

Can There Be a Cultural History of Meditation?

With Special Reference to India

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In these blessed days, interested readers can easily inform themselves about the history of a variety of cultural items. Recent years have seen the publication of books with titles such as *A History of God* (Karen Armstrong, 1993), *A History of the Devil* (Gerald Messadié, 1996), *A History of Heaven* (Jeffrey Burton Russell, 1997), *The History of Hell* (Alice K. Turner, 1993). These are cultural histories, because these authors and most of their readers will agree that God, Heaven, Hell and the Devil are cultural constructs, with no existence outside of culture.

There are other items, however, that are not *only* cultural. One might, for example, study the so-called *historical supernovae*, exploding stars whose first appearances have been recorded in historical documents. The most famous historical supernova is the one that was to give rise to the Crab Nebula; well known to contemporary astronomers, it was observed in 1054 CE by their predecessors

in China.¹ These and many other historical supernovae might be treated in a cultural history of supernovae. Such a study would provide information about the way people in different cultures reacted to this or that supernova. The Chinese reaction, to take an example, might be altogether different from the way, say, medieval Arab astronomers and astrologers reacted to the same phenomenon. Such a cultural history might bring to light various ways in which different cultures (or the same culture at different times) interpreted these heavenly phenomena. But behind the cultural differences there would be objective, not culturally determined facts, viz., the supernovae. Supernovae are not, or rather, not *only*, cultural constructs, and the cultural constructs that are created around them have a core that cannot be taken to be on a par with God, Heaven, Hell, and the Devil, which are.

If we try to study the cultural history of meditation, we have to determine whether meditation is to be categorized with God, Heaven, Hell and the Devil, or rather with historical supernovae. Is there, independently of the cultural context, such a thing as meditation, or meditational states? If we think there is, our study is going to take an altogether different shape than when we think there is not. If we think that there are no such things as meditation and meditational states, our textual sources are the beginning and the end of our enquiry. Just as in the case of the *History of God* or the *History of Heaven* we do not ask what God or Heaven are *really* like, our history of meditation, too, will then proceed unencumbered by such questions. If we do, however, accept that meditation is something quite independent of the way it is interpreted within different cultures, we will wish to know what it is. The comparison with the historical supernovae is valid in this case: Our Chinese, Arabic, or any other sources take on a different dimension once we know that they refer to an objective event that can be confirmed by modern astronomical methods.

I suspect that the editor of this book tries to get around this difficulty by emphasizing meditative *practice*. A document he distributed in preparation of a conference on the issue repeatedly speaks

¹ For a translation of the Chinese and Japanese sources related to the Crab Nebula, see Clark and Stephenson 1977: 140 ff., and Duyvendak 1942.

about meditative practice and, more in particular, about the relationship between meditative practice and interpretation.² This is a clever move because meditative practice is something that outsiders can see and describe, but it is one that I find, in the end, to be unsatisfactory. It is like concentrating on the practice of our ancient astronomers of looking into the sky, while omitting to ask what they were looking *at*. Meditational practice derives at least part, and more probably the whole, of its *raison d'être* from the subjective states it gives rise to, and serious research has to face up to this. Meditational experience (and in some cases suppression of experience) is that which, in our comparison, corresponds to supernovae; without it our study of meditation runs the risk of becoming an empty enumeration of the ways in which certain people in certain cultures sometimes sit down with their eyes closed, and more such uninformative information.

Certain readers, while agreeing with my emphasis on experience rather than practice, will object to my comparison with historical supernovae and consider it simplistic. Meditational states cannot be compared with supernovae; they are altogether different “things”. One cannot separate meditational states from the culture in which they are evoked and experienced.

I am aware of these objections, and I grant that they oblige us to be slightly more precise. We can distinguish not just two, but three positions:

1. Like supernovae, meditational states are there quite independently of their cultural interpretation.
2. Like God and Heaven, there are no meditational states. For reasons that remain obscure, certain cultures talk about these, in the end, non-existent entities.
3. There are meditational states, but they are even in theory inseparable from their cultural context.

² A similar aim underlies Karl Baier's impressive two-volume *Meditation und Moderne* (2009: 21): “In Bezug auf die konkreten Weisen des Meditierens geht es mir einerseits um eine Formgeschichte, also um die Darstellung verschiedener Weisen des Übens und ihrer Entwicklung, sowie andererseits um deren Einbettung in die sinngebenden Zusammenhänge, innerhalb derer sie situiert sind.”

I have the impression that many scholars of mysticism and meditation — which, as the editor of this book observes, “are not the same thing, [but] raise many of the same issues” — may be inclined to accept the third position. Personally, I am willing to consider the possibility that meditational states and the cultural context to which they belong are hard to separate *in practice*. It seems to me, however, that if one is not even ready to consider that they may be separable *in theory*, the very basis of a project like ours would collapse. If the two are indeed inseparable even in theory, there is no way of determining whether, say, a Daoist in China and a Christian monk in Greece are both meditating; or rather, one might feel compelled to say that these people are each engaged in practices characteristic of their own cultures, with no essential features in common apart from, at best, some superficial and potentially misleading similarities. A cultural history of meditation that covers more than one single culture would in that case be difficult, if not impossible.

There is another point that has to be made. Brain studies of meditators have become quite popular of late. This started, if I am not mistaken, with Transcendental Meditation. Now Tibetan Buddhist monks appear to be all the rage. Reports indicate that these studies yield results. It is, of course, possible that more extensive neurological studies will bring to light differences in meditators from different cultures, but our first reaction would be to think that this is indicative of different meditational techniques that were being used, not that different cultures were involved. We might, for example, find consistent differences in brain patterns in the case of Transcendental Meditation and Tibetan Buddhist meditation. We would be more surprised if it turned out that Westerners who had learned to meditate from Tibetan Buddhist monks showed consistently different brain patterns from their teachers, and that in their essential features. I wonder whether brain researchers have ever even considered this possibility, yet this is what we would expect if meditational states were to be inseparable from culture.³

³ I am happy to note that the editor of this book takes the same position as I on this issue, stating: “the influx of Asian meditative traditions in the Euro-American cultural sphere has helped to wipe out traditional boundaries, and with them the

To sum up, I am most willing to consider that there are different meditational states. It is even possible that some meditational states are more frequently practiced in one culture than in another. However, the claim that meditational states are even in theory inseparable from their cultural context seems, for the time being, baseless and not fruitful.

This does not mean that the *interpretation* of meditational states will be independent of the culture in which they are experienced. It seems likely that in this respect, meditational states may be similar to mystical states (which they may also resemble in other respects): a Christian mystic is likely to experience the presence of a Christian sacred entity (God, the Holy Spirit, etc.), where a Hindu mystic may experience a Hindu sacred entity (Brahman, etc.). This, however, is a matter of cultural interpretation. At any rate, this seems to me the most sensible assumption to make if we wish to make progress in this project.

The answer to the question I raised earlier is therefore: Meditational states are rather more like supernovae than like God, Heaven, the Devil and Hell, in that they have an independent reality which culture has not created. Culture can, and will, interpret these states. A cultural history of meditation will therefore comprise a history of cultural interpretations of states that are, in their core, not culturally determined.

It may comprise more than only this, however. I have argued that at least some of the presentations of meditation which we find in our texts and perhaps elsewhere are interpretations of meditational states that have some kind of existence of their own; yet this may not be true of all of them. There may be presentations of meditation that are not linked to any meditational states whatsoever. This is more than a mere theoretical possibility. I will discuss some examples taken from the Indian tradition, where this can be shown (or at the very least argued) to be the case.

specific associations between meditative techniques and cultural and religious institutions.”

Jainism

My first example will be taken from Jainism, due to the fact that it presents an extreme and most curious example of a cultural interpretation of meditational states that were not meditational states at all.

Canonical classificatory texts of the Śvetāmbara Jaina canon enumerated everything that can be covered by the term *jhāna* (Skt. *dhyāna*). This is the term generally used in connection with meditation, primarily in Buddhism yet also in Jainism, but in the early Jaina texts it also covers other forms of mental activity, such as ‘thinking’. By collecting together all that can be covered by this term, these classificatory texts arrived at an enumeration of four types of *dhyāna*: (i) afflicted (*aṭṭa* / Skt. *ārta*), (ii) wrathful (*rodḍa* / Skt. *raudra*), (iii) pious (*dhamma* / Skt. *dharmya*), (iv) pure (*sukka* / Skt. *śukla*).⁴

For reasons unknown to us, these four kinds of *dhyāna* came to be looked upon as four types of *meditation*, enumerated among the different kinds of inner asceticism; so *Viyāhapaṇṇatti* 25.7.217, 237 f./580, 600 f. and *Uvavāiyya* section 30.⁵ The later tradition, when it looked for canonical guidance regarding meditation, was henceforth confronted with a list of four kinds of ‘meditation’, only the last one of which (viz. ‘pure meditation’), should properly be regarded as such.

But things did not stop there. The later Jaina tradition adopted the position that ‘pure meditation’ is inaccessible in the present age (in this world). Sometimes this is stated explicitly, as, for example, in Hemacandra’s *Yogaśāstra*.⁶ More often it is expressed by saying that one has to know the *Pūrvas* in order to reach the first two stages of pure meditation. The fourteen *Pūrvas* once constituted the twelfth *Aṅga* of the Jaina canon. They were lost at an early date.

⁴ So, for example, *Thāṇaṅga* 4.1.61-72/247.

⁵ The opposite confusion occurred, too: in *Āvassaya Sutta* 4.23.4, where the monk is made to repent these four types of *dhyāna*; obviously only the first two are such as should be repented, and these are no forms of meditation.

⁶ *Yogaśāstra* 11.4: *duṣkaram apy ādhunikaiḥ śukladhyānaṃ yathāśāstram*. The editor of the *Yogaśāstra*, Muni Jambuvijaya, quotes in this connection (1149) *Tattvānuśāsana* 36: ... *dhyātum śuklam ihākṣamān aidamṃyugīnān uddīśya* ...

Already the *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (9.40; see Bronkhorst, 1985a: 176, 179 f.) states that knowledge of the *Pūrvas* is a precondition for entering pure meditation. This means that already in the time between 150 and 350 C.E. pure meditation was considered as no longer attainable in this world.

The reasons why 'pure meditation' came to be looked upon as no longer attainable in this world seem clear. It appears to be the almost unavoidable consequence of the gradual exaltation in the course of time of the Jina, and of the state of liberation preached by him. A comparable development took place in Buddhism where early, already superhuman qualities came to be ascribed to *Arhats* (see Bareau, 1957) and release was postponed to a next life.⁷

Whatever the reason may be as to why 'pure meditation' was excluded from actual practice in Jainism, it is clear that all existing practice henceforth had to be assimilated into the descriptions of 'pious meditation'. ('Afflicted *dhyāna*' and 'wrathful *dhyāna*' were, very understandably, considered bad forms of meditation.) This means that two historical developments — (i) the addition of 'pious meditation' under the heading 'meditation' (*dhyāna*); (ii) the exclusion of 'pure meditation' from it — left later meditators with a canonical 'description of meditation' which was never intended for such a purpose.⁸

One can easily imagine countless numbers of Jaina monks in the course of history who seriously and determinedly tried to meditate in accordance with the guidelines handed down in their canonical texts. They did not know, as we do now, that these guidelines were not guidelines; that their meditational practices could not correspond to their canonical muster because the canonical muster never had anything to do with meditation. Some Jainas, presumably only the most determined and enterprising, abandoned the effort and looked for guidance elsewhere, outside the Jaina tradition. There are a number of known cases where Jainas introduced other forms

⁷ In later times the reason adduced for this was often that liberation would become possible after rebirth in the time of a future Buddha, esp. Maitreya; see Kloppenborg, 1982: 47.

⁸ This is not to say that the canonical description of 'pure meditation' is very satisfactory. Hemacandra (*Yogaśāstra* 11.11), for example, rightly points out that the last two stages of 'pure meditation' concern the body rather than the mind.

of meditation into the Jaina tradition, and along with them, of course, the cultural interpretations that accompanied those other forms of meditation. Yet those who were less enterprising, or more traditional, may have gone on trying to practice meditation following guidelines that were not based on meditative experience of any sort whatsoever.

Buddhism

The case of Buddhism is less extreme, and also less bizarre, than that of Jainism. Buddhism too, however, preserved canonical guidelines for the meditating monks which were a scholastic combination of two altogether different practices. The well-known list of nine meditational states is, as I have argued elsewhere, a construction composed of two shorter lists. The two kinds of meditation that find expression in these two shorter lists are quite different from each other and pursue different goals.

One of these shorter lists is the list of four *dhyānas*; the other one the list of the Four Formless States (*ārūpya*, Pa *arūpa*), to which sometimes a fifth is added, the Cessation of Ideation and Feeling (*saṃjñāvedayitanirodha*). The second of these two lists aims at the suppression of all mental activities. The former has a different goal, which I have called “the mystical dimension” for want of a better word. The four *dhyānas* seek to attain an ever deeper “mystical” state, whereas the Four Formless States only aim at suppressing mental activities.

Later Buddhist meditators, like their Jaina confreres, were therefore confronted with confusing canonical guidelines. Those who did meditate made no doubt the best of the situation; some may have decided that the canonical guidelines were of only limited use. However, to my knowledge Buddhist literature never abandoned them. The result is that the philologist who tries to study the cultural history of meditation in India appears to be confronted with data whose connection with real meditation is artificial at best.⁹

⁹ Bronkhorst, 2009: 44 ff.

In these two cases it can be shown, or at least argued, that the descriptions of meditation do not correspond, at least not directly, to real meditational states or to real sequences of meditational states. There may be other cases where our textual material is not sufficient enough to determine whether we are confronted with a scholastic construction rather than a description or interpretation of meditational states. This, of course, makes a cultural history of meditation very difficult.

Where does all this leave us? I stated earlier that a cultural history of meditation must be a history of cultural interpretations of states that are, in their core, not culturally determined. The examples I have discussed show that some of the presumed cultural manifestations of meditational states are nothing of the kind, and may indeed lead us astray. To use the comparison with supernovae: some of the recorded “supernovae” may not correspond to real supernovae; some of the so-called meditational states recorded in religious texts may not correspond to any real meditational states. In some cases, as in the ones just discussed, mere philological diligence may bring to light that there are no meditational states or sequences of meditational states behind certain claims of that nature. In other cases, philology may not be sufficient to render us this service. In those other cases we would like to know more about the “real supernovae”, i.e. the real meditational states that hide behind their cultural manifestations. In other words, just as the historian of the so-called *historical supernovae* needs to know something about real supernovae, in the same way the author of a cultural history of meditation needs to know something about what meditational states really are.

It seems that the editor of this book agrees with this. He speaks, for example, about the “the difficult question of whether or not superficially similar ideas in different cultural contexts still point to the same reality, or whether superficially disparate ideas really point to different phenomena, or are just surface manifestations of the same underlying unity.” He seems to think that a solution has to be reached, and can be reached, by way of an in-depth study of the different sources of information, including texts that describe meditative practices, material culture and visual art, and present-day information about meditation techniques. In other words, he wishes

to know what meditational states really are, and he proposes various methods of getting there.

He may overlook an important factor, however, which he might not have missed if he had thought of the comparison with historical supernovae. In order to understand historical supernovae we need to know all we can about the cultures in which the relevant observations were made. In order to understand real supernovae these historical records are by far not enough, and are of relatively minor importance in comparison to astronomy. Modern astronomy tells us more about real supernovae — what they are, why they exist, how they “work”, etc. — than any amount of historical records.

In the same way, in order to understand real meditational states, and not just what people through the ages have said and thought about them, we need the equivalent of astronomy for human experience and human functioning in general. We need a theory of how humans function, of how meditational and other states come about and are related to other experiences and practices.

Unfortunately there is nothing corresponding to astronomy in relation to the mental functioning of human beings. Yet this is what we need if we wish to make headway.

It is not new to the reader that psychology and the other “human sciences” have not been very successful thus far in presenting us with a general theory of human functioning, and indeed the reader may, like myself, have the impression that the aim of producing such a general theory is not on their list of priorities. Out of frustration, I have myself tried to work out the skeleton of such a theory in my recent book *Absorption: Two Studies of Human Nature* (2012). I will take this theory as my point of departure in what will follow.

Absorption

One of the features of the theory presented in Bronkhorst (2012) is that it presents the human mind as having two levels of cognition: the non-symbolic and the symbolic. Of these two, the non-symbolic level of cognition is fundamental, whereas the symbolic level of cognition is superimposed onto it, largely as a result of the acquisition of language at a young age. The overall combined cog-

niton resulting from these two levels is deeply colored by the multiple associations “added” by the symbolic level of cognition. Normal cognition cannot therefore be directed at an object, say a telephone, without an implicit awareness of its purpose, its relationship to other objects etc.; in short, its place in the world. Non-symbolic cognition does no such thing, but is normally “veiled” by symbolic cognition.

However, non-symbolic cognition can, in exceptional circumstances (and more easily for some individuals than for others), rid itself either wholly or in part of the veil of symbolic cognition. This may happen spontaneously in psychotics and mystics, but also, to at least some extent, through the voluntary application of certain techniques. These techniques may vary greatly, but they will have one thing in common: the special form of concentration I call absorption (see below). Absorption, just as ordinary concentration does to a lesser degree, reduces the number of associations (most of them subliminal). It follows that, if the degree of absorption is high enough, this will have cognitive consequences: experience of the world will be different, and will be accompanied by the conviction that this “different” reality is more real than that of the world ordinarily experienced. It will indeed be more real in the sense that the “veil” that normally separates us from the objects of cognition will have been removed, or at least thinned, resulting in less that separates us from them.

We might, provisionally, call “meditation” all those techniques that “thin” the “veil” that is due to symbolic cognition. This kind of meditation, whatever precise form it takes, will then be characterized by absorption and, if the absorption is deep enough, will have an effect on cognition. However, there is more.

Absorption has a further effect. Deep absorption gives rise to feelings of bliss. This is an effect quite different from the one mentioned earlier — modified cognition — and is due to a different mechanism, although this is not the occasion to describe that mechanism. Its consequence is all the more interesting in the present context, for it adds a further characteristic to what we provisionally call “meditation”. This kind of meditation is characterized by absorption, by modified cognition (access to a “higher reality”), and by bliss.

Let me now say more about absorption. Absorption is a form of concentration, but is not quite like the concentration one experiences within daily life. It is accompanied by, and in a way based upon, a deep relaxation of body and mind. Due to such deep relaxation of body and mind, absorption can reach depths that ordinary concentration cannot. Some people attain absorption without special techniques (we tend to call them mystics), some others do so with the help of certain techniques, and most of us do not normally attain degrees of absorption of any depth in spite of all our efforts. A clear understanding of the way the word meditation is used here will allow us to distinguish between different practices that are indiscriminately called meditation in scholarly literature.

Before we pursue our reflections about meditation, it is worthwhile to point out that the three features identified above — absorption, special cognition and bliss — recur in many descriptions of mystic states. This confirms that the kind of meditation we are concentrating on has these features in common with mysticism, and can in a way be looked upon as self-induced mysticism. Let us refer to this kind of meditation as meditation₁.

Meditation₁ corresponds to one of the two types of meditation I distinguished in my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (1993a). It is the meditation introduced in India by Buddhism. Absorption and bliss are essential features of this kind of meditation; the cognitive effect is, in the early Buddhist texts, to some extent overshadowed by the emphasis laid on the cognitive realization (“liberating insight”) associated with the final and definitive transformation that can be brought about by the practitioner while in the deepest state of absorption. More recent texts, both within and without the Buddhist tradition, emphasize the cognition without “conceptual constructs” that is accessible to those who practice this kind of meditation. The terms used are *vikalpa* and *kalpanā*, and the texts often point out that these conceptual constructs are the result of verbal knowledge. This, of course, looks very much like another way of saying what was observed above, viz., that the symbolic level of cognition is due, wholly or in part, to the acquisition of language.

It may be noted in passing that the transformation referred to in the early Buddhist texts is not presented as a result of meditation,

or of absorption for that matter, but rather as the result of a procedure undertaken while in deepest absorption.

Meditation₁ distinguishes itself, often explicitly and in critical terms, from what we may call meditation₂; both are designated by the same term *dhyāna* in Indian texts. Meditation₂ is quite different from meditation₁, and should strictly speaking not be called meditation at all, or at any rate not in the way in which we have chosen to use this term. Meditation₂, unlike meditation₁, is not characterized by absorption, bliss and cognitive effects. It rather has its place in a wider belief system in which the suppression of all activity is a *sine qua non* for escaping the effects of one's deeds, i.e. escaping from karmic retribution. Meditation₂ has its place in a number of early movements different from Buddhism that were intent on such an escape, among them Jainism. Notably, the word Yoga in the early texts covers practices that are of this nature.

In terms of the theory proposed in Bronkhorst (2012), it appears that absorption plays no role in meditation₂, mainly because it is not based upon a profound relaxation of body and mind. Indeed, its forcible, violent nature is not only clear from the descriptions provided by texts close to its practitioners, but also from the criticism directed at it in Buddhist texts that do not sympathize. It is here we find, for example, the method of closing the teeth and pressing the palate with the tongue in order to restrain thought, both in texts that criticize and those that promulgate this practice.¹⁰

Conclusion

It follows from the above that not all the practices that go by the name meditation (in India: *dhyāna*, etc.) necessarily have much, or indeed anything, in common. At the same time it is reasonable to assume that practices that on the surface have nothing in common may yet belong together. The main characteristics of meditation₁, for example — absorption, bliss, cognitive effects — may result from a number of superficially different practices such as yogic concentration, fixing the mind on God, reciting texts and rhythmic movements. Even completely “non-religious” practices (say, surf-

¹⁰ See, e.g., Bronkhorst, 1993a: 1, 48.

ing) may bring about states of absorption deep enough to create bliss, though normally with no recognizable cognitive effects.

Seen in this way, the study of meditation takes us into a realm that is not limited to meditational practice. We are here confronted with an aspect of mental functioning that also finds expression elsewhere. This is not surprising, because we are dealing in all these domains with the same human mind. A theoretical understanding of the functioning of the human mind is our only hope to ever make sense of the variety of practices that we tend to assemble under the banner of “meditation”.