Review of *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practice in Ancient and Modern Worlds*

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McMahan, David L. *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 245. Hardback $29.95. (978-01-97-66174-1)

Like many Americans interested in Buddhism, I first encountered Zen as a teenager. I read Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen* and was drawn to the irreverent style of the Zen masters, the bold simplicity of Zen calligraphy, and the enigmatic philosophy that underpinned it all. Zen Buddhism, I believed, was a tradition without dogmas and consonant with modern science, one that focused on expressing one's authentic understanding of the world through action. I wanted to be a Zen master like the ones I read about—creative, contemplative, spontaneous, iconoclastic, and funny. Going to college and realizing my limitations as a meditator humbled my aspirations and changed my spiritual inclinations. As I learned more about Buddhism in the college classroom, I wondered about the portrayal of Buddhism I found in modern writers like Watts and why it differed significantly from what I was learning there. I did not find an answer to this question until I got to graduate school. I read David L. McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* in a course on Buddhism in the West and finally began to understand what I had encountered years before.[1] This book, now a touchstone for the study of Buddhist modernism, profoundly influenced my approach to research and teaching. McMahan's newest publication, *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds*, expands on *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* by combining genealogical and historical investigation with critical reflection.

In this book, McMahan aims to understand the role of late modern culture in meditative practice and experience. To be more precise, he sets out to understand how late modern culture, particularly the notion that the self is fragmented and disembedded from traditional roles and identities, has shaped what he calls the "Standard Version" of meditation, which is how he refers to mindfulness meditation as commonly understood. In doing so, he criticizes what he calls the "objectivist" interpretation, "which views meditation as a kind of technology for obtaining a transparent, objective view of the interior contents of the mind" (16). In this interpretation, meditation provides "a lucid vision of a purely interior reality uncontaminated by cultural conditioning and social forces" (16). It is not McMahan's intent to deem anyone's practice as inauthentic or watered down; rather, the point is to make clear the assumptions that underwrite such ideas and how they influence the practice of meditation today. Given how pervasive the

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Standard Version of meditation has become worldwide, McMahan's inquiry into the role of culture and context in meditation is much needed.

In *Rethinking Meditation*, the depth and breadth of McMahan's expertise are fully displayed. The twelve chapters of the book are divided into three parts. Part 1, "Thinking About Mediation," encompasses the first three chapters and provides a genealogical excursus through the emergence of the Standard Version of meditation in contemporary culture. Here, McMahan contrasts the mindfulness practices of two individuals—a modern woman in North America and an ancient Indian, ascetic man. Each of these individuals draws from the *Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness* from the Majjhima Nikāya for their technique, but its meaning in their lives is strikingly different. The ascetic pursues a taste of the deathless through complete renunciation, and mindfulness is meant to cultivate dispassion and disenchantment. The modern woman desires relief from workaday life and seeks a sense of purpose. She wants to cultivate patience for her family and coworkers, compassion for herself, and a sense of wonder at the world around her. The contrast is not intended to portray one of these as authentic and the other not. The point is to show how the same technique and source text can support different pursuits in different contexts. This is a crucial insight because it clarifies that the Standard Version of meditation and its promise of an objective view of the mind are predicated on modern cultural assumptions about the nature of the self and subjectivity. While the contrast between the two examples reflects the distinct familial, sexual, and reproductive contexts of each individual, McMahan's decision to use hypothetical characters plays off stereotypical portrayals. The implications of his gendering of these two examples threatens to flatten the specificities of the lived social imaginaries these characters are meant to inhabit. Though his intention, as he states it, is not to denigrate the modern woman as inauthentic and the ancient man authentic, this contrast, unfortunately, may have that unintended consequence.

Those already familiar with McMahan's approach will find him once again deploying Charles Taylor's concept of the "social imaginary" to make sense of the complex transcultural exchange that has produced the Standard Version of meditation. A social imaginary is the "social and cultural context in which people live and make sense of their lives" and includes a "repertoire of concepts, attitudes, social practices, customs, ethical dispositions, institutions, power relations, and structures of authority" (55). It is neither totalizing nor static and does not require that all members agree; instead, it provides the very terms of any debate to be had (56). How does this relate to meditation? "Meditation is embedded in social imaginaries and functions as a part of a larger network of practices, ideas, meanings, values, and conceptions of the good," McMahan states. "In the broadest sense, meditation is self-cultivation within a particular social and cultural context, a particular social imaginary" (56–57). Some might push back here, claiming from various traditional perspectives that meditation allows one to break from social context altogether and see reality "as it is." However, McMahan responds that there is a difference between what traditional exegetes understood by this claim and how modern interpreters receive it. The claim that meditation frees us from our social conditioning (the modern interpretation) and that it allows us to see reality as it is (the traditional one) are "akin" but not identical claims (58).

McMahan's inquiry aims to think through how the ideas and practices of one social imaginary (the ancient Buddhist) were translated and transformed for deployment within another, quite different social imaginary (the modern Western). Through this comparative, genealogical analysis,

he theorizes the role of culture in meditation. When theorizing culture's role in meditation, McMahan's position in *Rethinking Meditation* can be characterized as "mild relativism." He does not hold that it is culture all the way down in contemplative practice and experience; there are genuine experiences generated by these practices that are not culture-dependent. But what these experiences *mean* for those who have them, how they are interpreted and validated, *is* culture-dependent, in his view.

Chapters four through seven compose part 2, "Meditation in Context," which moves the reader back to the earliest Buddhist texts on mindfulness and observes the development of contemplative practice and theory primarily within the South Asian context. Here, his examples of the male ascetic and the modern woman alike illustrate constructive approaches to such practices as they gradually cultivate for the practitioner new dispositions and attitudes—a new self, as it were, that engages with the world from the standpoint inculcated by contemplative experience. This approach is, in turn, contrasted with deconstructive and "innateist" approaches. Deconstructive approaches disrupt our reification of the self by demonstrating its emptiness, and innateist ones disrupt our grasping at linear cultivation processes by asserting that our minds are already enlightened but fail to recognize it. However, the point of introducing these approaches is to suggest that, despite their disruptive characteristics, "they, too, foster certain ways of being in the world within particular traditions, whether those traditions are orthodox versions of Buddhism or contemporary North American secularism" (123). His point is that contemplative practices are not a means to view the mind objectively but are instead a means to cultivate culturally-patterned affects, dispositions, and perspectives.

Chapters eight through twelve constitute part 3, "Meditation and the Ethical Subject," a return to the present to interrogate how the meditative practices and theories covered in part 2 are reworked to fit four different ethics we find in late modernity: appreciation, authenticity, autonomy, and interdependence. In the introduction of this part, McMahan uses the metaphors of filters and magnets to describe certain features of a given social imaginary (e.g., the late modern, secular one) that repel or attract aspects of other cultural artifacts (e.g., meditation) (10–13). The four ethics are McMahan's way of theorizing how those magnets and filters operate. This is to say, these ethics serve to draw in or expel certain aspects of meditation as far as they complement the respective patterns of thinking and being they endorse.

The ethic that comes under the most scrutiny, in line with the overall critique McMahan levies against the Standard Version of meditation, is the ethic of autonomy and particularly what he calls the "Inner Citadel" model of autonomy. In this model, contemplative practice can protect one's subjectivity from undue influences of social conditioning. Though it developed in the countercultural movement's appropriation of meditation techniques, it is compatible with neoliberal ideals of atomized individuals who are the sole source of their happiness and material wellbeing. Just as this model of autonomy supposes one can get beyond culture by fortifying their interiority, McMahan urges us to see how this attitude presupposes liberal values of freedom, individualism, and autonomy. According to McMahan, whether one is conforming or rebelling, the act is always done in ways coded by one's social imaginary. Therefore, one cannot get outside of or become free from one's conditioning within a given culture. Furthermore, the core notion of an atomized individual is complicated by feminist and Buddhist ideas around agency, autonomy, submission, and the interconnected nature of the social self.

McMahan's critique of the objectivist Standard Version of meditation is well-founded and timely. Yet the most important theoretical contribution of *Rethinking Meditation* comes in chapter 11, "Affordances, Disruptions, and Activism," in which McMahan introduces the concept of "affordances." Drawing on a robust body of literature from the social and natural sciences, he defines affordances as "features of things in the environment that offer (afford) organisms cues to how they might interact with these things" (182). McMahan expands this to include not just objects but affects and cultural practices. Affordances can "provide various opportunities not just for physical action but also for 'mental action' . . . including focusing attention, disciplining emotions, redirecting thought to particular subjects, and re-interpreting situations along the lines of particular moral, philosophical, or religious views" (183).

His example of this is mindful eating: In the context of the Buddhist monastic code and its ethic of renunciation, this practice is intended to discipline one's behaviors while eating and to curb the appetite, which is often an occasion to display greed. In the context of secular mindfulness and its ethic appreciation, mindful eating disciplines one's behavior by allowing its practitioners to savor their food more and consume it slowly. In each case, "mindfulness grants heightened reflexive illumination of impulses that might usually be only semiconscious and then subjects them to evaluation according to one's training" (185). This theory of affordances, in McMahan's view, can show us that "even when framed as nonjudgemental awareness, mindfulness is always value-laden, bending activity to certain possibilities rather than others" (185). This is important because it explains specific patterns of behavior through the social and natural sciences in conjunction with the humanities. The concept of the social imaginary provides a theory of context, explaining how practices and beliefs can travel between cultures across time, and the concept of affordances theorizes how said practices and beliefs function in differing contexts. These affordances are, to a considerable extent, determined by the social imaginary of a given culture.

While notions such as "practices of the self" and "technologies of the self," from Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault, respectively, are tremendously helpful analytics, McMahan's use of affordances could provide a bridge between the humanistic and scientific approaches to studying contemplative practices. The scientific study of contemplative practices, now called Contemplative Sciences, has operated with the Standard Version as its normal science, using Kuhn's phraseology. Contemplative Sciences inherits this from Francisco Varela and Jon Kabat-Zinn, who portrayed mindfulness meditation as a means to peer into consciousness. For Varela, it provides a first-person account that could supplement third-person descriptions of cognitive processes. For Kabat-Zinn, it is a way to observe one's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions without judgment to dissociate from pain, reduce stress, and live more authentically in the moment. These assumptions, in conjunction with the need to secure funding from scientific institutions, have pushed Contemplative Sciences to model itself on life sciences and biomedical research: measuring brainwaves, blood pressure, and cortisol levels; devising statistically viable studies with control groups and regression tables; and establishing labs with state-of-the-art technology. The cultural force of the sciences allows those who study meditation this way to claim they can *explain* what is going on in the meditator's mind and body and, crucially, what "real" (read: measurable) effect this will have on them.

For humanities scholars, description has primarily been the name of the game: describing premodern social imaginaries, relaying what the authoritative texts prescribe, reporting on what

informants say about their traditions, and so on. For example, the essays included in McMahan's edited volume with Erik C. Braun, *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*, broadly speaking, are descriptive studies of one kind or another.[2] The exceptions here are McMahan's own essay, "How Meditation Works," which develops the ideas presented in *Rethinking Meditation* and Evan Thompson's essay, "Looping Effects and the Cognitive Science of Mindfulness."[3] This is not to take anything away from the studies in that volume, as they are a key intervention by humanities scholars into conversations previously reserved for cognitive scientists and clinical researchers. Descriptive work will always be important in understanding the cultural place that contemplative practices hold, as these disciplines are never performed *without* a context. To assume otherwise would be to ignore the important insights McMahan and other humanities scholars have to offer. However, what McMahan brings to the table in *Rethinking Meditation* is a methodological intervention that allows the humanities scholar to move beyond the merely descriptive work and explain what is going on in meditation, just as the cognitive scientist or medical researcher seeks to do. When a meditator in a study reports that their practice helps them feel more secure amid uncertainty, the humanities scholar, equipped with a theory of culture, can now explain not only why this result has been achieved (i.e., through the affordances the practice creates) but how it came to be the goal for any meditator in the first place (i.e., the social imaginary that conceives of the self as an autonomous, bounded whole that needs protection from external pressures such as trauma). This could bring humanities scholars into conversation with cognitive scientists and medical researchers in ways otherwise unavailable to them. Moreover, the humanities scholar's intervention can highlight blind spots and presumptions at work in the quantitative approach to Contemplative Sciences.

McMahan's study is ambitious in scope, and despite being a slim volume, it delivers on its aims with clarity of prose and care for the subject matter. Though it is best suited to the graduate seminar room, I recommend it to anyone curious about how contemplative practices have been repackaged for the late modern world of fragmentary, free-floating selves in which Western, liberal-democratic, post-industrial capitalist people live. McMahan has already provided the study of Buddhist modernism with a foundational resource in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. I anticipate that *Rethinking Meditation* will be essential reading for anyone interested in the subject.

NOTES

[1] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
[2] David L. McMahan and Erik C. Braun, eds. *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
[3] David L. McMahan, "How Meditation Works: Theorizing the Role of Cultural Context in Buddhist Contemplative Practices," in *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*. And Evan Thompson, "Looping Effects and the Cognitive Science of Mindfulness," in *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*.