spaces, accommodating some, resisting others, and navigating the various tensions between them.

Meditation as a Cultural Practice

Part of the critique will entail questioning a certain popular conception of meditation that I call the "objectivist" interpretation, which views meditation as a kind of technology for obtaining a transparent, objective view of the interior contents of the mind. Such a privileged view is said to secure a lucid vision of a purely interior reality uncontaminated by cultural conditioning and social forces. I caution against this view, which I have come to think of as a "premature universalism" that takes the insights obtained in meditation to be unmediated, transcultural knowledge of the Way Things Are. A parallel premature universalism is manifest in a lot of scientific literature on meditation, which presumes that meditation is primarily something that happens to the brain and central nervous system, which are essentially the same in everyone; therefore, studying what meditators' brains are doing, for example, in an fMRI scan, will tell you "how meditation works." But how meditation works is not just about brains—it is about *the work meditation does* in particular social contexts that meditators inhabit and the repertoire of possibilities, projects, concepts, and moral visions in those contexts.

Still, I resist the conclusion that meditative practice merely reduplicates or amplifies culturally dominant structures of thought and feeling. It does, I think, do this more than is generally acknowledged. But it also has features, inherited from particular Buddhist ideas and practices, that are conducive to dismantling these structures—calling into question accepted truths, interrogating tacit assumptions, reconfiguring affective habits. There is, therefore, a fundamental tension in many Buddhist meditation practices, bequeathed to their modern iterations, between the *constructive* aspects of meditation—the cultivation of attitudes, virtues, ideas, emotions, ways of thinking and being—and the *deconstructive*—the dismantling of all of these. This is a creative tension that allows for multifarious adaptation in the use of meditation, from

practices that simply reinforce dominant habits of thinking and feeling to the radical critical interrogation of personal and cultural assumptions. To illustrate this tension, as well as examine the history of the practices that have fed into contemporary meditation, I will delve into selections from classical Indian meditation literature, as well as citing some other relevant examples from Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.

To further anticipate this kind of investigation of the role of culture in meditation, let's think for a moment about the particular cultural world, and its understanding of selfhood, that has helped birth the Standard Version. Practices that have taken root in the modern West have tended to be those that can be made sense of according to the dominant ways that modern westerners understand the self, that is, as an enclosed, private, subjective interior, separate from an external, objective world. Some thinkers have suggested that modern western people have a stronger sense of separation of internal and external, self and other, than those in other cultures (Makari 2015, Taylor 2007, Luhrmann 2020). Here I am not just talking about *theories* of selfhood, but the everyday sense of self. Meditative practices that have been adapted to contemporary affluent cultures have been pressed into the logic of this model of selfhood and to see it as having to do exclusively with interiority. It also takes pains to avoid things that could be called "supernatural," or even more, "superstitious." Thus the Standard Version avoids talk of gods, ghosts, and spirits—"external" forces—and instead focuses on meditation as a means of knowing the mind and its operations. In contrast to, for example, Korean shamans, who will train their minds to listen for messages from deceased ancestors, or evangelical Christians who cultivate the ability to distinguish the voice of God within from other mental chatter (Luhrmann 2012), meditators in this context will train their minds to treat all mental phenomena as "thoughts," all on the same interior plane, so to speak, none more significant than another, all mere events to be observed with detachment and objectivity. And yet they are also encouraged to seek insights within the constant stream of thoughts—insights into personal problems, into how to put together a poem one has been working on, into the fact that all human life is interconnected—or even more nebulously, into the way the swirl of thoughts resonates with the pattern of the succulent on the shelf, which resembles the eddies in the nearby stream and the whirl of galaxies. All of these insights require training in particular ways of looking at one's own mind, as well as previous knowledge, for example, of modern psychology and cosmology. The Standard Version encourages such insights over the hearing of the spirits, cultivating of supernatural powers, or seeking transcendence of the physical world altogether. It requires, therefore, particular

cultural understandings of what "thoughts" are (events "inside" the enclosed space of the mind), what one should do to ascertain them, what is their significance, and how one should act in relation to them.

Yet, there is also a countertendency to the interiority of contemporary meditation that we will also explore, particularly in the last chapter: it has also been used as a way to cultivate a sense of the fluidity in the boundaries of the self, to encourage a melding of self and world, to overcome the isolation and alienation of the atomistic individual and develop a porosity of self that encourages profound connection with other people, the natural world, and the cosmos itself. Meditation today is often called upon to navigate the tension between this sense of the enclosed individual, the rational atomistic self of modernity, and this more porous sense of self.

I should add that my critical analysis of the Standard Version is not meant to be a critique of meditators themselves but how many of us today—ordinary practitioners, scientific researchers, scholars—have come to think about and talk about meditation, what it is, what it does, and how it works. I am trying to get at some unexamined assumptions, often drawn from the background ideologies of the modern West, like individualism and certain folk theories of mind. My purpose is not to complain that Buddhist meditation has become "contaminated" with such assumptions, or to insist that some version of "traditional" Buddhism is better, but rather to show that these assumptions are there and render them more distinct so that we can then evaluate them more precisely. This kind of critical examination is itself rooted in modern, western thought but is also informed by Buddhist thought. The Buddhist tradition has reinvented itself many times over and provided radical critiques of even its own cherished doctrines and practices. In this sense, I see my own inquiry as a deployment not only of the methods that constitute the conglomeration of disciplines that that make up Religious Studies—anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, literary analysis—but also as resonating with certain elements of Buddhist thought itself—indeed, of meditative inquiry.

Meditation and Secularism

It is often said—by some with a derisive snort and others with a satisfied smile—that Buddhist and Buddhist-derived meditation practices have become secularized. This is certainly true in one sense of the word, in that they have been transported beyond the province of Buddhist "religious" institutions and have spread far and wide into public institutions and settings, taken up by schools, governmental bodies, health clubs, corporations, and

universities. But this observation carries with it a too-narrow conception of the secular. For now, we need not go into the various ways in which secularism is construed today (I will address the subject further in chapter 8), but a few comments on how conceptions of the secular impinge on the meditation practices we are discussing are in order.

When people refer to the secularization of meditation, the implication often is that the Buddhist bits have been stripped away, leaving the meditation in the realm of the secular, which is conceived as what is left when "religion" is set aside. Yet, a great deal of research on secularism shows that it is not adequately conceived as simply what is left over when religion is segregated—when you set aside unprovable belief and superstition and settle comfortably into rational debate about established facts. The categories of secular and the religious are themselves a historically recent way of dividing up human experience. Secularism is a discourse that creates such divisions conceptually, but it also consists of cultural formations that structure societies and institutions. In popular parlance, it can designate a worldview aligned with science and naturalism and skeptical of institutional religion. Of course, it is a political project as well: the separation of church and state, the setting up of a realm of rational, public political debate and deliberation separate from the more ethereal convictions and passions of religious life. These categories of religious and secular are modern and coconstitutive and do not simply refer to natural, unambiguous species of phenomena. The religious-secular binary is a historically specific way, not just of *classifying* knowledge, subjectivity, meaning, practice, and power—but also of *constituting* it. The discourse of secularism determines what counts as secular, what counts as religious, what is marginalized as superstition or cult, what qualifies as a legitimate exercise of religion and what doesn't. It instills particular disciplines of subjectivity, curates particular beliefs, cultivates sensibilities, and authorizes normative models of behavior, practice, and, indeed, religion. In this sense, ironically, *secularism is not secular*—that is, it is not what it purports to be: a neutral space of rational discourse and practice free from the irrational subjective passions of religion. Rather, it is a discursive tradition, with values, normative practices, attitudes, prohibitions, and metaphysics—much of it still retaining the underlying ideological apparatus of Protestant Christianity. In this sense, secularism—at least in the West—is a kind of post-Protestantism. This is important with regard to our examination of contemporary meditation practices, for they are often modeled on secular forms of knowledge—particularly the secular knowledge par excellence, science—and are often said to secure access to a kind of objective reality within, free from the vagaries of mere beliefs and the impositions of one culture or another. Secularism itself, however, is cultural—and science has its cultures too (Latour 1993).

Contemporary meditation has been significantly shaped not only by its being conceived in secular terms—as a science of mind, a psychological technique, a means of discerning "natural laws" in the psyche—but also by the laws governing secular and religious spaces. Throughout the twentieth century, as Buddhist meditation became more frequently offered to people beyond Buddhist communities, it was increasingly presented as a nonreligious practice, something that required no belief in particular religious ideas or ideals. Meditation and mindfulness were promoted to the world as definitively secular practices by many of its promoters. In their articulation of Vipassana meditation, for example, S. N. Goenka and his followers have often insisted on the nonsectarian and nonreligious character of the practice. An author at an Indian conference on Vipassana put it this way: "[Vipassana] 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 acceptable, therefore, as an integral part of education" (21). This characterization of meditation as nonreligious and nonsectarian illustrates the broader trend 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 infuse themselves into many areas of life under the banner of the secular. This is not, by the way, solely a matter of "the West" appropriating or adapting something from "the East." This process began in colonial Asia and has, all along, been a complex, mutual creation of Asian and western actors (Braun 2013). Many of the most prominent Asian Buddhists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have promulgated basic mindfulness practices to people outside the Buddhist tradition, promoting them as universally beneficial regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof. Buddhist luminaries like the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (2011), Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche,[7] and Chögyam Trungpa (in his Shambhala program) have all offered programs and approaches to meditation that they themselves have called "secular," and many others have insisted that basic Buddhist meditation practices can and should be taken into multiple spheres of secular life, from business to law to education to medicine. Perhaps the apex of this effort has been Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which was quite deliberately stripped of religious language and references to Buddhism, even though it was derived from Zen and Vipassana traditions. This has allowed MBSR to be taught and practiced

in public schools and government institutions, and the plethora of scientific studies on the effects of various secularized forms of meditation and mindfulness have given them a legitimacy that could only be conferred by its occupation of secular spaces. MBSR and other secular mindfulness practices have also been tailored to the contours of American laws on the separation of church and state. This is an example of how the cultural, political, and legal contexts in which these practices occur shape the practices themselves, along with how their purposes are conceived.

If Buddhist meditation came to Europe and North America on the back of secularism and naturalism, it, like many colonial imports, has never been thoroughly contained by these paradigms. Today we are assured in countless articles and books that meditation is sanctioned by secular authorities and demonstrated effective by scientists, all in the language of a world purged of the supernatural or superstitious. Yet secularity is still haunted by ghosts that have never been completely exorcised from the machine. Scientists may claim that meditation "works" for countless worldly goals, but many practitioners use meditation to assure themselves that there is "more than this," more than the desacralized world portrayed by science. The "more," however, is often sought *within* the "this"—in deeper resonances, dimensions, and aesthetics of the here and now, rather than the *more* of another world in the future—the Pure Land or nirvana. It is a "more" that affirms this-worldliness but at the same time attempts to break open secularism and show that this world exceeds what it seems to be on first glance: the frog plopping in the pond, the chopping of wood, the carrying of water—simple things that are, to contemplative probing, *more*. So the Standard Version isn't simply "secular," in the popular sense of the word denoting strict adherence to a naturalistic or materialistic worldview, despite assurances from mindfulness teachers in public schools or at Goldman Sachs. Rather, it occupies a field of tension between, on the one hand, comfort in the dominant discourse of secularity—the naturalistic worldview taught in public schools and taken for granted in mainstream newspapers, the established normativities of late modernity—and, on the other hand, the destabilization of that very discourse, and the bending of it toward the possibility of a kind of secular re-enchantment of the world.

Ethical Subjects

The later sections of the book move on from the argument that meditation is a cultural activity to the question of *how* meditation has been reconfigured

in the conditions of late modernity and become nestled in the cultural values of contemporary secularism and liberalism.[8] Despite the emergence of a Standard Version, there is now an unprecedented profusion of uses to which meditative practices are put. My purpose is not to catalog these multifarious deployments but rather to examine some underlying ideals running through many of them—orientations that are built-in to the subterranean conceptual architecture of contemporary social imaginaries.[9] I don't intend to map out the entirety of this underlying architecture but to look at selected parts, examining how contemporary meditation has become refracted through the lens of certain concepts: appreciation, authenticity, autonomy, and interdependence. These are modern concepts, though some have antique roots. They are important enough that I see each as an "ethic" in a particular sense; that is, they are constellations of concepts, values, and ideals through which contemporary meditators interpret self and world, but also that carry implicit directives about how to act in the world. They are not "ethics" in that they are well thought-out positions, at least not for everyone. Rather they are part of the background landscape of ideals and values prevalent in late-modern liberal democracies.

What I call the Ethic of Appreciation highlights the fact that contemporary meditation is far less focused on transcendence of the world than on appreciation of life in all of its diversity, complexity, and nuance. Classical Buddhist texts insist that the body, the material realities of the world, the processes of birth and death, the eating of food, the performing of one's work, and sensual pleasures are all marked by dissatisfaction, ephemerality, and insubstantiality. The imperative in these texts is to break habitual attachments to them, even to develop revulsion for them, and ultimately, to transcend them completely. Contemporary meditators, in contrast, are guided by an implicit injunction to appreciate their lives as embodied beings in a material world and to use their practice to enhance this appreciation. They are encouraged to cherish the beauty of nature, the tastes and textures of food, the sensual delights of a massage or even sex. Failing to do so would be missing the wonder and mystery of existence in the world. Such invitations have roots in the European Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Transcendentalism, humanism, and psychology, with their relative de-emphasis on the supermundane and the affirmation of the value—in some cases, even the sacredness—of this world and of finding transcendence in immanence. But they also reflect broad, historical movements in Buddhist thought, some of which began to question the distinction between nirvana and *saṃsāra*, offering more this-worldly interpretations of awakening and affirming transcendence in immanence, especially in East Asian contexts.

The Ethic of Authenticity and the Ethic of Autonomy are closely related values that wrap Buddhist meditation into the individualistic ethos of modernity. While originally Buddhist meditation was directed toward freedom from the world itself, today freedom can hardly be thought without reference to liberal ideas that have emerged in the last few centuries: freedom of thought, freedom from tyranny, freedom of expression, freedom from oppression, freedom to shape one's own life and destiny, freedom from enslavement to the passions (in favor of reason). It is not that these aspirations are either uniquely modern or completely absent from earlier conceptions of freedom; but the inherited ideas of personal autonomy and freedom are so stitched into the fabric of modern life that they are taken for granted, at least in liberal democratic societies. Contemporary iterations of meditation, therefore, have inevitably been threaded into this fabric as well, repurposed as techniques for the formation of subjects in search of freedom in these distinctive senses.

The concern with navigating freedom and bondage through meditation today often emerges in this language of "social conditioning" versus internal freedom, autonomy versus following "tradition," "authenticity" versus conformity to external norms. The drama of liberation of the individual from external tyranny is transposed into a battle between socially conditioned habits of mind and something authentic within—something original, self-determined, or experientially verified. One becomes the author of one's own life by escaping the internalized dictates of a sick society and pursuing one's own unique, authentic path.

There is something almost inevitable about this way of thinking today, and no doubt, nearly everyone in liberal democratic societies embraces certain aspects of it. We teach our children to think for themselves, to choose their own careers, to find their own paths, to have original thoughts, to avoid simply following the herd. Yet we also know from mountains of evidence in the humanities, social sciences, and psychology that we are fundamentally social creatures who seek out the authentication, justification, and recognition of our peers, and that even our most distinctive artists and writers are taking a plethora of materials from their culture and making something new from it. Moreover, the ideal of a self-authenticating, transparent insight into the workings of one's own mind in beings so vulnerable to cognitive distortions, propaganda, advertising, and so on, can often be a mirage. Social thought has problematized the value of what some have considered an excessively individualistic bent to the discourses of autonomy and authenticity. Thus, I will discuss some contemporary articulations of the kinds of freedom and authenticity that meditation supposedly confers, especially notions of freedom resembling Enlightenment-influenced ideas of the autonomous subject

floating freely above social conditions, nestled in a mindful inner citadel, invulnerable to "external" disturbances. If such concepts of internal freedom are inadequate, what kind of freedom might meditative practices offer, then? While not dismissing entirely the "inner citadel" model, I argue, drawing from certain feminist, anthropological, and psychological research, that such practices create possibilities for greater "situated autonomy," a concept that acknowledges the embeddedness of subjects in a nexus of social conditions and in which these practices provide for the expansion of agency through the increased awareness of possibilities for action (i.e., affordances). I also touch on how such conceptions of situated autonomy, as well as the aforementioned deconstructive aspects of meditation, have been important to the development of the recent idea of deploying meditative practices in service of sociopolitical freedom and justice, for example, the dismantling of racist and consumerist habits of mind.

If the ethics of authenticity and autonomy are reliant on a kind of centripetal force that tends toward interiority, in some cases exacerbating the sense of the isolated, autonomous self of the modern West, there are also centrifugal forces in contemporary interpretations of meditation—those that encourage a dissolution of the boundaries between self and world or that call for ethical and political engagement. These often employ what I term the Ethic of Interdependence. This ethic draws more explicitly from Buddhist doctrine, refracted through contemporary conditions, and reinterprets the often fragmented chaos of late modernity as the capacious connectedness of all things. It also carries a rationale for braiding meditative endeavors together with ethical and social responsibility: meditation under this concept cultivates a sense of the porosity of the boundaries between the self and other and emphasizes the systematicity (rather than the individuality) of suffering and the responsibility to care for others and for the planet, again, in contrast to an exclusive focus on meditation as the cultivation of personal peace of mind.

I don't claim that these particular four "ethics" constituting parts of the underlying architecture of secularism are the only such components relevant to contemporary meditation, but I believe they are important ones. In fact, there are others that are more obvious than these, such as what we might call the *ethic of health and well-being* and the *ethic of productivity*. My reason for not focusing more explicitly on these is not that they are unimportant but that others have addressed them ably and thoughtfully.[10] More generally, this book in no way attempts to nail down a definitive understanding of meditation, nor account for all of the ways it might help, transform, or even harm people. It

instead attempts to illuminate cross-pressures, tensions, and intersections entailed in meditative practices today in order to show that meditation—itself by no means one thing—does not simply *do* one thing. It might activate opposing tendencies within a society and even within the same practitioner: activity and passivity, agitation and serenity, acceptance and political urgency, self-containment and interconnection.

Finally, I have attempted to make this book a bit more accessible to nonspecialists than academic books tend to be, avoiding too much reliance on discipline-specific jargon and avoiding long digressions into technical and theoretical issues. This might disappoint my fellow scholars of religion, but it is because my intended audience is not only them but also scholars in other fields who now study meditation—psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers—as well as nonacademic practitioners of meditation. For it is the ideas about meditation that often circulate among scientists and practitioners, more than scholars of the humanities, that I want to scrutinize and, in some cases, rethink. Those hoping for methodological consistency and theoretical tidiness will also be disappointed. I roam rather promiscuously among anthropological, philosophical, psychological, and historical methodologies and theoretical frameworks. I both critique and draw from ideas in the cognitive sciences. I employ a mixture of a hermeneutics of suspicion and sympathy. I perform my research as an outsider, but I have also studied with meditation teachers, been part of meditation groups, and done some form of meditative practice for the majority of my adult days. I am not doing "Buddhist theology"—that is, thinking from an explicitly Buddhist position—and some of my conclusions might be at odds with Buddhist (as well as secular mindfulness) orthodoxies; yet, I am also sympathetic to much in Buddhist thought, practice, and ethics and feel little obligation to insulate myself from its influence on my thinking. I think *about* Buddhism and, also, *along with* Buddhism—and sometimes, against it.

This book also reflects my particular scholarly idiosyncrasies. I began my career as a specialist in Indian Buddhism, working with Sanskrit texts like the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) literature and the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, along with the early Buddhist discourses in the canonical language of Pali. As a side project, I began exploring the emergence of modern, transnational forms of Buddhism, and this project snowballed into a major part of my research. This book brings together these two poles, exploring uniquely modern and contemporary articulations of Buddhist meditation and looking for some of their precedents in classical Indian literature and, to a lesser extent, in the Chan/Zen and Tibetan traditions (in which I have less linguistic competence).

Another scholar with other interests and specializations might tell a different story, for example, with more attention to the significant influence of Tibetan traditions on contemporary versions of Buddhist meditation. Mine follows particular threads among many in the vast and complex tapestry of Buddhist meditative practices. There are many other stories to tell.