

Meditative practices have flourished since the founding of the great civilizations in Eurasia. For the first time, this volume brings together studies of the major traditions of Asian meditation, including Yoga, Tantra, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, as well as modern secular and scientific approaches to meditation.

Few if any scholarly attempts have been made at cross-cultural comparison of meditative practices. This is in contrast to the cross-cultural study of mystical experience that has been thoroughly addressed in the debates pitting the constructivist approach of Steven T. Katz against the perennial approach of Robert K. C. Forman.¹ It is also in contrast to the comparative issues raised in scientific rather than cultural studies of meditation, as in Maria Ospina et al.'s impressive report "Meditation Practices for Health: State of the Research." Finally, while scholarly studies of meditation have tended to shy away from cross-cultural comparison, more popular works seldom have the same qualms, including Claudio Naranjo and Robert E. Ornstein's *On the Psychology of Meditation* and Daniel Goleman's *The Meditative Mind*, both of which were first published in the 1970s, as well as Livia Kohn's more recent *Meditation Works*.

Scholars studying meditation have typically stayed within one specific tradition and stuck to culture-specific modes of explanation with limited general relevance. This includes excellent monographs, such as Sarah Shaw's *Buddhist Meditation*, Isabelle Robinet's *Taoist Meditation*, and Rodney L. Taylor's *The Confucian Way of Contemplation*. To the extent that scholars have ventured beyond the bounds of a single tradition, they have mostly limited themselves to traditions that are historically related, as in Geoffrey Samuel's *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra*. Scholars have usually avoided the comparison of traditions that have no obvious historical relation but may have generic features in common or may, for that matter, differ from each other in interesting ways.

This collection of essays brings together different Asian traditions and compares them not only with each other but also with the traditions studied in another recent volume I edited, *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*.² In addition to delving deeply into the individual traditions, this book places each tradition in a global perspective, looking at both historical and generic connections between meditative practices from different historical periods and different parts of the Eurasian continent.

The aim of this book is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to identify the cultural and historical peculiarities of various Asian schools of meditation, both for their own sake and as a basis for further comparison. On the other hand, it seeks to identify basic features of meditative practices across cultures, and

thereby to take a first step toward a framework for the comparative study of meditation.



Asian forms of meditation have two main historical sources: Indian and Chinese. In the course of their development, both forms have ventured far beyond their places of origin to eventually cover most of Asia. They have also mixed with one another, and with meditative, devotional, ritual, and shamanistic practices in the various localities to which they have traveled. More recently, they have become global phenomena on a larger scale, and have exerted substantial influence on the cultures of America, Europe, Australia, and other parts of the world, often in combination with Western medicine, physical exercise, psychotherapy, and various forms of modern spirituality. The resulting practices have in turn exerted an equally substantial influence on Asian meditation.

The notion of Asian traditions of meditation is in contrast to the Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and ancient Greco-Roman traditions stemming from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. There is no absolute line of division between the two. For instance, it has been persuasively argued that Indian impulses have strongly influenced the Kabbalah of Judaism, the Orthodox Christian Jesus Prayer, and the recitative and sometimes musical practices of *dhikr* and *samāʿ* of Islamic Sufism. It can also easily be argued that the exclusively devotional practices of the Sikh *nām simran* (discussed by Kristina Myrvold in this volume) are generically more similar to the corresponding European, Middle Eastern, and North African practices than to most Asian forms of meditation. The recitative practices of the Jesus Prayer and the Islamic *dhikr* display many parallels not only to *nām simran* but also to the Indian repetition of *mantras* and to the East Asian recitation of Buddha names (Ch. *niàn fō*; Jap. *nen butsu*). Similar cross-cultural parallels can be found in the realm of visualization practices. Thus, distinguishing the Asian traditions from European, Middle Eastern, and North African practices is done mainly for practical and heuristic reasons, not because they are typologically distinct.

Nevertheless, there are some general tendencies that distinguish the two groups. While meditation practices originating in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa typically center on devotional, thematic, and scripture-based forms of recitation and visualization, Asian forms of meditation cover a much greater range of methods, including body and breath techniques, awareness training, and other methods involving a high degree of technical sophistication. In Asian traditions, even some of the recitative and visual practices have a technical rather than a content-oriented emphasis, as in some uses of *mantras* and *yantras*. Of course, European, Middle Eastern, and North African meditation also have their technical features, but the main focus lies on the devotional, thematic, and scriptural content.³ And while devotion-, theme-, and scripture-based forms of recitation and visualization are by no means uncom-

mon in Asia, most Asian traditions also include a number of practices that tend to emphasize technical practice over semantic, affective, thematic, or symbolic content.

About the spiritual exercises of the Greco-Roman philosophers of antiquity, the French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot says, “In all the schools, for various reasons, philosophy will be especially a meditation upon death and an attentive concentration on the present moment in order to enjoy it or live it in full consciousness” (*Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 39). This could almost have been said about Asian schools of meditation as well. However, the following characterization contrasts the Asian and the Greco-Roman practices: “Unlike the Buddhist meditation practices of the Far East, Greco-Roman philosophical meditation is not linked to a corporeal attitude but is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise that can take extremely varied forms. First of all it is the memorization and assimilation of the fundamental dogmas and rules of life of the school” (59). Several Buddhist and other Asian forms of meditation also involve “rational, imaginative, or intuitive” activities. However, Hadot is right in pointing to the “corporeal” or in other ways technical and prelogical aspect of meditation as something more typical of Asian schools.

In spite of these differences, all forms of meditation share a number of elements. By definition, meditation always has technical elements, and always seeks to modify the use of attention and to bring about some form of long-term inner transformation. At a technical level, meditation methods are built from a large number of elements, including a wide variety of meditation objects, a few more or less well-defined mental attitudes, and spatial, temporal, social, ritual, interpretive, and other settings. The choice of technical features influences the meditative process and its effects. Again, however, the range of variety is larger in the Asian traditions than in the traditions originating in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

In modern Western culture, the meaning of the term “meditation” has changed radically to accommodate the enormous influx of Asian practices, and the modern scientific and popular interest in meditation is directed almost entirely toward techniques originating in Asia. The technical and often body-oriented nature of Asian practices allows them to fit more neatly into modern Western secular and scientific thinking than the typical devotional and scripture-based practices of European, Middle Eastern, and North African traditions. In the process, Asian methods have often been detached from their cultural and religious backgrounds and placed within secular and scientific contexts. Many of them have then found their way back to their places of origin, and this has in turn influenced modern Asian cultures of meditation.



This book consists of twelve chapters written by scholars from various fields. Although all of the chapters have a scholarly ambition, they are written for interested readers with a general academic background.

Comparative issues are most strongly present in my opening chapters, one of which explores a generic definition of meditation, and the other, the classification of meditative practices into directive and nondirective types.

The part of the book addressing individual meditative traditions begins with two chapters dealing with traditions usually subsumed under the broad label of Hinduism: Edwin F. Bryant's account of the inner transformations associated with the term *samādhi* in the highly diverse Indian tradition of Yoga, and Madhu Khanna's chapter discussing the Indian tradition of Tantra and its meditative use of *yantras*, simple linear diagrams of concentric configurations used for visualization, and their correlation with the bodily energy centers known as *cakra*.

Next come chapters on two traditions that are not often explored in the context of meditation: Johannes Bronkhorst looks into the historical discontinuity and innovation of Jaina meditation, and Kristina Myrvold examines the many varieties of *nām simran*, the Sikh recitative practice of remembering the divine name.

Three chapters discuss various Buddhist approaches to meditation: Sarah Shaw's study of various meditation objects suitable for different stages and individuals in Southeast Asian Buddhism; Geoffrey Samuel's exploration of how Tibetan Buddhist longevity practice highlights the complex relation between the inner transformation that meditation is thought to bring about and its other more "worldly" goals; and Morten Schlütter's account of keyword (*kānhuà*) meditation in Chinese Zen, which works toward a final transformative experience of enlightenment, with no regard for states of calm or quietude.

Two other chapters discuss indigenous Chinese traditions: Harold D. Roth's argument that the early Daoist tradition was based not primarily on philosophical ideas and scriptures but on a common set of meditative practices that would ultimately reveal a deeper reality known as the Way (Dào), with which the actions of the individual would be made to spontaneously resonate; and Masaya Mabuchi's account of the ambivalent attitude toward meditation, referred to as "quiet sitting," in Neo-Confucianism, in which the wish to achieve an intuitive grasp of one's "original nature" or a "universal principle" was tempered by the fear that the experience of quietude could undermine traditional teachings and norms, and draw the meditator away from external action and social relationships.

In the final chapter, Are Holen discusses two waves in the recent scientific interest in meditation, one focusing on the physiology of relaxation, the other on the neuroscience of attention. The purpose of his chapter is not to assess the scientific validity of such studies but to see them as part of a cultural history of modern meditation practices. While science is typically associated with modern Western concerns, and most of the studies under scrutiny are written in English and have been published in European and American journals, almost all of the meditation techniques studied hail from the Asian traditions explored in the rest of the volume.



Cultural historians typically study meditation as a function of its linguistic and historical situatedness, and the focus of this volume is on some of the world's major meditative traditions. In addition to such cultural and symbolic contexts, this volume also seeks to take into account the specific impact and importance of the technical features of meditation. More specifically, it aims to squeeze out from the limited source material we have whatever information there is about specific technical practices within the traditions studied.

This is not unproblematic. As any cultural historian knows, and as should be clear from most of the contributions in this volume, meditation is usually tightly interwoven with the context in which it takes place, often making purely technical descriptions appear inadequate. For instance, the *yantra* and *cakra* practices presented by Khanna, the Tibetan practices described by Samuel, and the Chinese Zen practices discussed by Schlütter would be hard to envisage in a culturally neutral setting. Furthermore, the early sources are typically more interested in the doctrine behind meditation, or the states of mind it is supposed to produce, than in the technical practice itself, prompting Bryant to proclaim that his contribution to this volume is merely concerned with the metaphysical presuppositions of Yoga, not its actual practice. Even to the extent that early sources do account for meditative practice, these accounts are often prescriptive rather than descriptive, idealized rather than realistic, and determined by doctrinal rather than practical concerns, as Bronkhorst shows with particular clarity in the case of Jaina meditation. Meditative practice is also sometimes surrounded by taboo, as something to be discussed only with one's teacher or master, to the extent that Buddhist monks who have been meditating together for years still may not know which technique their fellow monks are practicing.⁴

Despite such problems, however, many sources do provide at least some information regarding actual, or at least ideal, meditative practice, and they usually presuppose that practice is more important than doctrine. The major obstacle for the study of practice has perhaps been not the lack of source material but a scholarly orientation that has prioritized doctrinal issues and sociocultural contexts over actual practice. To varying degrees, the contributions in this volume seek to counter this bias. For instance, Bronkhorst shows how the tension between practical and doctrinal concerns produced challenges for any meditator attempting to take seriously traditional Jaina accounts of meditation. Myrvold combines the study of historical texts with her own ethnographic material on modern Sikh practices, providing life to the former and depth to the latter. Shaw uses early narrative texts, supplemented with ethnographic material from Southeast Asia, to get closer to the reality of Buddhist meditative practice and teacher-student interactions. Roth shows how the purely textual material of early Daoist scriptures can provide a basis for conjectures regarding actual meditative practice. Mabuchi presents an indirect piece of evidence for

the importance of practice when discussing the Neo-Confucian fear that meditative practice, even if it takes place in a Confucian context, may draw the adept away from Confucian norms and action. Holen argues that one of the determining factors behind the scientific approach employed in the study of meditation is the type of meditative practice under scrutiny.

In other words, the crux of meditation lies only partly in its symbolic meaning within a larger sociocultural and interpretive context. Just as important are the effects of what a practitioner actually does while meditating. This volume aims to combine the study of meditative practice with an interest in the cultural contexts in which such practice takes place.

Notes

1. See, for example, Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*; and Forman, *Problem of Pure Consciousness*.

2. Both books may be profitably read along with two other volumes I edited: *Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist Meditation: Cultural Histories* and *Meditation and Culture: The Interplay of Practice and Context*.

3. See Eifring, "Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam," which includes several forms of prayer in the notion of meditation.

4. Cf. Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation*, 11. On the problems regarding historical sources for meditative practice, see also Eifring and Holen, "The Uses of Attention," 2–6; and Bielefeldt, *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation*, 11–12.

Glossary

nen butsu 念佛

niàn fó 念佛

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