
Review of *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*

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Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop, eds. [Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies](#). New York: Routledge, 2021. 564 pp.; 16 b/w ill. Paperback \$56.95. (978-0367557164)
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The English word *meditation* has changed meaning over the centuries. Based on the Latin *meditatio*, it originally meant recitation of and reflection on biblical verses. In the late medieval period, the word referred to contemplation of Christian theological problems. In the 19th century, the word was applied by the West to the techniques described in the newly “discovered” Asian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, especially as presented by the then influential Theosophic Society. Finally, the word has expanded beyond the realm of religion to that of psychology and physiology to describe specific self-regulating practices.

Given these changes in meaning, it would be reasonable to ask: What exactly *is* meditation? Contributors to the excellent *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*, edited by Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop, attempt to answer this question. “The volume is aimed at students and educators,” the first chapter states, “aspires to showcase the range depth and complexity of current, global academic research on yoga and meditation.” The book has five sections and a total of thirty-four chapters, ranging from an introduction that addresses nomenclature and the current state of the field, to perspectives on yoga and meditation outside of Hinduism, to global and regional transmissions, technology, and more. Five chapters are available through Open Access [on the publisher's website](#).

The *Routledge Handbook* includes solid introductory essays on the word *meditation* as it applies to various historic stages of Hindu yoga, Buddhist meditation, and Tantric visualization, as well as within Daoism, Sikhism, and Islam. Even if various texts, teachers, and traditions use the words *yoga*, *samādhi*, and *dhyāna* (or translations based on these words), seemingly interchangeably, do they all describe the same activities? Some forms of meditation, for example, require focused attention but with training in executive control over one's thoughts, while other forms are more passive, without executive control. And different meditation practices have dissimilar forms of metacognition and diverse philosophies of mind. How can we know these are similar mental states without first contextualizing them in their own psychologies, then comparing them?

With this volume, Newcombe and O'Brien-Kop aim to expand the focus of meditation studies to show the diversity of South Asian meditation, including discussions of teachers writing in



Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam, and other languages and texts including not only texts about meditation but also songs, poems, letters, and popular devotions. These discussions show the multiplicity of Hindu and South Asian forms of meditation and yoga, engaged in interreligious encounter with Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity. The volume also includes essays on meditation and yoga in other parts of Asia (Korea, Japan, Indonesia) and in Latin America. The editors acknowledge that they would have liked to cover more countries and historical contexts, if given more time and pages.

In one of the early essays in the book, “Meditation in Contemporary Contexts” the author distinguishes sharply between the scientific and religious definitions of meditation. For the scientific psychologist, “meditation refers to a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness,” leading to well-being and emotional balance. Meditation in this context is not about historic, cultural, and social aspects; rather, it is technical and individual. In contrast, Hindu- and Buddhist-derived meditation practices focus on a comprehensive, transformed understanding of the world and a way of being in it. Even if overstated, the distinction between the two approaches forces readers to reflect on the genealogy of their own working definitions of meditation.

The chapter on “Secular Discourse as a Legitimizing Strategy for Mindfulness Meditation” explains how meditation, specifically mindfulness, became understood in secular discourse with validation as a universal scientific truth, in juxtaposition to religion (not scientific). The author asserts that “the evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness is not strong” and points out how studies that appear to support meditation’s effectiveness suffer from methodological and conceptual issues. Neuroscientific findings, he argues, are being treated by academic proponents of meditation as showing more conclusions than the data warrant; moreover, the mere association of academia with meditation further reinforces the latter’s credibility—without actual double-blind studies to support it.

The chapter on “The Psychophysiology of Yoga” notes that currently, 14 percent of people in the United States report meditating in a variety of forms to relieve stress, promote health, and create psychological calm. Anecdotally, meditation works to do these things—but has it been *proven* to work? In the chapter, the authors provide examples of research studies that announce how yoga and meditation practices (including relaxation and breathing) do, indeed, lead to a greater sense of well-being and human functioning. They also note the converse with a look at the limitations of these studies, including lack of a control group and using data based on self-reporting biases.

The well formulated chapter on “Meditation and the Cognitive Sciences,” which follows the research of C. J. Dahl, A. Lutz, R.J. Davidson, divides forms of meditation into three groups: attentional, in which the goal is to control one’s awareness on breathing, a mantra, the body, or another object; constructive, including meditation on loving-kindness (*mettā*) or compassion; and deconstructive, which includes mindfulness, vipassana, and koan practices. (The author notes that, while limited, these rubrics are useful.) The article reviews the studies of Herbert Benson and Jon Kabat-Zinn on attentional meditation and the work of John Teasdale on the deconstructive third model, concluding that these typologies are solid working models for designing future research.

Both Newcombe and O’Brien-Kop are scholars of religion, and most contributions in the *Routledge Handbook* are informed by the contemporary religious studies perspective. This

influence is evident in bold and robust discussions of the cultural constructions of meditation, including colonialism, exoticism, neoliberalism, gender, race, critical theory, the fashion industry, and economic inequality. While individually these critical perspectives do not have their own dedicated chapters, the themes are threaded throughout the book and allow readers to understand clearly how yoga and meditation have been commodified and marketed. Other themes and perspectives include the digital humanities, ethnography, art, sound, mandalas, and the scholar-practitioner in the West. The editors apologize for not including a chapter on sexual and psychological abuse and its cover-up within meditation and yoga traditions. Personally, I would have wanted more coverage of the cosmological and hermeneutical aspects of meditation, as well as more attention to phenomenology. For contrasting views from the secular/scientific perspective, readers may be interested in the Oxford Library of Psychology's [*Oxford Handbook of Meditation*](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), edited by three neuropsychologists—Miguel Farias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee.

While inclusive of South Asian and yoga-derived practices as well as East Asian and Buddhist practices, the book falls short when it comes to the diversity of Tantric practices which will be clear to specialist readers familiar with the breadth of recent studies on this topic. A single overview chapter on Buddhism diminishes the role of this book as a reference volume for that area of study. Nonetheless, this handbook will be a valuable classroom resource for starting discussions, footnoting term papers, and formulating research projects. It will familiarize readers with different forms of meditation in diverse contexts—their names and definitions—and serve as an example of quality historical and conceptual scholarship for students. The *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* will guide both novice and advanced researchers to the scholarship needed to broach an understanding of the phenomena of meditation. Overall, a helpful reference work.