

Book Review IV

Halvor Eifring, *Meditation and Culture: the Interplay of Practice and Context*. Bloomsbury Press. London, Delhi, New York and Sydney, 2015. £64.99. 240 pp. ISBN: 9781472579911.

Reviewed by Sarah Shaw

Over the last decade Halvor Eifring has been undertaking an inter-disciplinary research project to explore the nature of ‘meditation’ and the cultures in which it is practised and undertaken. A conference was held near Oslo in 2011, bringing together the work of scholars contributing to this. This book of edited essays is one product of this, and links to other volumes still to be published. As Eifring notes, meditation studies can avoid cross-cultural comparisons, and can sometimes, by emphasising the transmission of doctrine, underplay the actual mechanics of the practice and focus only on the theory and external ramifications, rather than exploring the detail of the practices themselves, and how they relate to others, in their own and other contexts. As he says, ‘the volume seeks to integrate a number of different perspectives, and, in doing so, to argue for a multifaceted rather than a one-directional relationship between practice and context’ (page 4).

In some ways the attempt at cross-cultural comparison through a series of papers on widely disparate historical and geographical areas, and through the lens of a number of different disciplines, that include historical, literary, ethnographic, philological, anthropological and modern neuro-scientific studies, might seem impossible; there are just too many variables. That they are simply acknowledged and discussed cogently, with an open-minded willingness to attempt to cross cultural and disciplinary boundaries is one of the great strengths of this collection. This is a subject that is becoming increasingly important,

and, as this volume demonstrates, the attempt itself is rewarding, scholarly and, in the light of recent interest, ever more needed. The undertaking is helped considerably by the way Eifring's editorship has ensured considerable care has been taken by contributors to cite and to draw out points of comparison with the issues and terminology discussed by other papers in the volume. Reference to discussion within the conference, detailed well in individual papers, also means that the book works coherently as a broad study, despite what would appear at first sight great obstacles in terms of language, culture, doctrine and practice, with studies covering highly distinct regions and periods of history.

The book is divided into four sections, reflecting various preoccupations of the study: 'Traveling Practices', which explores some adaptations of practices imported from other geographical regions; 'Competing Practices', focusing on periods when practices appear to have had some rivalry with others; 'Competing Cultures', that looks at the way a single practice or series of them may be undertaken within different traditions in the same region; and 'Cultural Mosaics', where a number of different practices are investigated together in various ways.

Clearly there is much overlap between these loose categories, as the editor notes.

Section One

Livia Kohn starts the collection off with a strong discussion of various Buddhist insight practices, and the way that they were adapted and changed in Daoist settings in China. This gives an excellent and detailed insight into Daoist practice, and the article demonstrates the various stages and processes whereby the exercises are integrated into Daoist thought as well as practice. There could perhaps have been more examination of the terms *śamatha/samatha*, as this is less clearly differentiated and defined (page 14); the overall argument and demonstration of their absorption, is however, greatly helpful and informative. Standaert's examination of Ignatian practices in seventeenth-century China in the next article is quite fascinating, and demonstrates the strengths an undertaking such as this book represents. His introduction to the exercises in China is detailed and careful about both Chinese and Latin contexts, and how they worked with one another. Focusing on 'visual meditations' he demonstrates that the visual and written materials accompanying the movement of Ignatius Loyola's practice into works published in China were absorbed and accepted so easily precisely because they were understood in terms of pre-existing visualisation exercises,

whose Chinese Daoist, and to a certain extent Buddhist sources are carefully examined and translated for us. His analysis of the vocabulary accompanying such exercises, and its adaptations, in both Chinese and Latin, sets an exemplary model for such an undertaking. The final article in this section, by Øyvind Ellingsen and Are Holen, approaches the subject from the point of view of modern scientific techniques that examine meditative states, such as neuro-imaging and biomedical criteria. As they observe, there is currently no generally agreed consensus on how to classify such states in clinical health trials. Of course scholars skilled in one field cannot be expected to have comparable knowledge of others. Anyone, however, with an interest in the subject who has been frustrated by reading articles that seem to employ highly sophisticated scientific terminology and clearly convincing readings of neurological evidence, but lack a sense of the proper use of meditative terms, will attest to the need for work in making the finds of different disciplines accessible to others, as a two-way process. The article helpfully attempts a categorisation of some modern classifications of such states and to this decidedly unknowledgeable ‘lay person’ in science, appears a useful and cogent start to such classificatory work.

Section Two

This section’s exploration of ‘rivalry’ between practices in a particular tradition starts with a welcome study by Robert H. Sharf of the plethora of practices that appear to characterise early Chán schools, and the odd lack of evidence as to their detail. Is early Chán a meta-discourse, dependent on earlier practices, or was the promulgation of any one practice, such as *dhyāna*, seen as dualistic, and thus anathema to the ‘sudden ‘enlightenment’ schools? Sharf argues, on the basis of texts dating back to Dunhuang Chán, Daoxuān (596–667) and Zōngmi (780–84), that the early Chán approach might not have been as antinomian as it appears, but possibly represented a populist attempt to isolate practice from monastic discipline and technical Buddhist theory. Sharf is an often contentious scholar, but his comparison with the situation then and the way the modern secular mindfulness movement offers an operationalised wisdom, that conflates *jhāna/dhyāna* and wisdom, while likewise offering laypeople an alternative to a monastic lifestyle and the study of Buddhist doctrine, seems curiously inspired: like modern insight-based movements in Southern Buddhism, and the mindfulness schools that have inherited much of their doctrine, the Chán schools were attempting, he suggests, to isolate Buddhist practices from their usual context in an appeal to a larger audience. Rur-bin Yang’s article focuses on

the ‘practice of reverence’ in neo-Confucianism, a way of integrating movement with the stillness that is deepened in ‘quiet sitting’, and how textual evidence has previously been read to suggest that some sort of tension existed between the two approaches. Ying subjects the terminology associated with this practice to philological scrutiny, and argues that the mild polemic against ‘quiet sitting’ found in its descriptions results from a sense that more is needed than *just* ‘quiet sitting’; the practice is a means of translating and applying the quietude found into ethical action, thus ensuring that it is fully realised. So it is complementarity and balance, rather than rivalry, which are the issue here. Eifring’s article on meditative pluralism in Hānshan Déqīng raises at the outset the difficulty, also explored by Sharf, in finding actual meditational advice amongst the eulogistic works extolling the benefits of meditation: for whatever reason, in China such material is hard to find. Exploring in some detail, however, the known types of practice in Hānshan Déqīng, including Buddha name recollection, *gong’an*, the generation of doubt, and ‘beyond sound’ meditations, he concludes that Hānshan’s originality lay in his very syncretism, and in the contribution he brings to collating and reinterpreting a number of different practices, thus unifying and handing on a potentially chaotic collection of various exercises current at the time. His choices and arrangements of these are, he says, not a reflection of a lack of organisation or of conflict, rather a means of suggesting ways that they might work at different times, for different people, with creative input reflecting his own practice and meditative interests. This is a strong article, and brings together a considerable amount of information on Chinese practice, as interpreted by Hānshan.

Section Three

The third section looks at the way that a single meditative practice can be deployed with different and apparently competitive intent in often highly diverse traditions. This section covers Hindi *sants*, the Islamic, Indic and Javanist elements of the Sumarah movement and the various types of Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Korean folklore involved in the cinnabar-field meditation. Daniel Gold has conducted a considerable amount of field work in India, filming and writing about chant, ritual and meditation within communities where they are still practised and undertaken: his article reflects the immediacy of this prolonged contact with these living traditions. Exploring terms such as *yoga* and *bhakti*, he examines the phenomenon of the North Indian *sants* from the fifteenth century to the present day, through

poetry, recorded techniques of practice and, in particular, the practice of *śabda*, by the eighteenth century an esoteric practice associated with varying degrees of devotional meditation. He traces its history to modern yogins, such as Thakur Mansingh Kushwah, known as Malik Sahib, and the Malikdasi guru known as Yogiraj Nanak Chand, and examines the principles behind the role of the guru in the *sant* tradition. He argues that it is a means not only of providing loyalties within traditions, but also of reconciling often radically different practices, in new and creative ways, within one lineage. He also, usefully, notes strong affinities between the esoteric energy channels exploited in practices that characterise this tradition and the Dikr practices undertaken in Sufi contexts, as well as the Daoist ‘snake’ energies, arguing that while some relationship or contact is feasible either way in regard to the Near Eastern and East Asian traditions, we should also not exclude the possibility that ‘the potential paths for the flows of psychic energy within it are basically the same across humankind.’ (page 146). This is a welcome comment by a scholar in a field in which critical comment tends to polarise between a rather woolly universalism and a sometimes narrow demand for signs of ‘textual influence’ or ‘plagiarism’: Gold’s points of clear comparison are detailed and realistic. Paul D. Stange’s article moves the discussion to the presence of Islam in Java, and to the argument that different cultures, at different times, privilege different areas of religious and contemplative activity, and that this in itself is as worthy of investigation as the theory itself. This, he argues, is particularly important in understanding the way Islam is practised by the new movements such as Subud for whom gnosis (*nghemu*) is not based on the subtleties of philosophical discourse, or ideology, but ‘refer quite precisely to knowledge of and through the whole body rather than that which is mediated by the intellect in isolation’ (page 161); the history of meditation practices should not just focus ‘on shifts and and substitutions in the phenomenological realms of social organization or ideological image’.

This suggestion is acted on in the subsequent article, that takes the cinnabar-field meditation, which locates and moves the *qi* within the body, and discusses its varied application in the several traditions in which it is practised in Korea. Although it did not originate in Korea, it has become something of a hallmark of Korean practice in many traditions, and, Baker argues well, should be discussed more in books on meditation alongside the more usual delineation of Seon practices.

Section Four

The last section takes a different perspective, and discusses ‘mosaic’ meditative traditions, which have absorbed elements from many different traditions. As Hannah Havnevik makes clear, Tibetan Chöd (‘cutting’) meditation as practised by Ani Lochen Rinpoche is a composite, particularly popular amongst women, that integrates Bön with other, imported elements. This largely narrative discussion gives a readable and interesting description of the way this practice has developed and has been given life by Ani Lochen. Next, an important article by Muthukumaraswamy discusses Vedic chanting and the Tamil Śaiva tradition. Discussing the interplay of text, ritual, pictorial image and poetry, the author explains the way this tradition is associated with householders’ practices, and the article gives a detailed picture of the complexity of ritual, *yantra*, chant and bodily investigation involved. While Muthukumaraswamy does not mention the fact, this tradition is particularly significant for anyone who studies Southern Buddhism, as it shares, curiously, many elements in common with comparable lay traditions discussed by Kate Crosby in Southeast Asia, where Na Mo Bu Ddha Ya is key instead of Na Mo Śi Vai Ya.¹ Eifring finishes off the book with a thematic analysis, investigating the attitude to spontaneous thoughts in various quite distinct traditions, including several Chinese schools, the Christian *Cloud of Unknowing*, and the *Yogasūtras*. He demonstrates ways that the arising of spontaneous thoughts, which may or may not foster the development of the meditation, are treated and analysed in different settings, and treated with a slightly different emphasis in each, but sharing some common features. This kind of cross-disciplinary, cross-tradition study may have necessary limitations, in that spontaneity is itself perhaps a modern notion, and applies to different things in different schools, but Eifring’s article draws notable parallels, and refreshes one’s sense of how meditation systems work and how they can be compared. By asking new questions, he gets some new answers too, and finds points of affinity in quite separate meditative traditions. The essay shows how this sort of investigation can and should be conducted, and as such is a fitting way to conclude this adventurous book.

This compilation is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather demonstrates ways that cross-cultural comparison can usefully be undertaken. Despite this, the

¹ Kate Crosby, *Traditional Theravāda Meditation and its Modern-Era Suppression*, Hong Kong: Buddha Dharma Centre of Hong Kong 2013. The book’s five chapters are organized by the Na Mo Bu Ddha Ya formula.

underlying themes of the book would have been helped by, for instance, some consideration of modern Southern Buddhist practice, where text, ritual and a still living tradition are all operating together in a way that the other contexts cannot always provide. By highlighting areas of actual technique and practice, however, in traditions such as chanting, cinnabar-field practice and devotional exercises, often neglected in studies of meditation, this book extends the scope of academic research and demonstrates the way that such fields could be further explored, and need to be. Often essential components of meditations in their own cultural contexts, such as chanting and devotional practice, are often neglected by scholars, both East and West, perhaps influenced by now pervasive Protestant views of what meditation ‘should’ be. Indeed I must confess that years ago I noticed how often words like ‘just’ or ‘mere’ precede reference to many chanting and devotional activities, to the extent that they offered highly effective search terms when scrolling through PDFs of articles and books on Buddhism as a way of finding more about the often neglected cultural context and supports for what we in the West like to call meditation practice. That this book explores these supports, background factors and the way practices may be designed to complement one another, is an important development for our understanding the nature of any particular meditation practice within any tradition. The compilation, in many ways such as this, offers directions and suggested avenues of discussion for other scholars working in related fields, perhaps in different disciplines.

One feature that would have been helpful to this book would have been some attempt at a definition of the very term ‘meditation’ in the introduction. In the introduction the editor notes that the very language for words we term ‘meditation’ is used in a number of different ways in different cultures, but some reference to those articles where approximations to our modern usage of the term, and its modern application, would have been useful. Various contributors do explore this term, ably and with philological care. As Standaert notes, citing Jens Braarvig’s talk at the conference, the term has undergone significant transformations itself, from its early origins (page 25). He points out that the word has historical roots in some sort of verbal or sub-verbal activity (‘murmuring in a low voice’), but has come to mean also, and even more so, a non-verbal undertaking; other articles indicate the way that supplementary practices to non-verbal ‘meditation’ are often considered essential.

The articles in this book are all intelligently analytic, observation-based and filled with information that a scholar or general reader approaching a particular

area without prior knowledge will find helpful and informative. All the scholars involved have been, happily, slow to draw too many quick conclusions, but careful in their presentation of textual and field evidence, and in ensuring this is balanced with analytic comment and suggestion that aids further investigation for those who may be coming from other disciplines and areas of prime interest. So this book offers a significant contribution to study of a field notoriously difficult to document or discuss in academic terms. Norway is, of course, the home to a particular kind of even-handed internationalism. This feels a very Norwegian project, and Eifring is to be congratulated for a courageous undertaking, that brings this spirit of fairness and search to the study of so many different kinds of meditation. That such study has been achieved without sacrificing scholarly care and substantiation is a credit to the editor and the book's contributors. Only collaboration between scholars in neuro-science, philology, textual analysis, anthropology, ethnography and religious studies will make further work in the field of the study of meditation and related areas possible. This book offers a distinguished start to these studies: one is left with a solid sense that steps have been taken to a new understanding and accord between scholars working in different fields, and with different background research interests, on a subject that is now coming to be considered so important in matters of health, social benefit and the well-being of the individual.