



Meditation from Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist Perspectives

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Preface

My original title for this book was “Dancing on the Edge of Oblivion: Demystifying Meditation.” However, my publisher wanted a title that would be more search-engine-friendly by providing thematic information that would locate the text for those seeking material on my main topics. Hence, though the original title has changed, the core content and direction remain the same. I will demystify meditation, in *some* of its classic forms, and show how this demystification takes us to the edge of what I metaphorically describe as a kind of psychological oblivion where we see through (see the empty nature of) the fetters and constraints that impede our ability to joyfully dance through life.

Although synthesizing worldviews is somewhat out of fashion in the contemporary academic world, I use a multi-tradition body of literature to create a guide to meditation practice that cuts through the hype and jargon that often surrounds this subject. I use material from Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.¹ I do not claim that these “systems” can be reduced to some universal mystical tradition; that kind of project would conflict with this book’s goal (and original title) of demystifying meditation. However, I argue and demonstrate that common elements and insights are embedded within these traditions. I synthesize these commonalities into a working model that demystifies the practice of meditation while remaining grounded in the most important ideals embodied in the traditional perspectives.

Meditation, in its demystified form, is best understood as a means to develop optimal psychological health or well-being. Meditation practice, when stripped of its metaphysical and religious veneer, transforms one’s psychological horizon by “rewiring” the structural framework through which we process information. One of the shared intuitions that I unearth is the way these traditions share basic presumptions about the psychology of well-being, happiness, and contentment, and about the kind of psychological

structures that impede the development of these qualities. Enough family resemblances exist across traditions to explain and demystify meditation practice—where the focus of the practice rests on a psychology of transformation rather than attainment of some supreme metaphysical ideal, although success in the former (psychological transformation) may (as a default) produce the latter (attainment of the supreme ideal).

Originally, I intended to write a short basic introduction to some of the types of meditation practice, to demystify meditation and show how its practice could be relevant in a contemporary context. However, as the project developed, it became clear that I could not do justice to the topic with a mere superficial gloss. It would be impossible to develop any kind of genuine understanding of meditation, or really engage the practice, without understanding the animating principles from which the practices arose. Hence, the scope of the project expanded. To go beyond a mere gloss of the topic, I would need to include a broader spectrum of material, explore that material in a reflective as well as explanatory manner, and then apply the results of that analysis to the contemporary context in a way that was philosophically and psychologically relevant.

Once I expanded the scope of the project, I was confronted with a tension within the project itself. I wanted the book to be readable for anyone with a strong interest in the topic and not be confined to scholarly details for academics only. That approach (limiting the audience to the professionals) would clearly miss the key point of meditative development. The practice of meditation, its lessons, and the way its insights transform the practitioner's psychology need to be expressed in an accessible, as well as usable, form. In meditative development, theory and practice must work together.

However, I also wanted to produce a work grounded in respect for scholarship, and authentically represent the body of literature upon which a mature understanding of meditation stands. I have tried to maintain this delicate balance. Where necessary, I have tried to keep technical scholarly issues confined to notes. Nonetheless, sometimes some pretty deep depths must be fathomed. Such is the nature of meditation practice in its genuine form, even if we remove the metaphysical and mystical gloss. And any thorough reading of the primary sources confirms that the history of this body of philosophical literature always centered on detailed examination of how theory functioned in practice.

Starting from the most basic material, I build an honest and intellectually satisfying explanation of the central elements animating these meditative traditions. I blend traditions and use the material that I take to be most efficacious for developing an authentic practice rooted in what I see as the most important aspects. I believe I have been faithful to the spirit of the

traditions. Different types of meditation practices are introduced, starting from the most basic material and progressing to detailed and probing explorations of the more advanced insights (and dilemmas) that arise in the mature stages of development. Supporting worldviews and metaphysical presumptions are examined and assessed, and the reader is asked to explore the depths of consciousness and human development from the perspective of these traditions.

The story here is one of self-transformation and transcendence. The philosophies that I explore, unlike contemporary Western philosophy,² share the ideal that genuine wisdom must transform our psychological horizons. In these traditions, that transformation included the transcendence of suffering.³ The relationship between meditation and this transcendence of suffering (e.g., the psychology of suffering) is a central developmental theme of this book. The ideals embodied in these traditions represent “philosophies of happiness” and “psychologies of contentment.” A principal part of my thesis is how those ideals blossom within the context of the original teachings and how meditative development relates to those ideals. I then show how the original practices, coupled with their underlying philosophic and psychological ideals, are rich enough to survive their demystification and remain applicable antidotes for those who, like their ancient counterparts, seek a viable means to transcend unnecessary suffering.

The book thus presents a kind of meditation manual, in the spirit of these traditions where practice is rooted in theory but theory must always be confirmed by practice. The demystification will emerge as the reader journeys through the subtle psychological world of meditation practice and theory. However, if I am correct, the culmination of demystified meditation practice takes us to the edge of a kind of oblivion—perhaps “psychological oblivion” best captures the idea—and once we have been to that metaphorical edge, at least according to tradition, the insubstantial and nonessential roots of suffering are exposed in the light of meditative insight. However, no leap over that edge is necessary. A glimpse over the symbolic edge reveals the empty, nonbinding nature of suffering and awakens us to dance playfully, joyfully, on the edge of oblivion.

The academically grounded reader should note that I am trying *to create* a viable model by connecting material from the different traditions, in support of my position that meditation practice is best understood as a means to transform one’s psychology. The selection of supporting sources is thus driven by their relationship to the psychological model that I am developing and not (as noted above) by any grand philosophical attempt to argue that these traditions can be reduced to one all-encompassing paradigm. I am fully

aware that that particular brand of reductionist project is outdated and, in the eyes of the contemporary academic community, cannot be sustained. Throughout the book, I present detailed explanations, analyses, and assessments of differences between the traditions, as these differences are relevant to meditation practice. And though I do argue in places that the differences can be seen as simply different ways of describing the same phenomenon, no reductionist underpinning is necessary for the overall success of my project.

However, the fact that the reductionist project has (until now) failed in no way precludes the emergence of strong family resemblances (e.g., similarities in meditation practices, *similar* characterizations of mind, *similar* psychologies) across traditions. And, of course, a central part of the work I do here demonstrates the reasonableness of the similarities that I find. These family resemblances are supported by independent arguments, and none of those arguments presuppose any reductionist assumptions. Hence, I only request that my work be judged on the quality of its content in relation to my goal and not on any prior assumptions about the impossibility of finding cross-tradition similarities.

One such family resemblance is the way that successful meditation practice transforms the human psyche. All of the traditions noted above (especially in their culminating literature) view the practice of meditation as a means to reach their respective supreme ideals. They all view meditation as an introspective process, and they are able to communicate with each other about the nature of meditation. They often argue with each other about subtle differences but (as I will show) frame the basic problem to be solved in very similar terms.⁴ For example, these traditions (subtle nuances aside) share a commitment to the notion that meditation practice has a confirmatory function (e.g., success in practice confirms the underlying worldview). Once the respective worldview is confirmed, a transformation in the individual's psychology results.

I also, as noted above, argue that in spite of the fact that these are very different traditions that arise from very different worldviews, certain common characterizations about human nature permeate the literature. For example, in all three of these traditions we can find a form of meditation practice built upon what I call in the text "The Witnessing Practice."⁵ I find this family resemblance important for my project because the use of this particular practice (across traditions) implies a somewhat similar view of the nature of "mind." The commonality of this particular practice leads me to the conclusion that the compiler's of these (technically different) "systems" all shared a similar perspective on the fundamental nature of meditation's central problem and orientation—observing the fluctuations of thought.

Finally, all three traditions clearly view the ego as an impediment to spiritual growth/development and view attachments and desires as particularly problematic areas on the journey of negotiating their respective paths.

I contend that meditation practice (in any legitimate form) must drive practitioners to the same foundational insight (however that is labeled). We can be eclectic from a methodological perspective but not from a teleological viewpoint. The argument here is quite simple. All of these traditions view mind content (thoughts, desires, emotions, etc.) as an accretion that conceals a more rudimentary condition. This prior condition (i.e., prior to the accretion) is characterized as one's "true/original nature" or "essential self." Finding this prior condition is one of the central goals of meditation practice across traditions. If that characterization is correct, then there are three possibilities in relation to the cross-tradition conversation. The first possibility is that the insights/realizations towards which all forms of meditation are directed are complete frauds—there is nothing (i.e., "true nature") to discover. If that option sounds correct, you may want to stop here. The second possibility is that one tradition has exclusive access to truth—one tradition's form of practice delivers the goods and the rest are all frauds. The final possibility is that there is a bedrock condition of human consciousness that can be accessed using different methodologies. Obviously my sympathies lie with the third possibility, and if I am right then the tried and tested meditative traditions are, in their own ways, talking about the same thing. And given that foundation, my bucking the current antireductionist paradigm is, at least, defensible.

Regarding the sources, I have tried to use accessible sources that remain faithful to the traditions. I want all readers to be able to have easy access to the source texts. I do not believe this commitment to easy access in any way undermines the quality of the sources, but I am aware that some scholars may view that commitment on my part as a "problem." However, the selection of sources is consistent with the project's central goals—a fair representation of the literature (as it relates to building my model) and a desire to write for an audience beyond the narrow limits of professional academia. While any professional can easily find the relevant sources, grounding the material in technical scholarly sources would create legitimate access problems for the nonprofessional.

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Notes

- ¹ Of course, there is no one system that characterizes any one tradition, and all of these traditions are full of internal disputes about which particular sect's system is correct. However, my focus here is on finding similarities and then using those similarities to develop my own synthesized model.
- ² I have always found this odd given the reverential place Socrates holds in the Western tradition. For Socrates nothing was more important in philosophy than that it transformed the lives of its participants, and in this small (maybe not so small) way he had far more in common with the ancient Asian philosophers than he does with the current state of the art.
- ³ I am not here claiming (at least not this point) that these traditions all reduce to a version of the Buddhist project, and I fully realize that this characterization may disturb those readers inclined for more detailed distinctions. However, it does seem to me (and I will show) that the transcendence of suffering is a driving force (e.g., bliss is Hinduism, contentment in Taoism) across traditions. Hence, my only defense at this point is the "as I will show" caveat for those disturbed by the generalization.
- ⁴ Certainly there are differences, and it would be foolish to deny that fact. However, at this point, I am only trying to justify my sympathies for the "similarity thesis." In technical terms, indeterminacy and incommensurability worries do not mitigate the possibility for the cross-tradition conversation.
- ⁵ The witnessing model is a stock Hindu practice in both Vedānta and Sāṅkhya. It is also the central practice in Buddhist Vipassana meditation, and a version of the practice can be found in Thomas Cleary's *Taoist Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000).