

EASTERN MEDITATION IN WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY:
PERSPECTIVES FROM ETHICS AND THE SCIENCE-RELIGION DIALOGUE

BY NATHANIEL BINZEN
MAY 8, 2000

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
AND GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL UNION
PSYCHOLOGY 290P / PROF. ELEANOR ROSCH

In this paper, I will consider the status of meditation-in-psychology in a larger context, and consider the thought which underlies Eastern meditative practices in the light of ongoing dialogues between science, ethics, and religions and other sorts of metaphysics.

My reflections here are fragmentary at best; and I can only hope to catch a sliver of the great variety of perspectives in the Eastern and Western traditions. My main intention here is to point to some issues that deserve further treatment.

ONTOLOGICAL ACTUALITY IN A NONSUBSTANTIAL WORLD

Western psychology, like all of Western science, is built on some form of realist suppositions concerning the evidence at hand. Extraordinarily precise rules and principles have been derived by these means, through which scientific disciplines have defined the nature of our world in the largest contexts available to them, from biological evolution to big bang cosmology.

However, in physics and philosophy, it is understood to be more suitable today to speak the language of events and process than of substance. Yet no metaphysical moves are readily available in the sciences to better reflect the underlying, transitory and interconnected nature of physical reality. There is a school of thought in today's generation of researchers in science-and-religion with legacies from Whiteheadian process philosophy. But in the main, practicing scientists tend to ignore the problems of substantialist thinking at their roots. The precision of quantitative research is achieved within a gross descriptive level of matter even if it can be understood to be bound at its limits by a more refined level of nonsubstantialist description with its own set of rules. Psychology as a scientific discipline is many steps up on the hierarchical epistemological ladder which builds from physics, through chemistry, biology, physiology and so on. Because of the practical irrelevance of these foundational questions to a field like psychology, it is intriguing that a similar reorientation is now entering on a very different vector: that of Eastern meditative practice. From a Buddhist perspective, the grand construction of a human psychology is in itself not real, in fact it is one more piece in the puzzle of *samsara*, the distraction that is the cycle of life and death. Thus, Western psychology's confrontation with the Buddhist metaphysics that accompany meditation is really a different case of the scientific thinker's encounter with his/her own denial of nonsubstantiality. Both the Eastern thinking which underlies therapeutic meditation and the conclusions from physics raise the same issues; the difference is that in the case of meditation, the issue is basic to the field of psychology itself.

In any case, for the Buddhist worldview to play the game in the field of western psychology, there's no avoiding the power of critical-realist explorations in the form of quantitative, predictive science. I suspect, then, that the thing for proponents of meditative practice in psychology to do is to find ways of expressing the limits of science and embedding it

in a broader context which does a better job of presenting nonsubstantialist reality coherently, perhaps finding support from contemporary physics.

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ON METHODOLOGY

A related concern with respect to meditation's place in psychology is that of methodology. One of the most compelling developments in the contemporary dialogue between science and Christianity is that both disciplines have adopted the language of "models." As the philosophy of science has refined its epistemological framework in the manner of paradigms and webs of knowledge, Imre Lakatos's scheme of research programs, with central theories protected by belts of supporting hypotheses, has gained influence. Although formal Christian theological "research programs" along these lines have been few in number to date, the language of models is widely used, and the discovery of a methodology that can provide common ground for both scientific and theological research has been a great boon to theologians.

I suggest that it would be desirable for theorists of meditative practice in psychology – and theorists of Buddhist thought generally – to embrace similar approaches. It's not clear to me the extent to which, philosophically, Buddhist teachers would be interested in such an epistemological framework, which would in any case be grounded in a realist theory of knowledge. However, it would be salutary for Buddhist theorists to go this route in the dialogue with scientists, and even more so for advocates of meditation in psychology. Meditation may become a strong player in psychology by virtue of its gradually taking root in actual psychological practice, but finally it requires that a community of scientists give some rope to meditative experience. A common methodological framework could go a long way in making this happen, even if the ways of knowing are very different.

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ON A PROGRESSIVE, EVOLVING WORLD

Consider that humanity is the historical, contingent product of evolution, which is presumably the process by which the human animal's capacity for wisdom awareness has emerged. Let us also grant that reality as we typically know it is empty in the sense of *codependent arising* – that nothing *is* except insofar as it is *in relation* with other things, that nothing has an independent existence. We can ask, then, how does Buddhism understand the relationship between wisdom awareness as it comes to expression in the human being and the necessity of the material evolution of humankind which has made this aware being possible? To what extent is mindfulness/awareness in the meditative sense regarded as related to the emergence of consciousness within historical evolution?

We are exhorted by Buddhism to overcome our grasping after the things of material reality and ordinary consciousness, yet our entire evolutionary history is in some sense a story of grasping. What, then, is the relationship of mind to this history? The exhortation itself is in a similar category of human development as ethics and religion – it is a basic orientation that is not easily reducible to strategies for adaptive advantage. Yet whereas Western ethical traditions are grounded in certain positive assumptions about the nature of things, the meditative view locates positive value in the *relationship between* things. Steven Tainer says that the realization of our *interconnectedness* is the basis of our ethics: when we realize our inter-relation, we can do unto

our neighbor nothing other than what we do unto ourselves, and the deeper our realization is, the further the circle of “neighbor” expands among all beings.¹ The ground of ethics, in this view, is in the mere fact of a world of relatedness. Perhaps in some way this affirms a world that has an evolutionary, progressive unfolding character, suitable for study and enjoyment, *valuable*, yet empty.

A brief reflection on a Christian approach: the Christian tradition, now more than ever, features a huge range of interpretations of the God-world relationship, as the tradition of a fully transcendent, impassible God is ever more refuted and replaced by more *immanent* models of God (God *in* the world and affected by events in the world, e.g., suffering with the world). The essential problem that this turn seeks to address is that of theodicy – that is, what kind of God creates a world with such evil and suffering in it? Such approaches as the kenotic (self-limiting) God; pantheism (the world is *in* God); and process thought (God provides a lure for each event, in which entities freely choose their destiny) are all attempts to overcome the theodicy problem. It’s easier in many ways to deny the need for a divine agent! The Buddhist approach is, however, also resisted by Christians because it posits a world in which “good” and “evil” are on a level field and are capable of flip-flopping eternally. The idea is that Buddhism avoids theodicy at the cost of losing the world’s progressive character – there is no sense that good will prevail in the fullness of time. My temptation is to split the difference, and say, with the natural scientists, that the universe is a place of progressive unfolding in which beings can develop or evolve; with the Christians, that the world has some kind of accessible moral order; and, with the Buddhists, that any such moral development is only in the hands of ourselves and the community in which we exist.

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ETHICS IN A HIERARCHY OF KNOWING

Masao Abe gives an elegant rendering of a hierarchy of knowing – scientific, ethical, and “awakened.” Abe presents the question of ethics in a framework of three dimension, which in effect form a hierarchy, because “all issues are properly...understood *ultimately from the vantage point of the third dimension*”:

1. A nonhuman, natural dimension represented by pure natural science.
2. A transnatural human dimension represented by individual morality, and collective social and historical ethics.
3. A transhuman fundamental dimension represented by religious faith or awakening.²

In the third realm – of spiritual/religious reality, of ultimate value – duality disappears, as judgements of good and bad are overridden by wisdom and compassion. Thus we have the overflowing love and forgiveness of the Christian God, offering, some say, universal salvation. And thus we have the “crazy wisdom” of Buddha by which all of the distinctions we make in order to organize people together in society are actually groundless, and the mind is set on the goal of the enlightenment of all beings.

Seen from the perspective of natural science (level 1), the level of values is real only insofar as it has emerged from the matrix of physical life. The level of awakening is, at best, inaccessible and thus incoherent.

Seen from the perspective of ethical humanity (level 2), nature itself may or may not have value embedded in it, but human life is characterized by moral imperatives, either self-generated or God-given. If a higher religious level is acknowledged, it is seen as the source and final arbiter of consequences for ethical conduct.

Seen from the perspective of fundamental religious faith or awakening (level 3), ethical values are real and necessary for the conduct of human affairs, but these values are extinguished in a higher dimension beyond distinction. But it is essential to recognize that the reason that one can abandon judgement is that one is entering a dimension in which relatedness inevitably dictates compassionate action.

I like Abe's scheme because it suits the dual intuitions that moral judgement really does matter, yet that judgement is not the end of the story. It acknowledges the paradox of ultimacy. At the same time, it slaps down the temptation to downgrade or discredit ethics as biologically based, strictly relative, and ultimately devoid of meaning. Abe's scheme says: pay attention to your ethics, but also realize that, fundamentally, the ethical existence is derived from, or modeled after, compassion as the governing quality.

I see this scheme as helping the discussion concerning ethics in several ways. First, the vantage point of natural science is justifiably wary of the ethical dimension of experience as an ultimate description of reality – and here, the relative nature of ethics is affirmed. Second, however, an attitude of humility is called for in the search for the basis of ethical judgement in values which are inherent in nature and evolutionary biology – because the descriptions from natural science are subordinate to those from human morality. Third, this scheme cannot, on the face of it, provide much comfort to the moralist who makes judgements of good and evil to be the *final* dictate of God. Again, the relative nature of ethics is affirmed. Fourth, the very nature of the third, “fundamental” dimension, in which all judgement is obliterated, is challenging. It offers paradox and mystery. In no way is it a devolving to valueless nature, nor is it a warrant to disregard ethics.

This is easily understood by reflecting on a fundamental paradox in Christian theology. On the one hand, much of the Judeo-Christian tradition is steeped in commandments (thou shall, thou shall not); beatitudes (blessed are...), and judgement (...to judge the quick and the dead...). At its most extreme, the tradition would seem to indicate: we die, and then the judgement comes: heaven or hell. Yet, on the other hand, God is described in terms of gratuitous, overflowing compassion. By these lights, salvation is universal – nothing of creation is excluded from entry into the reign of God, thus all evils, and judgements concerning them, are finally washed over with mercy. From the Buddhist perspective, no doubt both Abe's scheme and the Christian tradition are entirely too over-articulated. To the Buddhist, it is simply the realization of relatedness that both makes distinctions groundless and necessitates the rule of compassion. I think that the straightforward Buddhist understanding can be of great value to some people in therapy. The advantage of Abe's scheme, on the other hand, is that it might serve as a bridge for people seeking a worldview that allows them to import meditative understanding into their existing Western theistic beliefs.

¹ Steven Tainer, during informal sessions at University of California, Berkeley, Psychology Department, February-April, 2000.

² John B. Cobb, Jr., and Christopher Ives, editors, *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 45-50.