Review of *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*

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Unpacking *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation,* I was immediately impressed by the physical heft of the volume. I turned to the last page of the index to gauge its reading length: 1,015 pages. I don't remember whether I whistled or widened my eyes as I registered that figure. I then circled back to the table of contents. Sandwiched between front and back matter were forty-three chapters written by leading scholars working in a wide variety of academic disciplines. These chapters are organized into six broad sections.

While my initial impression regarded the volume's considerable bulk after finishing the Handbook my attention lingered on the breadth of contents. As befits its multidisciplinary approach, the editors (Miguel Farias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee) describe the general audience for this book broadly as anyone wishing to learn more about meditation, regardless of interest: scientific, secular, or religious. The chapters are individually excellent in their disciplinary approach to the subject while making substantive contributions to the volume as a whole. The Handbook equally rewards readers who rappel into single essays or sections and those (like me) who read the volume cover to cover. Meditation is examined in the round, as it were, from the vantage points represented by the book's six-part organization.

The breadth of different approaches to meditation is, in fact, one of the *Handbook*'s prime virtues. In addition to generous descriptions of meditation practices embedded in a variety of religious traditions, readers encounter an array of different empirical approaches to the study of meditation. Attention is also paid to the diverse ends, religious and secular, that meditation practice can engage. Discussions of meditation are polyphonic—they comprise many voices. The plurality of voices is, however, balanced by listening; conversations take place on these pages. The *Handbook* amply displays the diverse multidisciplinary discussions underway in the field of meditation studies.

These discussions take place despite the conceptual challenges posed by the English word *meditation*. Twin problems complicate the use of this term. One is conceptual blurriness; the other is the propensity to take *meditation* as if it possessed a stable and uncontroversial referent. These

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two problems seemingly tug in opposite directions. One direction points to everything converging into meditation: needlepoint, fly fishing, gaming. The other direction, however, leads to sterile conversations of this sort: fly fishing is *not* meditation, sitting zazen *is* meditation, auto-hypnosis is *not* meditation, and so on. In order to use *meditation* as a truly comparative category—one that can bridge traditions and disciplines and thus facilitate comparative, multidisciplinary discussions—it must be sufficiently "vague."[1] Richard King, in his chapter, develops a historical narrative describing how *meditation* (which originated in the Greek and Christian traditions) came to refer primarily to Asian religious practices in the nineteenth century. The problem King directs our attention toward is the insufficiently critical use of a culturally specific term as a comparative category. Put another way, using culturally specific terms without critical attention paid to their cultural, philosophical, political contexts results in biased, distorted discussions.

Conversations taking place across traditional and disciplinary boundaries necessarily require a modicum of agreement about what fits or is appropriately described as meditation, while at the same time not allowing this agreement to smother the diverse ways in which meditation can be specified. The editors do not theorize their comparative category of meditation, but they do provide a practical framework that facilitates discussions across traditional and disciplinary boundaries. They set out a two-sided model of meditation, one in which various techniques can interface with diverse ends. "Technique" combines "actions of attention" (5), especially sustained concentration with particular bodily postures. Some techniques require the body to be still (e.g. sitting or kneeling), while in others (such as walking meditation) the body is moving. Meditative techniques are mostly products of cultivation, the integration of effort and time. The practice of meditative techniques is coupled with the end of a "transformed state of consciousness" (5). Transformation suggests a fundamental shift or a long-term outcome. Meditative transformations, however, range widely in possibility.

The graphic of a "Meditation Tree" provides an illustration of the variety of traditions in which particular meditative techniques are embedded. Six branches represent the different world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) discussed in 11 informative essays collected in Part 2: Meditations Across the World's Traditions. A seventh branch, "therapeutic," refers to scientific or secular practices (such as the mindfulness-based interventions associated with the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn).

In addition to the chapters concentrating on a single tradition, several contributors make comparisons between traditions. Carlos Henrique do Carmo Silva brings together the techniques of Hindu *dhyāna* and Christian *meditatio*. He concludes that the end for these techniques is more like Socratic teaching ("teaching how to learn" [394]—a quote from J. Krishnamurti) than the contemporary understanding of "a self-hypnotic state or a sort of mental numbness" (394). Peter Sedlmeier and the late Kunchapudi Srinivas compare early Buddhist and *Sāṃkhya*/Yoga theories of meditation with the aim of developing a broad theory of meditation not beholden to any particular tradition, religious, scientific, or otherwise. What proves to be stumbling blocks to this effort are the dharmic claims that, first, life does not end with death and, second, one side effect of meditation practice is the attainment of supernatural abilities (or *siddhis*). A limiting claim originating from Western scientific/secular approaches is their insistence on the final end of physical and mental well-being. Such a frankly physicalist end not only endorses a materialist understanding of self but also turns a blind eye to "negative side effects of meditation" (563). (Juhn

Y. Ahn describes some of these side effects in his chapter, while Etzel Cardeña examines the *siddhis*.)

Despite the appearance of the Meditation Tree's emphasis on cultural/religious traditions (six branches), as opposed to the one secular/scientific (or "therapeutic") branch, the dominant approach in the *Handbook* comes out of the sciences. Two broad orientations can be discerned. The first reviews the current state of scientific knowledge on meditation with attention paid to the possible limits of empirical research in this area. The second considers the possibility of a science of meditation that is transcultural in practice and able to enjoy wider application.

Let's begin with the state of empirical research. Doug Oman provides an overview of modern empirical research since 1970. Previously, the primary sources for understanding the practice and experience of meditation were "a rich and varied, but unsystematized array of culturally and religiously derived inputs" (42). The two drivers for empirical research were Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). While this research was resolutely secular in the 1970s and 80s, by the early 2000s attention was increasingly being paid to "ancillary practices"—to, in other words, the cultural contexts that had informed traditions of meditation in the first place. This effort stemmed from the recognition by some researchers that secular recontextualized practices like TM or mindfulness "can foster an ironic '*unmindfulness*' of meditation-related cultural diversity issues" (62; emphasis in original). As a result, empirical researchers are increasingly engaged in multidisciplinary inquiry. Oman describes this approach as an "inclusive integration perspective" (67).

Tim Lomas exemplifies Oman's approach in his exploration of the interaction between meditation and emotions. Meditation practices, he observes, tend to work "directly" or "indirectly" with specific emotions (481). Other empirical researchers aim to incorporate recent scientific findings, especially those of neuroscience. Kieran C. R. Fox and B. Rael Cahn describe recent research on "the multifaceted relationship between meditation and the brain in both health and disease" (430). They consider concerns such as whether meditation contributes to altered brain structure (otherwise known as *neuroplasticity*), the neural correlates of meditation practice, and the possibilities for meditation as intervention for physical issues such as age-related cognitive decline and addiction. Dusana Dorjee examines the effects of meditation on psychophysiology or "the science of bodily functioning in relation to psychological processes" (462). Dorjee concludes that the present state of research, while promising in its potential, nevertheless is mixed and limited in application.

Several contributors make concrete suggestions for how empirical research can be improved. Ivana Buric, Inti Brazil, and Valerie van Mulukom, for example, argue that much research fails to take adequately into account individual differences among test subjects, which in turn limits the capacity of health care professionals to offer "personalized medicine" or "individualized treatment based on patient characteristics" rather than a "one-size-fits-all" strategy that benefits some patients but not others (504). Possible sources of individual differences considered by the three authors include psychological and biological variables, illness severity, and demographics.

Ronald E. Purser and David J. Lewis ask provocatively whether neuroscience has contributed toward understanding meditation and its benefits, especially those of physical and mental well-being. They tartly conclude NO! What neuroscience has been remarkably effective at doing is the creation of a "persuasive mode of language and perception" (926) or *regime of truth*. This term, taken from the work of Michel Foucault, is used to describe the proliferation of “discursive formations [that] under appropriate socio-cultural conditions [become] a powerful influence shaping how people think” (929). One such truth regime is the fusion of “neural Buddhism,” a creation made possible by Buddhist modernism (933; they attribute the phrase to philosopher Evan Thompson).

Neural Buddhism is one example of a science of meditation, which is the second scientific approach under consideration. While neural Buddhism draws techniques from the Buddhist tradition, it can decontextualize those techniques from Buddhist cultures (helped in no small way by the claim that Buddhism is not *really* a religion) and recontextualize them in modern scientific culture (i.e. the secular West). A similar “freestanding secular practice” is S. N. Goenka’s Vipassana program (629). Masoumeh Rahmani describes Goenka’s international popularity as stemming from his decision to deny his program as Buddhist while at the same time “refashioning his teachings in a pseudo-scientific and world-affirming language” (629). Rahmani argues Goenka utilized various rhetorical strategies so that he could draw freely on the “pure teachings” of the Buddha in presenting Vipassana as a tool, confirmable by experience, for adherents to attain enlightenment in the context of conventional life (647).

Perhaps the best-known examples of a science of meditation are mindfulness and TM. Patricia Lynn Dobkin and Kaveh Monshat look at mental illness through the lens of mindfulness. For the authors, mindfulness is the offspring of the Buddha’s pragmatic approach to existential suffering combined with the insights of modern psychology. Among the advantages offered by mindfulness is a “whole-person perspective” (681) on illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis. The way in which mindfulness fuses science and spirituality (derived from Buddhism) allows for a broader understanding of the person than that afforded by a strictly scientific or religious approach. Madhav Goyal and Heather L. Rusch examine the use of mindfulness-based interventions on physical ailments, such as chronic pain, heart disease, and insomnia. They caution against the popular view of mindfulness as a cure-all. Current research, they argue, suggests instead that mindfulness can provide a set of useful interventions “to lessen symptoms” or it can be combined with “other therapies to improve symptoms” (710). The broader empirical question—the exact contributions made by the mind to physical health (the cornerstone of a viable science of meditation)—remains open, according to Goyal and Rusch.

A longtime researcher whose work concentrates on TM and physical health, David W. Orme-Johnson reviews empirical research on the effects of TM on physical health, mental well-being, and behaviors (such as school behavior and substance use). The TM technique was introduced to the West in the 1950s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who described it in an early publication as the “science of being.” While the TM technique has its roots in the ancient Vedic tradition of India, it is, like mindfulness, a secular, transcultural technique. Unlike other mantra meditations, which concentrate on the (cultural) meaning of the words composing the mantra, the TM technique uses mantras that are sounds, not words. While these sounds (sometimes described as seed-syllables) are said to have originated in the ancient Vedic tradition, their putative lack of semantics and syntax enables the TM technique to decontextualize Hindu practices and cosmological claims and recontextualize itself in secular and scientific spaces. This is why, Orme-Johnson argues, the TM technique has been successful in the health sciences as well as in institutional contexts such as schools and prisons.

Candy Gunther Brown argues that public schools are contested spaces for meditative interventions precisely because of the disputed classification of meditation as science rather than religion. Various techniques, such as TM, mindfulness, and ashtanga yoga, are touted by proponents as secular means of combining ethical training and self-care. Their secularity, however, has been challenged in a series of court rulings beginning in the 1970s. Empirical research on their effectiveness has also been questioned (Brown points to similar concerns about methodology voiced by Oman and Goyal/Rusch in their contributions). Further empirical research is called for, she concludes, with renewed attention paid to methodology. While not saying so directly, Brown seems to find the claims for secularity made by meditative programs to be dubious at best and outright dishonest at worst.

Reading these chapters in light of the technique-ends framework suggests that a working agreement can be said to exist regarding the techniques of meditation. At the same time, however, no such consensus seems to organize the mushrooming diversity of possible ends. Conflicts, either between different cultural traditions or between traditional and secular approaches, tend to take place about the ends of meditation practice. Owing to its emphasis on empirical research, the *Handbook* can be read as offering two responses to these disputes. Both responses, however, presume that disorganization about ends is largely apparent and stems, ultimately, from the particular cultural origins of meditative techniques. The first response holds that further and more sophisticated empirical research will necessarily promote better understanding of the freestanding experience of meditation. The second considers that the freestanding experience of meditation can supply the basis for a genuine science of meditation that is transcultural in practice. These responses, of course, should be taken not as conclusions but as questions for continued discussion. Comparative, multidisciplinary inquiry of this sort should, furthermore, take place in a comparative context, one that requires its own theoretical discussion.

The Oxford Handbook of Meditation offers ample resources that provide a useful overview of important questions currently being discussed in the field of meditation studies: the promise and limits of empirical research, the possibility of a transcultural science of meditation (and the risks necessarily involved in such a project), and comparative concerns about “meditation” across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. It can serve as an introduction to the field of meditation studies as well as provide direction for future research. Serious readers will no doubt agree that the *Handbook* successfully follows through on its promise to feed the wonder and desire to know of a wide audience of specialists and non-specialists alike.

NOTES

[1] "Vague" is used here in a technical sense, one drawing on the work of C. S. Peirce. For its application to comparative inquiry, see Robert Cummings Neville, *Normative Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 59–84.