Review of *Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation*

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Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation
Edited by Rick Repetti
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The *Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation* is an outstanding contribution to the establishment of the academic subfield of the philosophy of meditation. Edited and introduced by Rick Repetti, it comprises 26 excellent chapters by a group of experts that integrate various elements from the West, ancient and modern, continental and analytic, as well as from the East, especially Indian traditions, although there are also references to Tibetan and East Asian traditions.

Since Repetti's goal is to establish the philosophy of meditation in the academe, he follows "the traditional Western presentation of the 'three major fields of philosophy,' epistemology, metaphysics, axiology" (17), preceded by a debate on the possibility of the philosophy of meditation itself. Accordingly, the *Handbook* is divided into six parts: I. Meditation and Philosophy, II. Meditation and Epistemology, III. Meditation and Metaphysics, IV. Meditation and Values, V. Meditation and Phenomenology, and VI. Meditation in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian Traditions.

One may wonder why ancient Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions are put in the last part while Asian traditions are framed within the Western presentation of philosophy. Repetti offers one reason for his uniting the former, despite their divergent metaphysical frameworks, "They are Western, relatively ancient historical traditions, and involve forms of meditation that are generally cogitational, as opposed to those Asian forms of meditation in which all cogitation and conceptualization aspire to be attenuated" (21). Furthermore, he continues, since Judeo-Christian traditions have sacrosanct theological presuppositions (e.g.,

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that God is real), "they are not subject to the sort of open-minded philosophical scrutiny that follows chains of reasoning to their logical conclusions" (21).

As Repetti points out, we cannot assume a transcultural concept of either meditation or philosophy. Therefore, throughout this *Handbook*, we find different ways of understanding both philosophy and meditation, as well as their relationship. Some authors highlight the apparent tensions between the two, while others, the apparent harmony between them. Still, although Repetti refers to his own work and Richard Legum provides his own classification, it would have been worth classifying the various terms regarding meditation, especially in Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit. And it would also have been worthwhile to provide a classification of meditation techniques, beyond the distinction cogitational vs. cogitation-attenuating, and the various philosophical strategies used to explain, justify, and prescribe them.

Repetti puts forth three hypotheses about the relationship between meditation and philosophy, from weakest to strongest: (1) meditation can contribute to philosophical understanding, (2) there ought to be a philosophy of meditation, and (3) meditation ought to be considered a philosophical activity. In this brief review, I will try to advance these hypotheses from the perspective of Buddhist meditation, while suggesting some topics any philosophy of meditation ought to address.

With its main goal to establish a philosophy of meditation in the academe, this *Handbook* begins by questioning spiritual traditions with meditation practices from the perspective of modern Western philosophy—i.e., of philosophy understood strictly as systematic and critical thinking. As pointed out by Owen Flanagan, two claims common to such traditions seem to catch the modern philosopher's eye: that meditation leads to insight into the nature of the mind and/or the world, and that it leads to moral improvement and/or ethical self-cultivation (xxi–xxiii).

As we see, these two claims cannot be separated, but let's begin with the first: meditation leads to insight into the mind and/or the world. In chapter 1, Legum raises the question of "whether practicing meditation is doing philosophy, i.e., whether meditation is a tool or method of philosophy in the way reason, logic, and arguments are" (29). Legum defines philosophy as "the discipline of examining beliefs, including life-guiding principles." Then, he creates two categories of meditation with philosophical aspirations: (i) the process of identifying and conceptually purging all false beliefs to secure a foundation for scientific knowledge, of which Cartesian meditations are a paradigmatic example, and (ii) the process of concentrating the mind to calm all mental activity and, ultimately, to achieve an acquaintance with ultimate reality, of which Buddhist meditation is a paradigmatic example (32–33).

Finally, he explains two objections to meditation as philosophy. The first objection, developed by Gilbert Ryle, is that it is not possible, through introspection, to examine one's beliefs from a neutral or objective perspective, without altering them. The second objection, developed by Robert Nozick, is that, since meditation involves calming all mental activity, it

may not reveal a deeper reality but only what it is like when our cognitive functions are attenuated (37–83). If these two objections were true, meditation couldn't lead to any insight into either the mind of the world.

Legum argues that the first objection is not relevant to Buddhist meditation since its advocates claim that one of its benefits is precisely that it transforms mental states for the better. However, he continues, to defend Buddhist meditation from the second objection, those same advocates must provide a theory of knowledge that accounts for how meditation allows an experience of a deeper reality and not merely an experience of our attenuated cognitive functions (37, 45). Many variations on these issues resurface in the subsequent chapters. In chapter 5, Sonam Kachru replies to Legum's doubts by stating that meditation is not the passive revelation of deeper, nonconceptualizable realities. Rather, it is a process of habituating oneself to the Buddha's teachings to realize them experientially. Focusing the mind on those teachings, one *sees* certain aspects of them "that one takes to be true, but which one cannot typically perceive; e.g., the fact of small-scaled, moment-to-moment intrinsic change" (92).

Still, Kachru acknowledges, it might be argued that this habituating process resembles cognitive construction: collective patterns of seeing the world are reproduced at the level of experience, and these experiences are used to reinforce collective patterns of seeing the world. In short, communities with meditation practices deliberately cultivate only experiences that reinforce their beliefs and block those which contradict them (93–94). Embracing this criticism, Kachru proposes meditation "as the activity of imparting normative shape and structure to the mind, by placing it in a single content." Meditation is not a passive experiencing of mental states but a process that involves metacognition, an "awareness of both what one is doing and what it entails for oneself to do it." Understood like this, meditation might not allow the practitioner to experience deeper realities, but it at least allows her to structure her mind according to her professed norms and to be aware of how a mind structured in such a way impacts her experiences for the better. Ultimately, this process of structuring the mind leads to freedom, "One has the mind one wants, by shaping the mind one has" (95–96, 101).

So, how can this understanding serve philosophers? Well, certain states, like anger, hurry, etc., may impede their ability to attend to people and things around them, according to their professed norms. For a philosopher to put into practice her own professed norms (for instance, objectivity), she needs to pay attention to her patterns of mental action, something that, according to Kachru, is often overlooked in modern philosophy, even in the field of ethics (97–99). Kachru concludes that this understanding of meditation shows how it might be centrally connected with philosophy. To the extent this involves virtue epistemology, this also shows that the conception of philosophy should be far more demanding than the one proposed by Legum. Philosophy is the examining of one's beliefs not just for securing knowledge but also, and perhaps most importantly, for attaining wisdom. Philosophy must be understood, then, as a way of life that leads to moral improvement or ethical self-cultivation (101).

While I do not disagree with Kachru's account of meditation, I believe that, in trying to avoid the risks inherent to any community, it overlooks the positive ways in which the world shapes our mind. As Odysseus Stone and Dan Zahavi argue, "Consciousness is neither self-enclosed nor exclusively self-presenting" (348). Rather, consciousness is world-involving—that is, occupied with objects and events around it. What I would like to add to the picture is that the world is consciousness-involving. It is not only, as Wolfgang Fasching argues, that the world is there for us (151); it is also that the world is calling for our response. As Seth Zuihō Segall puts it, in a naturalized way, meditation "helps us appreciate the interconnection between our well-being and that of others, our dependence on a well-functioning social order and an unspoiled natural order" (306). Without the realization that our life is nourished by the whole universe and our mind emerges together with the world, meditation risks becoming self-absorption.

I believe the reason why Kachru overlooks the positive ways in which the world can shape our mind is that it doesn't take into account three elements we find in Buddhist meditation manuals: (i) the body-mind relationship (e.g., the importance of the bodily posture for settling the mind and attaining insight); (ii) meditation's prerequisites (e.g., good friends, a quiet place, a proper cushion, proper clothes, enough food and sleep, etc.); (iii) and the use of metaphors, symbolism, and narrative, besides the use of technical language.

Of course, it can be argued that any realization is merely a cognitive construction. In that case, as Karsten J. Struhl argues, the main criterion to decide whether we should venture any spiritual path is whether it transforms us for the better (266). We've moved to the second claim, that meditation leads to moral improvement. As John Vervaeke points out, even if we assume that meditation allows the practitioner to shape her own mind, we could ask a philosophical question, "Can the decision for transformation be made in a rational manner?" Vervaeke believes it can, as long as we don't take it as an inferential decision process but as an aspirational process. Vervaeke writes, "One takes up a relationship to one's future self . . . in which the current self undertakes to cause the future self." This process, Vervaeke continues, resembles serious play, "a form of symbolic behavior that gives people a taste of what constitutes the new life" (200–201). In short, going from being a fool to a sage requires serious play. While Vervaeke's answer is reasonable, it says little about the world around the person making the decision. It might be helpful to remember the well-known story of how Gautama decides to leave his castle, after meeting an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and an ascetic. Was the world that was presented to Gautama both the problem and the solution?

Pierre Hadot also argued that any philosophical or spiritual path begins with the awareness of the state of unhappiness that we find ourselves in before we enter it. The student's conversion is brought up by the encounter with a teacher, who would help him to relieve suffering and then gradually fill him with trust and the conviction that wisdom is attainable.[1] Once this conversion has taken place, the student would follow the newfound path within a community.

Repetti and others focus on "serious long-term sapiential meditation practices situated within philosophically framed contemplative paths" (47). Therefore, as most meditation manuals instruct, a philosophy of meditation should cover the whole path. This clarifies the place of meditation within it and shows that *the insight attained through meditation is precisely the whole path*.

As mentioned, the path is followed within a community. This community demands from its members the intention to live in a certain way. It would be relatively secluded and have codes of conduct, like dressing codes and dietary regimes. These communal rules give some sense of unity, but they also provide the practitioner with the proper conditions to live a contemplative lifestyle.[2] On the basis of an ethics, the student is required to study the teachings of the community and to reflect upon their meaning. This is complemented with living dialogue within the community, through which the student learns how to reason and deepens his conviction to live according to the teachings. Also on the basis of ethics, he learns spiritual exercises. Here, the truths that have been learned and reflected upon must be fully assimilated or embodied. This is the culmination of a path, the ethos of which is founded by the continuous mindful awareness of codes of conduct, learned doctrines, and one's own mind. As Peter Harvey mentions, in Buddhism, this progression was conceived as the three steps of wisdom: study, reflection, and meditation (105). Thus, these stages articulate the very paradigm of a Buddhist philosophy of meditation.[3]

As Christopher W. Gowans argues, learning a lifestyle is learning how to do something (162). But let's remember that such learning is difficult to acquire only through theoretical manuals. One needs a teacher and senior students who can demonstrate the training. Here also lies the importance of face-to-face, body-to-body teaching and learning. One also needs them to comment on one's own practice.[4] As Massimo Pigliucci argues, the best way to counter human epistemic fallibility regarding one's mental state (and to counter the first objection to meditation), is to engage not only in self-reflection but also in peer evaluation (380).

An important reason for reflecting on the student-teacher relationship is that here lies the ideal of the sage. Despite the importance of trust and obedience in spiritual traditions, a spiritual guide should pay attention to the particular character and circumstances of her students, and *she should never force a student to follow her instructions*. Spiritual guidance demands from the teacher purity of moral intent.[5] Is this ideal attainable? Any philosophy of meditation would greatly benefit from attending to recent sociohistorical scholarship on spiritual traditions with meditative practices. Some scholars have portrayed those traditions and their practices as nothing but sets of hollow rituals that thrive on political intrigue.[6] This might be a hypercritical assessment, but it should be considered to avoid naive idealizations.

This scholarship is also relevant because any tradition with spiritual exercises is located within a larger society. To the extent a tradition's viability depends on the larger society, the former will try to influence the latter, and vice versa. As Hadot showed, all philosophical

schools were concerned with the ethical education of their fellow citizens. Some tried to influence political leaders; others tried to convert individuals by means of missionary propaganda.[7] Likewise, Buddhist traditions have been preoccupied with establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with the larger society. Therefore, any philosophy of meditation must ask itself, "What should be the relationship of a practitioner, and the community she belongs to, with the larger society?" This is the deeper concern within Nozick's objection: should a meditator or philosopher regard his meditative or philosophical experience as a source of authority in relation to non-meditators or non-philosophers? After all, isn't politics, too, a field of Western philosophy?

In conclusion, anyone interested in the philosophy of meditation will undoubtedly be inspired by a careful reading of the *Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation*, which is a meaningful contribution to establishing this subfield within the academe.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 170, 216.

[2] Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 61, 66, 157.

[3] Marc-Henri Deroche, "Mindful Wisdom: The Path Integrating Memory, Judgment, and Attention," *Asian Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2021): 21–22.

[4] Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36–37.

[5] Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 219–20.

[6] Steven Heine, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow: Will the Real Zen Buddhism Please Stand Up?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3–4.

[7] Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 212.

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