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Intertwined Sources of Buddhist Modernist Opposition to Ritual: History, Philosophy, Culture

Richard K. Payne

Institute of Buddhist Studies at The Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Ca 94709, USA; rkpayne1@mac.com; Tel.: +1-510-809-1444

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Abstract: This essay is an inquiry into the religio-cultural background of the opposition to ritual evidenced by many adherents of Buddhist modernism. This background can be structured by three different kinds of questions—historical, philosophical, and cultural.

Keywords: ritual; Buddhist modernism; meditation; psychology; psychotherapy; Theosophy; occultism

1. Introduction

As a teenager I was entranced by the exotic Otherness of Buddhism and Daoism. Writers like Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki seemed to speak of something radically different, radically new, and yet oddly familiar and inexplicably reassuring—like seeing an almost-forgotten friend in the face of a stranger. Although the words were foreign, they both appealed to and reinforced the resurgent romanticism that I shared with many others coming of age in the late 1960s and 1970s. In our dogmatic slumber, little did we realize that the apparent renewal and rebellion were simply reworkings of themes already centuries old.

One of the events that disturbed my own uncritical, dogmatic slumbers was reading Walter Liebenthal's introductory essay to his translations of Sengzhao's *Zhaolun*. Writing about the Chinese appropriation of Buddhism, he says "Always the Chinese asked themselves questions and, though they found the answers in the sūtras, these were not what an Indian Buddhist could have understood (Liebenthal 1968, p. 21)". Liebenthal's comments point to a key for critical reflection: those who ask the questions determine the answers. Westerners like myself now peruse the sūtras, seeking answers to our own questions. Given the fact that our current cultural discourse leads to such questions being framed in a psychologized language of therapeutics, it should be no surprise that we find psychological answers.

One of the standard themes in the representation of Buddhism in the West today is that it is a religion that at least in its origins eschewed ritual. Indeed, the Buddha Śākyamuni is still often presented in popular treatments as if he were a Protestant reformer, cleansing the church of its decadent ritualism, as in the following quote from one of the most widely read works on world religions, one which, despite its manifest failings, continues to be used as a textbook in classes introducing the academic study of religion:

Buddha preached a religion devoid of ritual. Repeatedly, he ridiculed the rigamarole of Brahmanic rites as superstitious petitions to ineffectual gods. They were trappings—irrelevant to the hard, demanding job of ego-reduction. Indeed, they were worse than irrelevant; he argued that "belief in the efficacy of rites and ceremonies" is one of the Ten Fetters that bind the human spirit. Here, as apparently everywhere, the Buddha was consistent. Discounting Hinduism's forms, he resisted every temptation to institute new ones of his own (Smith [1958] 1991, pp. 94–95).

Despite appealing to an audience whose conceptions of religion are informed by the Protestant historiographic narrative of decadence and renewal, such a simplistic caricature is hardly an accurate picture of the origins and history of Buddhist praxis—a rejection of Brahmanic sacrificial rituals,

which involve the sacrifice of living animals, is not a rejection of ritual. As Vesna A. Wallace has noted, “Despite the fact that Indian Buddhists in part defined their religious identity in contrast to the Brahmanic, Hindu, and Muslim groups, by rejecting specific ritual forms, especially those involving ritual killing, they did not cast aside ritual practice as a whole (Wallace 2005, p. 117)”. While most of her study has to do with historically later developments, at this point she cites the *Sagāthāvagga* of the *Samyutanikāya*, (verses 394–395), drawing on the Pāli canon which is itself usually considered authoritative as representing “early” Buddhism by Buddhist Modernists. It seems clear that the Buddhist Modernist construction of an “original” Buddhism free of ritual is an instance in part of apologetics and of selective readings. Nor does the rejection of Brahmanic ritual constitute an assertion that the kinds of seated, silent, individual meditations with which Buddhism is identified today are the exclusive means to awakening—a Buddhist *sola contemplativa* to match Luther’s *sola fide*.

The widespread rejection of ritual practice found in present-day Buddhist Modernism is, therefore, not simply a given, but rather a phenomenon requiring inquiry. Three different questions may be asked in making such an inquiry. First, how did it come about that Buddhism is equated with the practice of silent, individual meditation? Second, how did Buddhist practice come to be identified as an exclusively mental phenomenon? And, third, how did it come about that meditation is now treated as a kind of mental technology that can be abstracted out of its ideological context? In more summary form, we can identify these three questions as:

- I. A question of intellectual history regarding the paradigmatic status of meditation as Buddhist practice;
- II. A philosophic question regarding the creation of a psychologized representation of Buddhism; and
- III. A cultural question regarding the decontextualizing of meditation, allowing it to be treated as a mental technology.

Foundational to answering all three of these questions is the cultural assumption that there is a dualistic opposition between mind and body (or mental and physical, or spiritual and material), and that opposition is rhetorically imposed as a dualist opposition between meditation (a mental activity), and ritual (a physical activity).

Answering these three questions will require identifying unexamined assumptions inherited by Buddhist Modernism from the modern religious culture of Europe and the United States. Making those assumptions explicit allows for critical reflection on the propriety of basing our contemporary understandings of Buddhism—both academic and practice-oriented—on those assumptions.

Throughout this paper, reference is made to the “representation of Buddhism”. By this, I mean the process of selection from the Buddhist tradition through which a particular image of Buddhism is created. The potential misunderstandings of this use of the term “representation” should be dealt with before proceeding any further.

Employing the concept of representation poses the danger of two epistemological extremes. At one extreme, there is the potential for introducing the distinction between representation and reality. In this case then, the Modernist representation of Buddhism would be contrasted with “what Buddhism really is”. Yet, “what Buddhism really is” is itself simply another representation. This can in turn lead to the other extreme, which is a relativism in which no evaluation can be made. Like all cats that are black in the night, all representations are considered to be equally valid—or, what amounts to the same thing, equally invalid. However, a denial of the rhetoric of representation versus reality—a denial which I believe is consistent with classic Indian Buddhist epistemology—does not necessarily entail the claim that all representations are equally valid. Representations have claims—whether you see claims as being entailed by representations, or representations as being built up of claims, is immaterial. These claims can—and indeed should be—evaluated: Is this claim true? Is it a generality? Are there any counter-examples? Is the claim made in such a fashion as to preclude any counter-examples? Is it a fallacy? A rhetorical trick? and so on. As an analytic tool, the concept of representation does not protect any claims about Buddhism from evaluation—much less excuse us from critical thinking. Conversely, neither does it entail an essentialized view of Buddhism.

Part of critical reflection on any particular representation entails clarification of the historical and intellectual processes by which it has been created. This is part of becoming aware of the limitations that the representation imposes. By narrowing our conception of Buddhism, these limitations restrict both scholarly inquiry into and practical application of Buddhist praxes. However, by seeing the limitations, they can be overcome and heretofore marginalized aspects of the Buddhist tradition can be explored.

Because it is such an easy error to fall into, it is worth re-emphasizing that the idea of representation is not being used here to imply that there is a truth about Buddhism that the representation misrepresents, suggesting that there is a more true, real, or authentic Buddhism—such attributions as true, real, and authentic are polemic rather than analytic (in other words this should not be characterized as a Marxist-style analysis of false consciousness). Employing the concept of representation critically is not intended to suggest that there is something other than the representation that constitutes true, real, or authentic Buddhism. Such judgments would be essentializing, that is suggesting that certain characteristics are the essence of Buddhism. Such an essentialized Buddhism is itself simply another representation, which itself results from a process of selection. Such a selective representation emphasizes some particular set of characteristics, and then asserts that it is just those that have a privileged status as essential. In other words, the actual process is just the reverse of how it is presented—although presented as if the characteristics identified as essential are (in some sense) discovered to be essential, it is rather that they are designated as essential after having been chosen according to some other (covert) set of criteria. Note, however, that this analysis is not intended to indicate that this process is necessarily consciously intended to deceive, either others or oneself. It seems instead to be an almost “natural” tendency to think in essentializing ways, and to be unaware of the selective process involved.

2. The Historical Question: Meditation as Paradigmatic of Buddhist Practice

Although the historical actualities are stunningly complex, for our purposes here we can pull out of the entangled mass three strands of thought that contributed to the contemporary representation of meditation as paradigmatic of Buddhist practice. These three are psychotherapy, Buddhist modernism, and what I am calling here modernist occultism.

As the conception of meditation and ritual as mutually exclusive opposites is shared by all three strands of thought, we will begin our examination with the line of development that runs from the Protestant Reformation, when the distinction is established, through Auguste Comte, to Sigmund Freud, and his follower Theodore Reik.

2.1. *From Protestant Reformation to Comte to Freud: The Pathologization of Ritual*

Before Luther or Calvin, Erasmus wrote eloquently of his disapproval of medieval religious practices such as pilgrimage and the worship of images and relics. Carlos M.N. Eire summarizes Erasmus' attitude, saying that such practices may have “made the individual feel that he was religious, when in truth he was merely carrying out a formal observance (Eire 1989, p. 43)”. Eire employs a distinction between transcendent religion and immanent religion in his analysis of the Protestant Reformation. As a founding figure of the Reformation, Erasmus emphasizes the transcendent character of religion, at the expense of the immanent. Transcendent religiosity is a dualistic opposition, in which the spiritual is separated from the physical body and the material world. The ramifications of this dualistic opposition between spiritual and material continue into present-day Protestant religious culture, such as that found in the United States.

This opposition also continues to have significant effects on the ways in which Buddhism is represented in the West. Out of the range of effects of the spiritual–material opposition on the modern Western representation of Buddhism, what is of particular significance for our present discussion is the characterization of religious practices such as ritual as “merely formal”. The valuation of ritual as a formalistic exercise empty of conscious intention is fundamental to those forms of Western religious culture that are predominantly Protestant rather than Catholic. What started with Erasmus as a critique of the then-dominant immanentist religiosity in favor of the transcendence of God has become an

unquestioned truism pervading the culture—not only the religious culture per se, but Protestant-inflected culture generally.

The Reformation's emphasis on doctrine gives shape to the modern "conception of religion that emphasizes its cognitive, intellectual, doctrinal, and dogmatic aspects (Tambiah 1990, p. 4)". The attention given to doctrine and the reasons for belief carries over into the Enlightenment, where one of the themes is the positive valuation of reason. Auguste Comte's thought is complex on this issue, as he at times emphasized the role of emotion, particularly as the basis of religion, while at others he emphasized an extremely austere rationalism (Wernick 2001, p. 7). Comte formulated a three-stage developmental sequence of knowledge as embedded in developing social organizations, which he called the Law of the Three Stages. The influence of Comte's ideas of a progressive epistemology was facilitated by his being looked upon as the founder of the science of sociology, and by his having given structure to this trend of thought under the name "Positivism".

The first of Comte's three stages is marked by theological thinking, the second by metaphysical thinking, and the third by positive scientific thinking (Harris 1979, pp. 11–12). The theological stage "covers mankind's progress from fetishism to polytheism and on to monotheism" and "corresponds to the most primitive state of social life—theocracy (Kolakowski 1969, p. 51)". As society develops, so does thought, which now moves into the metaphysical stage. In this stage there is no longer recourse to supernatural agencies as in the theological, but rather to naturalized but abstract metaphysical principles "which man now holds responsible for the observed facts: 'forces,' 'qualities,' 'powers,' 'properties,' and other such constructs" are characteristic of the metaphysical stage of thinking (Kolakowski 1969, p. 53). The positive stage of human mental development embodies the austere epistemology alluded to above. "The rise of a scientific world-view spelt the end of all supernaturalist ontologies, however attenuated, and their displacement by an immanentist materialism, grasped as the primacy of experienced actuality behind and beyond which we cannot go (Wernick 2001, p. 6)". This is a phenomenalist conception of knowledge, one in which all that we can claim to know are the "regularities in observed phenomena (Kolakowski 1969, p. 54)".

Although Comte's specific terminology of the three stages—theological, metaphysical, and positive—did not continue, the idea of three progressive stages of thought did take hold widely among sociologists and anthropologists, as well as by those working in the psychology of religion. The more common terminology that developed after Comte's time is magic, religion, and science as the three stages of human thought. Thus, the widely accepted distinction between magic as belief in the direct instrumental efficacy of ritual, and religion as belief in the power of intercessory prayer, is a consequence of Comte's three stages. The effect of Comte's three-stage developmental sequence on psychology, particularly psychology of religion, was that the sequence of the three stages was reinterpreted from a social theory to a theory of individual development. For example, a classic text in the psychology of religion, early enough that it makes no mention of Freud, that employs this typology is James H. Leuba's 1912 work entitled *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function and Future*. Exemplifying this is that Leuba only treats ritual in a chapter called "Varieties and Classification of Magic". Leuba's terms for magical and religious ritual are "coercitive" and "anthropopathic" (Leuba 1912, p. 172). He dismisses magic as a source of religious rituals which he sees as arising "no doubt, from transferring practices useful in human intercourse to man's relations with gods" (Leuba 1912, p. 172). That is, the assumption was made that if societies move through these three stages of increasing rationality, so too do individuals. This set the stage for the common equation made (even today) between children, savages (contemporary), primitives (historical), madmen, and women—all are represented as being in a pre-rational stage of development.

Since Freud was himself directly influenced by his study of the anthropological literature of his day, his conceptions regarding the developmental location of ritual were informed at least indirectly by Comte's Positivism. While we cannot claim that Freud is solely responsible for the transformation of religion from a cultural phase that will be outgrown, as per Comte's positivism, to a pathological symptom, the centrality of his thought for the development of modern psychotherapy is pivotal.

Freud, of course, gave a variety of explanations for religion, such as that it is a form of wish-fulfillment, an idea developed for example in his *Future of an Illusion* (Freud 1961, p. 42). In this and other works, Freud also formulates the theory that religion is a form of obsessive–compulsive behavior. While in general the one-dimensional treatment of religion as evidence of pathology or lack of development has been modified by more recent psychotherapeutic theorists, the link between ritual and obsessive–compulsive behavior (or what is also called “scrupulosity”) has in large part not been.

Freud’s short 1907 essay “Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices” seems to be the earliest appearance of his formulation of the idea that there is a strong connection, if not causal relation, between obsessive–compulsive behaviors and religious ritual. Freud opens the essay by saying that “I am certainly not the first to be struck by the resemblance between what are called obsessive acts of neurotics and those religious observances by means of which the faithful give expression to their piety (Freud 1959, p. 25)”. And, indeed, as Luis Gómez has discussed, this is based not only on the then-recent anthropological data that Freud may have been thinking of, but more fundamentally for Western culture the idea that there is an inherent connection between religious experience and psychopathology that goes back to classical Greece (Gómez 2001). The association of religion and psychopathology is not limited to the Western tradition. June McDaniel has discussed not only the contemporary interpretation of the linkage made between madness and ecstatic religion in Bengal, but also the cultural history of the idea in India as well (McDaniel 1989, pp. 7–25).

Key to Freud’s argument is his equation of religious sin and personal guilt. After briefly reviewing a few examples of obsessive behaviors, Freud concludes this short essay with the statement that

In view of these resemblances and analogies one might venture to regard the obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of a religion, to describe this neurosis as a private religious system, and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis. The essential resemblance would lie in the fundamental renunciation of the satisfaction of inherent instincts, and the chief difference in the nature of these instincts, which in the neurosis are exclusively sexual, but in religion are of egoistic origin (Freud 1959, p. 34).

Only very recently have any potentially beneficial effects of ritual been recognized within the psychology of religion. Even as recently as 2000, for example, an overview of the psychology of religion only mentions ritual in relation to Freud and obsessive–compulsive disorder (Loewenthal 2000).

The treatment of ritual has been marked by not only the Freudian view, but also by a culturally more fundamental set of values and assumptions that can be identified as intellectualist and Protestant. “Intellectualist” identifies the assumptions that action both follows on thought, and that action ought to follow on reasoned thought. This presumption also structures the academic study of religion which continues to privilege doctrine and belief as the key to understanding religious traditions. Indeed, the intellectualist assumption itself seems to be rooted in the Protestant teaching of the salvific power of proper belief (*sola fide* in Luther’s terms). For example, in his 1968 textbook for the psychology of religion, Paul W. Prysner describes sacramental acts—like all rituals—as having the effect of “a short-circuiting of conceptual clarity” and that members of religious groups may be motivated to participate in ritual by social pressure, “to submit to activities without having had the chance to think through the issues, principles, or implications, and before they are conceptually ready for them (Prysner 1968, pp. 90–91)”.

More recently, there is a more careful distinction made between ritual behavior and obsessive–compulsive disorder. For example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (fourth edition) gives the following qualification,

Culturally prescribed ritual behavior is not in itself indicative of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder unless it exceeds cultural norms, occurs at times and places judged inappropriate by others of the same culture, and interferes with social role functioning. Important life transitions and mourning may lead to an intensification of ritual behavior that may appear obsessive to a clinician who is not familiar with the cultural context

([American Psychiatric Association 1994](#), s.v. “300.3 Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: Specific Culture, Age, and Gender Features”, p. 420).

Here, the importance of cultural context in distinguishing appropriate ritual behavior from ritual behavior expressing a psychological pathology is clear and serves as a corrective to the universalized standards of the rationalistic view—fundamentally based on Protestant views of what constitutes proper forms of religion—that pathologized ritual.

The conceptions of religion and ritual found in our own present-day reflect the three strains of thought discussed above. First, the Protestant Reformation with its emphasis on transcendent religion. Protestant transcendent religiosity devalues any mediation between the individual and God, leading directly to our present characterization of ritual as “mere empty form”. Second, Comtean Positivism conceives societal development as a movement from primitive magical thinking, through religious thinking, to positive or scientific thinking. This laid the groundwork for the modern tendency to characterize ritual as behavior motivated by the magical stage of thinking. Consider that some contemporary textbooks for the field of religious studies continue to reflect this way of thinking about the role of ritual in religion. For example, Denise L. Carmody and T.L. Brink define ritual in the introductory chapter, but the largest amount of attention to ritual is the second chapter devoted to “tribal” religions ([Carmody and Brink 2014](#)). Categorized as a form of magical thinking, ritual is understood to be instrumental, that is, as being thought to have a direct effect, and is distinguished from religion as being intercessionary, that is, appealing to a higher power for its effect. It is also distinguished from science, which is instrumental but which has the proper epistemological means for grasping actual causal relations. Comte’s three stages of societal development were individualized in psychology, where individual development was conceived as moving through these same three stages. This provided the background for Freud’s widely influential pathologizing of religious ritual as a societal form of individual obsessive–compulsive behavior. Although originating in the theological disputes of the Reformation, these ideas found their way into the academic study of religion, whether sociological, anthropological, or psychological. (The treatment of ritual in the academic study of religion cannot be fully explored in the course of this essay. Such a treatment would need to take note of countervailing trends such as functionalism, which attributed a positive social function to ritual as providing social cohesion and stability.)

2.2. *Anti-Ritual Character of Buddhist Modernism*

The three strains of thought discussed above all influenced the development of the Buddhist Modernist representation of Buddhism. Buddhist Modernism is the name given to a movement within Buddhism that starts in the interaction between native forms of Buddhism and colonialist Protestant evangelism. It was a re-assertion of the value of Buddhism in the face of evangelical triumphalism.

Comtean Positivism was one of the influences on the development of the rhetoric of Buddhist Modernism—Buddhism was presented as fitting into the third of Comte’s stages, that is, as at least in accord with, if not in advance of then-modern science. This is certainly not to be understood as claiming that Buddhist modernists were consciously aware of Comte, but rather that the pervasive influence of Comte’s conceptions in Western thought did directly influence the way in which modernists chose to represent Buddhism as scientific and therefore modern.

One of the most influential sources for the anti-ritual character of Buddhist modernism is a work entitled “A Buddhist Catechism” written by Colonel Olcott in 1881 as a summary of the essential doctrinal claims of Buddhism. Olcott was an American Theosophist who worked to reform Sinhalese Buddhism ([Obeyesekere 1992](#)). The Catechism was used extensively in Sri Lankan schools, and it is still available in reprint form. Olcott’s representation demonstrates the intellectualist presumption that religion is primarily doctrinal. Similarly, by representing Buddhism as in keeping with modern (i.e., nineteenth century) science, his work evidences the influence of Comtean Positivism. The Catechism entails an active condemnation of Sinhalese popular Buddhism, including a fundamentally Protestant rejection of ritual. We find for example,

184. Q. What was the Buddha's estimate of ceremonialism?

A. From the beginning, he condemned the observance of ceremonies and other external practices, which only tend to increase our spiritual blindness and our clinging to mere lifeless forms.

Here, several centuries after Erasmus, we find the same characterization of ritual as "mere lifeless forms". Similarly,

187. Q. What striking contrasts are there between Buddhism and what may properly be called "religions"?

A. Among others . . . redemption by oneself as the Redeemer, and without rites, prayers, penances, priest or intercessory saints . . . (Olcott [1915] 1983, pp. 44–45).

Here is another aspect of the shift from immanence to transcendence in the Protestant Reformation. No longer are there powers in this world—"rites, prayers, penances, priest or intercessory saints"—that serve to mediate between the individual and God. This individualism is reflected in Olcott's idea that the practitioner is his/her own redeemer.

Other figures important in the development of Buddhist Modernism as presented in the United States were D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and R.H. Blythe. All three were deeply influenced by romantic notions of spontaneity. This included an epistemology of intuition over reason, and of direct, unmediated experience as having a privileged epistemological status. Adopting the neo-Platonic idea of paradox as the means by which direct, intuitive knowing can be achieved, they tended to interpret Zen as employing a method of paradox in the form of meditating on koans. Such views are clearly in direct historical continuity with Protestant emphasis on a direct, experiential relation with God, unmediated by priests and their ritual performances. Given the neo-Platonic and Romantic frames adopted by these three figures, it is hardly surprising that ritual plays no role in their writings on Buddhism, and perhaps even more influential is that they treat Zen meditation as something other than a ritual—no doubt because of the dualism in Protestant Western thought between meditation and contemplation as valid forms of attempting to attain a direct experience of the divine, and ritual which was devalued as an active obstacle to the goal of direct experience of the divine.

2.3. Modernist Occultism

In the contemporary cultural environment, where many religious leaders oppose research into the therapeutic potential of stem cells and promote the notion that intelligent design is as scientifically credible as evolution, it is easy to maintain the now long-standing idea that science and religion stand opposed to one another—what is called the "Warfare Myth" (based on the title of Andrew Dickson White's *The Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, White [1896] 2017). However, one of the characteristics of what I am calling here "Modernist Occultism" was the embrace of science, or at least of scientific sounding terms, by religious and quasi-religious groups as a source of legitimation. These latter ideas continue to circulate in a variety of forms, including the recurring representations of Buddhism as scientific and empirical. In other words, the representation of Buddhism as being based on first-person empirical knowledge has provided rhetorical justification for accepting the teachings of Buddhism. This has meant, however, that the teachings become subject to review, reinterpretation, and in some cases rejection. For example, many Western Buddhists find it difficult to accept the doctrine of rebirth. While some seem to simply ignore the problem, others question the centrality of the idea of rebirth, some reject it as irrelevant to a modern Buddhism, and yet others are satisfied to believe it is true since it has not been disproven.

Perhaps it is the modern professionalization of psychology that has tended to obscure the close relations between modernist occultism and psychology at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. One example of this is the use of psychological terminology by occultists to express their ideas in terms that sounded modern and scientific. For example, the Theosophical

Society played a pivotal role in the propagation of a psychologized interpretation of Buddhism. It is also essential to call attention to the fact that this interpretation was propagated both to Westerners and reflexively to Asians. As Poul Pedersen notes, the Theosophists' importance was not only in "that they strengthened Western interest in Eastern religion and philosophy" but also "perhaps more important was their introduction of Western interpretations of Eastern traditions to the educated Asian elites (Pedersen 2001, p. 158; for more details see Godwin 1994)". In other words, as a consequence of the work of the Theosophists, it is now possible to find Asian Buddhists giving psychologized interpretations of Buddhism that are reflections of nineteenth century modernist occult psychological language that has been appropriated in order to legitimate their own views—an instance of what is sometimes called the "pizza effect (Bharati 1970, p. 273)".

One exemplary instance of the Theosophical Society's manner of interpreting Buddhism is A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*. This work contained letters from the "Tibetan Mahatma Koot Hoomi", and developed themes from spiritualist and Hindu sources, attributing them to Buddhism. The spelling "Budhism" is intentional on Sinnett's part, as he claims that true Buddhism is not focused on the figure of the Buddha, but rather on the attainment of awakening, *bodhi*. Here we see early evidence of an emphasis on spiritual experience and the methods of its attainment, and a denial of the importance of the Buddha other than as a discoverer of eternal, sacred truths. Both of these ideas become themes of Buddhist Modernism.

Following the path that Theosophy had begun to tread from Western spiritualism to Buddhism was another figure who evidences the importance of modernist occultism in the formation of Buddhist modernism. This was Allan Bennett (1872–1923), who was a student of the infamous magician Aleister Crowley. In 1900, twenty years after Blavatsky and Olcott had formally taken lay ordination in the Buddhist sangha, Bennett followed in their footsteps, going to Sri Lanka to study Pāli and Buddhism. Shortly thereafter, he decided to become a monk, and travelled to Burma where he became a bhikku on 21 May 1902. Joscelyn Godwin describes Bennett as a

thoroughly modern man: converted to atheism by science; believing in evolution and progress; trusting in human reason and technology to bring about a Golden Age of peace and plenty. At the same time, he was a magician . . . He illustrates the seeming paradox that extreme rationalism can coexist with a belief in magic. The only possible explanation of this paradox is that for [Bennett], magic was not a belief but an experience so concrete as to demand a scientific rather than a superstitious explanation (Godwin 1994, p. 374).

In keeping with his modernist orientation, Bennett appears to have been the first to apply the term "agnosticism" (newly coined by T.H. Huxley in 1889) to Buddhism. Stephen Batchelor quotes a letter written by Bennett to the Free Thought Congress (1904), in which he says, "The position of Buddhism on these vital problems is exactly coincidental, in its fundamental ideas, with the modern agnostic philosophy of the West . . . (Batchelor 1997, pp. 119–20; also Batchelor 2000, p. 24)". (The connection from Bennett back to T.H. Huxley itself indicates an intellectual trajectory further back to Comte's Positivism.) This characterization of Buddhism as agnostic not only includes the religious understanding of that idea, but also the broader understanding of an emphasis on method rather than on doctrines, which continues to form a central part of Buddhist modernism (Batchelor 1997, p. 17).

More explicitly psychological in its modernism is the work of Ernest Holmes. Originally published in 1926 (revised in 1938, the latter edition being still in print) *The Science of Mind* stands as a classic of modernist occultism, combining an optimistic image of the eventual unity of science and religion with a psychological interpretation of occultism, under a traditional neo-Platonist conception of the "First Cause, Spirit, Mind, or that invisible Essence, that ultimate Stuff and Intelligence from which everything comes (Holmes [1938] 1998, p. 25)". Like so much of this literature, this is all couched in the language of popular Christianity, complete with Biblical quotations. Central to Holmes' psychologization of modernist occultism is a monistic equation of the cosmic Mind and the individual mind, similar to the monistic stance of Advaita Vedanta in which ātman (individual) is identical with Brahman (cosmic or universal). Holmes is also evidently borrowing from psychology, for he

introduces a distinction between the conscious and subconscious (Holmes [1938] 1998, p. 29). One of the consistent themes of the Science of Mind style of religiosity is the equation of biological evolution with spiritual evolution; the first demonstrated the “scientific” character of the teaching and was then taken as “proving” the second.

The threads of modernist occultism served not only to introduce Buddhism to the West—as part of its own claim to legitimacy through universality—but also furthered the psychologization of Buddhism. A third impact was the emphasis on Buddhism as a method of individual personal development that was not encumbered by any specific doctrinal beliefs—and which, therefore, could be effectively employed by Westerners without requiring them to abandon their own Christian identity. This latter pattern continues, for example, in the Christian appropriation of Zen meditation as a context-neutral mental technology.

2.4. *De-Natured Zen: The Christian Appropriation*

Paralleling the transformation of Buddhist meditation into a psychotherapeutic tool, the Zen form of practice was appropriated by Christians. Probably one of the earliest publications promoting this appropriation is Dom Aelred Graham’s 1963 work entitled *Zen Catholicism: A Suggestion* (Graham 1963). The success of the representation of Buddhist meditation as simply a context-free mental technology is evidenced by Graham’s introduction. Addressing his Catholic audience, Graham says:

The word Zen means “meditation”; which sounds simple enough. No one, presumably, would object to a more meditative Catholicism. Zen, however, is Buddhist, and Buddhism is commonly regarded as a religion on its own account. The religious aspect, a later development, of the Buddha’s teaching will not concern us. The questions to be discussed are whether what is essential to Buddhism, with its Zen emphasis, does not have its counterpart in Catholicism (Graham 1963, p. xi).

This is an almost perfect expression of the idea of Buddhist meditation as a context-free mental technology, and it allows us to examine the rhetorical strategies that support this idea—as well as noting how longstanding this conception has been a part of popular religious culture. We can also highlight the rhetorical character of these claims regarding Buddhism being made by Graham by inverting them, that is, by applying them to Catholicism. Note first the implicit assertion that the “religious aspect” of Buddhism can be separated from Buddhist practice. Rhetorically, we might ask whether performance of the sacraments could be separated from the “religious aspect” of Catholicism. Second, the “religious aspect” of Buddhism is identified as a “later development”. This claim is rather oddly ambiguous. Is it intended to mean that the Buddha only taught meditation, and that it was his followers who later developed what was originally a purely meditative practice into a religion? Or is it intended to mean that the Buddha first taught meditation and that it was only later that he developed the religious dimensions of his thought. In either case, the integrity of the practice of meditation as part of the path to awakening—which, presumably, many would see as religious—is broken. Again, we might rhetorically ask whether the religious aspects of Catholicism are a later development of Jesus’ teachings. Under either interpretation of “later development”, the implicit message is made explicit in the next sentence, which claims that Zen as (a context-free mental technology of) meditation is “what is essential to Buddhism”. Presumably then, the religious aspect is not essential to Buddhism? Is the religious aspect of Catholicism not essential to Catholicism?

Graham is, of course, building on works very familiar to most Western students of Buddhism who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s—the works of D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and R.H. Blyth, already referred to above. The ability to de-nature Zen is aided by quotations such as R.H. Blyth’s intellectually soporific but meaningless claim that “Zen, though far from indefinite, is by definition indefinable, because it is the active principle of life itself (Blyth 1942, p. 2; cited by Graham 1963, p. 19)”. (Unfortunately, much of the ongoing representation of Zen does nothing to get past the mystification of this kind of statement.) Graham even goes further afield, drawing on Aldous Huxley’s Perennialism,

which produces the following both highly problematic, and ultimately incoherent statement more reflective of Advaita Vedanta than of Buddhism.

How far could one, as a Catholic, agree with a position which many expositors hold to be implicit in Buddhism, namely, that to become aware of the inner self (Atman) is to become aware of the Ultimate Self (Brahman) which is God? Succinctly the doctrine is expressed in the sacred Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* (That thou art); “The Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being is to discover the fact for himself, to find out Who he really is” (Graham 1963, p. 27; internal quote Huxley 1944, p. 2).

Since the only source that Graham references is Huxley, one cannot help but wonder who these unidentified “many expositors” are who hold that such a view is “implicit in Buddhism”. Whoever they are, their rhetorical agility is truly stunning for they can claim that Buddhism teaches the existence of a permanent, autonomous self (*ātman*), which is the exact opposite of what is almost universally accepted as basic to Buddhist thought, the impermanence of the self and the absence of any essence from any existing entity—*anātman* and *śūnyatā*. This appropriation of a denatured Zen meditation stripped of any doctrinal context, such as emptiness, into a Christian religious praxis continues, though perhaps with less vigor than previously (see for example, Freeman 1989, 1998, 1999; Johnston 1997; Boykin 2003). It is also a harbinger of the kind of systematic decontextualization found in the present appropriation of Buddhist practice as mindfulness, which is itself a psychologized interpretation of Buddhism.

3. The Philosophic Question: Creating a Psychologized Buddhism

The distinction between meditation and ritual—particularly in its strong version of the two being mutually exclusive opposites—is conventional. These are not “natural” categories, though given their fundamental status in Protestant religious culture, they appear within that culture, within that discursive world, as if they were natural categories. The meditation–ritual opposition is built on and reinforces two inter-related strains of thought—the dualistic anthropology we commonly refer to as Cartesian, and the intellectualist presumption. Neither of these are part of the Buddhist analysis of mind and Buddhist praxis, and both warp our ability to understand the integral character of human-being-in-the-world as a basis for healing and awakening.

What does it mean to say that in its Western representation Buddhism has been psychologized? First, we must recognize the psychological character of contemporary Western society. In our present society, it seems that we primarily define the self, that is ourself, as a mental process going on inside our heads, the products of which are unique since they are uniquely our own. More technically, modern subjectivity has been constituted as the unique center of conscious awareness, isolated from both the outer world and other people. Many of the (pseudo-) problems of contemporary philosophy are the consequence of this conception. These pseudo-problems include the mind–body problem, the epistemological issues of subjective experience, the problems of intersubjectivity, solipsism, and so on.

These products of the mind that are uniquely our own, that is the contents of mind—experiences, thoughts, feelings, judgments, memories—are all given particular value because they are taken as defining who one is. The psychological character of our contemporary society not only determines the formation of the self as a primarily psychological phenomenon, but has also become the most pervasive way of understanding per se, including reflexively determining the way in which we attempt to understand the influence and depth of the psychologization of modern society. Sarah Winter notes the “impasse” created by attempting to reflect on the influence of psychology when our own attempts to understand that influence are already informed by a psychologized understanding of what constitutes a causal explanation:

In order to examine psychoanalysis historically, it is necessary to step outside of its dominant psychological frame of reference, within which every event is interpreted as a psychodynamic scenario, however personalized, impelled by desires defined as arising “from within” the individual and the mind. The inside/outside opposition is not even as important to the

theoretical impasse I am describing as the assumption that the psychological constitution of the subject precedes social and cultural formation, rather than being a process of individual and familial experience socially conditioned—with one of the crucial conditions being the cultural currency of the category of the psychological itself (Winter 1999, p 14).

Second, at the same time, ours is a therapeutic culture, one in which we define ourselves in a condition of needing to be fixed in one way or another. Most pervasively this is evidenced in the way that advertising creates a sense of lack and then offers to fulfill that lack—whether it be through brightening one’s teeth or acquiring the right automobile. This is in fact an age-old marketing device probably first invented by religion. Carl Jung noted this combination of psychological orientation and therapeutic culture, suggesting that its origins lay in the fact that Protestant religious culture provides almost no guidance for the individual who stands without mediation between him/herself and God. “Our lack of direction borders on psychic anarchy. Therefore, any religious or philosophical practice amounts to a psychological discipline; in other words, it is a method of psychic hygiene (Jung 1989a, p. 532)”. Given this combination, that our culture defines the self psychologically and that it is a therapeutic culture, it is not surprising that we should view the world through these interpretive lenses and find both psychology and therapy in the Buddhist teachings.

As evidence of how thoroughly psychology has displaced religion as the perspective for understanding Buddhism, let us take a single example from a source at hand:

To be properly understood the *Satipatthana Sutta* must be examined from a psychological and psychiatric viewpoint. Most scholars of comparative religion are accustomed to approaching their studies from religious, ethical, or philosophical frames of reference, but none of these orientations apply here. If this sutta alone was to be filed on the shelves of a public library, it would most aptly be placed adjacent to the archives of eclectic psychiatry and would have little in common with the classic writings of religion and philosophy. Even psychology would not be an appropriate title, for the sutta is not concerned with any theoretical or conceptual interpretation of the mind. It deals only with the empirical facts of conscious experience and prescribes the techniques for mental development (Burns 1967, n.p.).

The claim that for the *Satipatthāna Sutta* to be “properly understood” it must be seen as a psychological work, or—even more properly—as psychiatry, is one that I imagine many Western Buddhists would have little trouble accepting.

There are two problems with this analysis, however. First, it is an interpretation of the text, not some sort of given characteristic of the text. Second, the interpretation being made is based on our own categories, not those of the Buddhist tradition itself, nor of the wider Indian religious culture within which the text originated.

The author suggests considering the text “alone”. But, of course, no text exists in isolation. The *Satipatthana Sutta* is part of the Buddhist corpus. To strip it of that context does not mean that we are able thereby to get to what the text “really” is. While there are a variety of interpretive strategies, what seems to be intended here is a completely “literal” understanding. Christian Wedemeyer has discussed the range of interpretive strategies, and the problems with supposedly literal ones (Wedemeyer 2007). Further, the categories employed by the public library do not provide us with a neutral means of categorizing works. Those categories are themselves contingent social conventions, and are not constituted without a set of assumptions of their own, nor is it possible to place an item into one category or another without making a judgment that emphasizes particular aspects of the text at the expense of others.

The author juxtaposes a psychological understanding of the text with a religious, ethical, or philosophical one. This, however, is simply a rhetorical strategy designed to conceal the interpretive character of the assertion, that is, that what is being promoted is a psychological interpretation of the text. Once recognized as an interpretation, there is nothing wrong with the assertion. What is important to keep in mind is that it is an interpretation made from our own cultural perspective—or in this case from the author’s perspective, who, perhaps not surprisingly, is himself a psychiatrist.

The contemporary perspective within which the text is being interpreted includes an unquestioned assumption of the validity of the distinctions between psychology, religion, ethics, and philosophy. These distinctions did not exist in early Buddhism or in Indian religious culture up until they were imported in the modern era. It is not simply the case that this text, Buddhism in general, or the essential character of Buddhism, is psychological. This is an interpretation that is made in the present by employing modern categories.

The psychologization of Buddhism, following from the psychological and therapeutic character of contemporary Western culture, directly impacts how meditation is understood and employed. The psychologization of Buddhism finds one of its expressions in the characterization of awakening as a mental event. Backing up from this characterization, the pervasive dualism of popular thought unreflectively produces the presumption that that practice is also mental in character—mental causes (meditative practice) produce mental effects (awakening). In the background of this is the long-standing habit of treating the Buddha Śākyamuni's awakening as an instance of mystical experience, which is itself understood as a universal and uniform religious category. While it may well be the case that there are universally human cognitive capacities involved, what is not unproblematic is the presumption that awakening is a particular kind of experience, that is, mystical experience. The common epistemology of experience constructs the mind as a passive recipient of some external stimulus. One might for example say "I experienced such a profound feeling of peace watching the sunset the other evening". The sunset is the external stimulus producing an experience of peace. This way of thinking about one's own experience has its direct parallel in the way that mystical experience is understood. According to the logic of the common epistemology of experience, an external stimulus for mystical experience must exist—God, the divine, the absolute, the Great Pumpkin. Such an epistemology leads, for example, to "emptiness" being treated as an (special) object of (meditative) experience (Nunberg 2018).

Harvey Aronson has theorized this in terms of the difference between mental contents and mental processes (Aronson 2004, p. 43). In Aronson's analysis, if we focus on the contents of our minds—that is if we understand insight to be a greater, deeper, and richer sensitivity to and appreciation of our own thoughts, feelings, and memories, understanding how we came to be the way we are psychologically, and how the way we are psychologically effects our lives in the present—then we are using meditation as a psychological tool. If, instead, we use meditation as a way to focus on the processes of our minds—understanding insight to be a greater, deeper, and richer sensitivity to the conditioned, and therefore temporary character of our thoughts, to the impermanence of our feelings, and to the autonomous way in which the mind generates thoughts and feelings without a metaphysical agent giving directions or making choices—then we are using meditation as a means of waking up.

This subtle, but all-important, difference that Aronson has identified—the difference between content and process as the focus of meditative practice—highlights the issue considered in the next section. Meditation is not a context-neutral mental technology. Even once we have recognized that we are using a singular term—meditation—to cover a wide variety of markedly different kinds of activities—there still remains the issue of intent that Aronson indicates. The intention of the individual who is engaging in a meditative practice affects the outcome of that practice. And that individual's intention is itself conditioned, albeit unconsciously, by the presumptions of the culture within which he/she lives. In our case, the culture presumes a psychological and therapeutic understanding of human existence.

4. Cultural Question: Meditation as Context-Neutral Mental Technology

Andrew Feenberg, a philosopher working on the issues of technology and modernity, has pointed out the modern tendency to act

as though technology could really be separated from society as two types of things—or in more sophisticated formulations, two "practices"—interacting only on their boundaries. . . . But from an experiential standpoint these two dimensions—device and meaning, technical and lifeworld practice—are inextricably intertwined (Feenberg 1999, p. xii).

Although Feenberg introduces the term as part of a historical discussion, we can characterize the contemporary tendency to treat meditation as a context-neutral technology as an instance of “common sense instrumentalism”. Feenberg says of common sense instrumentalism that it “treated technology as a neutral means, requiring no particular philosophic explanation or justification (Feenberg 1999, p. 1)”. The historical development of Buddhist Modernism, with its representation of Buddhism as rational and scientific, has at least implicitly integrated a common sense instrumentalist view of meditation practice. Buddhist Modernism also promoted meditation to its paradigmatic status as the single, essential characteristic of Buddhism in part because it can be represented as a rational approach to individual spiritual development. Such a representation of meditation set it within an instrumental conception of the working of the mind, a conception shared by the psychologized forms of Occultist Modernism.

As with the use of Buddhist meditation in Christian religious settings, its use as part of a psychotherapeutic program—no matter whether Zen, mindfulness, rDzogs chen or any other form—has been based on an argument by analogy. That argument can be outlined as follows:

1, Technology is context-neutral.

2, Meditation is a mental technology.

Therefore, Meditation is context-neutral.

By structuring the psychotherapeutic use of meditation in this way, we can examine the validity of each of the premises separately—the argument provides us with an analytic solvent by which different sets of beliefs and assumptions can be divided into the two clearly distinct statements forming the premises of the argument.

The first premise is so fundamental to modern thought that it is basically invisible, and is never—as far as I have been able to determine—addressed directly in the literature on the application of Buddhist meditation as a psychological therapeutic. Yet the evidence points to the opposite conclusion. Banking, cell-phones, and highways all bring massive social changes—many unintended—in their wake. The second premise, that meditation is a mental technology, is equally problematic. It entails a particular view of the mind, in which the person is separate from the mind and is therefore able to act on it to effect changes in the person—a paradox that will be examined more fully below. Given that both premises are questionable, we have good reason to doubt the conclusion.

De-Contexts: Various Locations of Meditation in Traditional Buddhism

There are (at least) two ways of exploring the issue of context more fully. One would be to examine the differences between explicitly Buddhist and secular-medicalized deployments of meditation. These differences are located in conceptions regarding the nature of the person, and the differing systems of symptoms, diagnoses, prescriptions, and prognoses (a.k.a. the four noble truths) that follow from those differing conceptions of the person. The second way to explore the issue of context would be to examine Buddhist practice understood more broadly, that is, as a system within which meditation is enacted. It is to this second approach that we turn here.

One of the categories of practice found in the Sanskrit terminology of Buddhism is *sādhana*. In her study of several *sādhana* for the goddess/bodhisattva Sarasvatī, Sarah Haynes identifies four sections that typify each *sādhana*: homage, preliminaries (T. sngon 'gro), practice (T. dngos gzhi), and conclusion (T. rjes 'jug).

A *sādhana* generally begins with a statement of homage whereby the deity of the text is revered. This is followed by a set of preliminary practices that usually includes going for refuge, the four immeasurables, generating a mind bent on enlightenment and a reiteration of the bodhisattva commitment, followed by the seven-limbed practice. These preliminary

practices are always concluded by a mantra on emptiness . . . The main practice includes the descriptions of the deity and the meditations and visualizations that are done in order to embody their qualities. The sādhana usually concludes with a reiteration of the importance and value of the deity. The qualities that will be embodied by the practitioner and the results of the practice are the typical topics with which these texts conclude (Haynes 2006, pp. 125–26).

The section identified as the “main practice” corresponds to the modernist conception of meditation as a value- and context-free mental technology. In other words, the modernist conception of meditation strips away the balance of the ritual structure within which the meditation is embedded—including the ethical aspirations of seeking awakening (bodhicitta) and the bodhisattva’s commitments to assist all living beings to become awakened.

A different aspect of the context of practice as it is found in traditional Buddhism is evidenced in the path structure. One of the simplest of these is the threefold structure of morality (sila), meditation (samādhi), and wisdom (prajñā). Buddhaghosa’s classic work, the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) is structured around these three dimensions or stages of Buddhist practice. (Translating from the Pāli, Ñānamoli in Buddhaghosa [1975] 1999 renders these three as “virtue”, “concentration”, and “understanding”.)

A third instance of context is exemplified by Zen practice, which in its modernist interpretation as simply a mental technology has served as an exemplar or source for the secular application of meditation. At first one might conclude that indeed here is a form of Buddhist meditation in which all of the inessentials have been stripped away—if tantric practice is the luxury sedan of Buddhist meditation practice, then Zen is the drag racer. Dōgen’s text, the *Fukanzazengi*, appears to assert this apparent simplicity of practice. This short text instructs the practitioner: spread out a thick mat with a cushion, fold your legs into a full or half lotus position, arrange your robes loosely but neatly, sit upright, place your hands together in your lap, allow the tongue to rest on the roof of the mouth (which is closed), and keeping your eyes open, breathe softly through the nose (Dōgen 2004, p. 533). In what can only be seen as an ironic twist supporting the point of my argument in this paper, this text has been ritualized and is recited as part of the daily liturgy in Sōtō Zen temples in Japan (Bielefeldt 1988, p. 8). As indicated previously, central to the context of meditative practice is intention.

The effects of the application of any technology are partially determined by the intentions of the application. An analogous situation exists with regard to hatha yoga, which in its native context is intended to assist in the overcoming of attachment to the body, a practice of austerities intended to purify the bodily energies, withdrawing them from involvement with the outer world, and facilitating the practice of a trance-style meditation. In contrast, in present-day United States, yoga forms a regular part of the curriculum offered by gymnasias and health clubs, part of the cult of the body.

That meditation does not exist as a context-neutral technology, but rather is deeply embedded in cultural values, is exemplified by an experience recounted by Victor Hori. He describes a meditation retreat in which there were both ethnic Chinese and Anglo-American participants. At the end, when asked to describe their experience of the retreat, the Americans universally talked about gaining strength and insight. In contrast, the Chinese spoke of feelings of shame and the need for repentance (Hori 1994, cited Aronson 2004, pp. 1–2). While one could attempt to argue that the different effects of the meditation experience are simply rooted in the difference in cultural values, and hence that the meditation per se is not the cause, this argument fails on the grounds that the meditation practice cannot exist except in the context of some set of cultural values.

5. Are Contexts Actually Important?

Context is, of course, a very amorphous term. In the case of meditative practices, context includes a wide variety of apparently divergent elements. These include the specific social setting, the lineage of practice, the cultural background, even the aesthetics of a tradition. Given the character of meditation practice, however, context also includes the intentions and expectations of the practitioner. It is

important to note that contrary to the common understanding of intentions and expectations as part of the individual's unique psychic contents (cf. *supra*), they are themselves part of the social environment, and the cultural conditioning of the individual.

This is just the point that Carl Jung made many years ago—that the cultural values and preconceptions within which someone undertakes a practice such as meditation deeply influence the effects that practice has on that individual. In several of his essays, Jung sounded a cautionary note regarding the appropriation of yogic practices by Westerners (Jung 1989b, p. 500, Jung 1989c, pp. 568–69). This has drawn the opprobrium of many Buddhist apologists, such as Daniel Goleman, who accuse Jung of a variety of sins, including racism, crypto-fascism, stupidity, and plain narrow-mindedness. The unwillingness to seriously consider the significance of Jung's caveat has precluded any serious reflection on the application of his insight to adaptations of Buddhism into contemporary Western society. It is important to note what it was that Jung tried to warn us of: that there were certain dangers involved that resulted from the attitudes inherent in Western culture. (Unfortunately, one of Jung's most prolific commentators, Maria Louise von Franz, has presented Jung's warnings as if it were an attempt to prohibit Westerners from even considering the practice of meditation.) Jung, however, is not unqualifiedly negative in his evaluation of yogic meditation. He says, for example

Quite apart from the charm of the new and the fascination of the half-understood, there is good reason for yoga to have many adherents. It offers not only the much-sought way, but also a philosophy of unrivalled profundity. It holds out the possibility of controllable experience, and thus satisfies the scientist's need for "facts" (Jung 1989a, p. 532).

Jung's closing suggestion here anticipates the contemporary fascination with scientifically studying the effects of meditation. (See for example, Nauriyal et al. 2006)

We can summarize Jung's concerns in terms of the "heroic attitude". This attitude is displayed in countless Western myths, legends, novels, films, television programs, and comic books. Whether Jason or the Dark Avenger, the hero is one who conquers his enemies. The hero motif is so pervasive in Western culture that some commentators have even subsumed the story of Śākyamuni's awakening under it. The confrontational style of the hero's tale is the largely unconscious cultural attitude that Jung suggested created the danger for Western practitioners of yogic meditation. Such practitioners may well attempt to employ meditation as yet another tool—or perhaps more appropriately, weapon—in the hero's arsenal. What Jung saw was that such an application of meditation under the guidance of the heroic attitude will simply reinforce the mistaken conception that the conscious ego is in charge of what happens. In light of Jung's conception of individuation, which can reasonably be described as including an increasing awareness of the limits of the conscious ego's ability to control things—his warning about the dangers of misapplying yogic meditation in a heroic fashion are quite reasonable. Indeed, Jung's concerns seem to be an important warning about the present appropriation of mindfulness practice in psychotherapeutic, corporate, and medical settings. As discussed above, the attitude with which meditation is undertaken is an important element of the context of practice, directly effecting the outcome of practice. As Jung puts it, "Yoga practice is unthinkable, and would also be ineffectual, without the ideas on which it is based (Jung 1989a, p. 533)".

The importance of expectation and intention as part of the context of practice is a point made by both Shinran Shōnin and Jack Engler. Shinran phrased this concern in terms of self-power (Jpn. *jiriki*) and other-power (Jpn. *tariki*). While these terms have (quite mistakenly) been used to describe different schools of practice, it is more appropriate to understand them as describing different attitudes toward practice. Using contemporary psychological terminology, we can say that self-power is ego-directed, and therefore is unable to effect change in the ego itself. It is necessary to seek a "leverage point" somewhere outside the ego, an "other power", which allows the practice to affect the ego. For Shinran, this other power was the Buddha Amida, but I think that what he saw about the ego's inability to effect change on itself can be generalized. In a sense, Amida functions as a good spiritual friend (*kalyāṇa mitra*), providing a position outside the ego from which change can be effected.

More recently, Jack Engler made a point similar to the ones that Jung and Shinran both made about attitude and expectation as part of the context of practice. Engler notes that “Without being aware of it, we can use a practice designed to liberate us from ego to shore up ego”. Engler details ten specific “unhealthy motivations”, that he sees as being universal issues, rather than individual or idiosyncratic problems. Each of these ten can “predispose us to employ practices like meditation in the service of defense, rather than self-awareness (Engler 2006)”.

Generalizing the issues described by Jung, Shinran, and Engler, the problem can be said to be the result of an unrecognized dualism in the practice of meditation. The practitioner is approaching the practice of meditation as a technique, or as a tool or weapon, that can be applied to one’s own mind. This instrumental attitude can be described as applying the model of using a hammer to nail together two boards to one’s own mind. The boards are the mind, the hammer is meditation, and the person hammering is the person doing the meditation. While the instrumental attitude works in carpentry, it sadly reinforces one of the very problems meditation in the Buddhist context is intended to overcome—the reification of the self, that is, the thought that the self is something separate from the very ongoing process of meditating.

6. Conclusion: Steps Toward an Alternative Construction

Awakening and Practice as Fully Embodied Rather than Mental

One of the key issues to transforming our understanding of Buddhist practice is to confront the intellectualist presumptions of the Western religious tradition. The emphasis on proper belief, orthodoxy, as salvific, which is central to the Protestant tradition, has created a focus on doctrine and belief as keys to understanding religious traditions. This in turn has fed into the psychological presumptions of contemporary Western society, and its tendency to locate agency in the mind. The Buddhist formula characterizing the actuality of human existence is “body, speech, and mind”, and Buddhist practice incorporates all three dimensions of our existence.

The representation of awakening as a mental event is overdetermined for us. There certainly are discussions in the Buddhist canonic literature that accord with such a view. The presumptions regarding religion held by many of the authors representing Buddhism to a Western audience led them to selectively construct a version of Buddhism that presents awakening as a mental event. And, there is also the equation of awakening with mystical experience, itself understood as mental. But there are also discussions within Buddhism that present awakening as involving body, speech, and mind equally, and which call into question an exclusive location of agency in the mind.

Seriously considering the relation between meditation and ritual as constructed in the process by which Buddhism was incorporated into modern religious culture facilitates recognizing that three common presumptions about Buddhist practice are problematic. These presumptions are, first, that technologies are context-neutral and value-free, second, that meditation and ritual constitute two distinct natural kinds, and, third, that privileging meditation over ritual conforms to “original Buddhism”—in turn valorized as pure and authentic.

First, contrary to the way in which it is commonly represented in contemporary society, no technology, perhaps especially a “mental technology”, is context-neutral or value-free. That is, the effects of technology depend upon the context within which it is employed, and the use of technology entails values. This is a broader issue, one that includes philosophic, political, economic, and psychological dimensions, and needs to be acknowledged within discussions of the adaptation of meditation. What does it really mean that someone combines, for example, a Zen-style of silent, seated contemplation with Catholic prayer? Would such a combination lead to an experiential awareness of emptiness? Or would it give one a greater sense of connection with God, the Creator and Lord of the Universe?

The Zen example is of course made particularly complex because of the historically early adoption of the language of context-neutral and value-free mental technology by Zen apologists in the West. Thus, the rhetoric is well entrenched, and one finds Zen authorities who will themselves present Zen as in just this fashion. Despite the fact that they are speaking for their own tradition, and no doubt truly believe

the claims they are making, those claims originate in a period of contestation. They were used as a means of justifying the Zen tradition and propagating it in a potentially hostile environment—religious pluralism not being valued in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western and Westernized societies.

Second, the distinction between ritual and meditation is a conventional one, and there is no way in which the two can be clearly delineated from one another. Any attempt to do so is simply a stipulative definition, that is, one that is purely conventional, and potentially idiosyncratic. Rather, what one finds within Buddhism is that meditation is ritualized, and ritual has a meditative function. Three factors contributed to an environment in which Buddhist modernists privileged meditation in their representations of Buddhism to modern, Western audiences. These were, first, the Protestant devaluation of ritual in favor of direct communion with God, second, the Romantic rhetoric of spontaneity as the highest expression of human existence (which is itself an extension of the former), and third, the ideas regarding individual spiritual development as a rational, scientific, and psychological process formulated by modernist occultism. All three of these strains of thought contributed to a positive cultural valuation of meditation at the expense of ritual. Buddhist modernists, in their efforts to make Buddhism relevant to Western audiences and the modern world, created a representation of Buddhism in which meditation is paradigmatic for the entire tradition.

Meditation and ritual, however, do not constitute two separate, natural kinds. Rather, the distinction that is made between them seems to derive from a choice as to what aspect of the practice is being focused on. Commonly, if the mental aspect is the focus of attention, the practice will be considered to be a meditation, while if the physical aspect is given attention, then it will be considered a ritual. There are, of course, terminological distinctions within the tradition that may be interpreted as analogues to the meditation–ritual distinction, but the complexities of invoking those are not involved in the popular perception that the two are autonomously distinct from one another.

A different distinction is based on the way in which the intent of the practice is characterized. If it is described in terms of a mental practice intended for individual psycho-spiritual development, then it will be considered a meditation. If, however, the intent of the practice is described in terms of expressions of devotion, as oriented toward a deity, or as a group activity, then it will tend to be considered a ritual.

Rather than considering ritual and meditation as two separate, distinct categories of activities, it is more accurate to consider ritual as a range of phenomena marked by varying degrees of ritualization, rather than a clearly demarcated category. The idea that ritualization as a scalar measure involving various degrees of various different characteristics—formalization, regularity, and so on—derives from the work of Catherine Bell (1992). Some activities, including meditation, are more highly ritualized than others—more formalized, more strictly defined in terms of sequence, and so on. For example, Sōtō Zen meditation is more ritualized than Korean Sōn meditation (Buswell 1992). Thus, from this perspective, an activity can be both meditation and ritual.

Third, the privileging of meditation is itself a particular polemic construction of Buddhism, one that warps our perception and evaluation of the actual majority of Buddhist practice over the last two and a half millenia, as well as marginalizing a majority of Buddhists in the contemporary world. The styles of meditation that are presented in the West as paradigmatic of Buddhism were in traditional Buddhist societies almost exclusively the domain of religious specialists—and indeed, even within the monastic tradition, were often part of a program of training which for most practitioners ended after a set period. This is the case, for example, with the majority of Zen monks in Japan—the image that we have of a Zen monastery is a Zen training monastery, not the ordinary Zen temple. The widespread promotion of Zen meditation as a practice for lay people is a very modern novelty in Japan. The same is true throughout the Buddhist world.

The relation between Buddhist meditation practices and ritual practices has a long history, and the two cannot be discriminated from one another in accord with the simplistic dichotomy that makes them semiotic opposites commonly found in popular religious culture in the West today. The dichotomy of thought and action, upon which the dichotomy of meditation and ritual is based, is itself an historically conditioned concept, one that is not supported by contemporary understandings of cognition.

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