

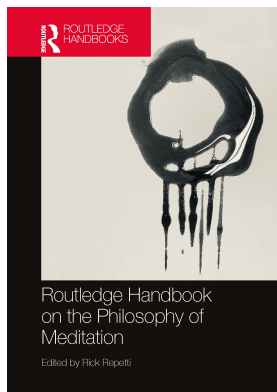
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MEDITATION IN THE CONTEXT OF A NATURALIZED EUDAIMONIC BUDDHISM

Seth Zuihō Segall

1 Introduction

According to my naturalized, eudaimonic interpretation of Buddhism (2020), the endpoint of Buddhist practice is a kind of exceptional well-being attained within a single lifetime.¹ This account is based on the epistemological assumptions that (a) human beings can never know reality *simpliciter*, and (b) reality can never be exhaustively described, and the existential assumption that (c) human beings desire lives that are happy and good. In this chapter, I describe the experience of Zen *shikantaza* (‘just sitting’) meditation in its ordinary and extraordinary manifestations and consider its soteriological value within this naturalized eudaimonic context. I argue that *shikantaza* facilitates progress along the path towards a naturalized eudaimonic enlightenment that includes wise relationships with desire and aversion, enhanced metacognitive awareness, intimacy with embodied experience, and awareness of interrelatedness. *Shikantaza* can also counterbalance the hyper-rationality and hyper-individualism that are consequences of the modern Western mode of being that promotes alienation from nature, our bodies, and the experiential ground of being. This chapter demonstrates how philosophy can clarify an understanding of meditation, and how meditation can, in turn, serve as a vital resource for philosophy, especially when construed as including ways of seeing the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and ways of life (Hadot 1995).

I have argued (2020) that traditional Buddhist teachings include sets of beliefs that most modern Westerners – myself included – find implausible given our prior commitments to naturalism and empiricism, and our intuitions about flourishing derived from the Greek tradition. Among these are beliefs concerning rebirth, celestial bodhisattvas, and the existence of a final end-state of perfect enlightenment. Consequently, many Western Buddhists tend to reinterpret, modify, or discard certain Buddhist beliefs. This is why a naturalized, eudaimonic Buddhism is becoming the modal form of Buddhist practice among Western Buddhists. It is a form of practice more relevant to the problems motivating Westerners to engage in Buddhist practice, and more congruent with core Western assumptions about the nature of self and world (Segall 2020, 2021).

Most modern Westerners don’t experience any existential urgency about ending the cycle of rebirth. It’s an idea that *might* be true, but who knows? It isn’t the prime motivation for their Buddhist practice, although it allegedly initially motivated the Buddha and the resulting Buddhist path. For most Westerners, Buddhist practice remains about reducing suffering and

becoming better people, however one understands those terms. This naturalized interpretation of Buddhism redefines the end-goal of Buddhist practice. Enlightenment is transformed from a finally realized state of perfection into a horizon one progresses toward but never reaches. In this revised understanding, the well-being of advanced Buddhist practitioners is never perfect well-being. Well-being can always be better, and there is no absolute level of it to be had. Suffering can be ameliorated, but some is inevitable. Advanced practitioners are not completely liberated, but possess a superior level of subjective well-being and lead relatively admirable lives. The end-goal of Buddhist practice is not an end to rebirth, but a happiness and excellence characterized by mindfulness, discerning wisdom, equanimity, and compassion in this (one and only) life.

To differentiate this from traditional enlightenment, I call it ‘eudaimonic’ enlightenment – an end-goal not understood as a complete end to desire and attachment, but characterized by the development of wise desire and wise attachment: the wisdom to know which desires and attachments are beneficial and consonant with one’s highest values, and the skillfulness to pursue them appropriately. This understanding retains Buddhism’s emphases on compassion, loving-kindness, and non-harming, but recognizes virtues neglected in Buddhism, e.g., courage and justice. It acknowledges aesthetic creativity and appreciation, and familial and romantic attachment as important constituents of well-being. Finally, while preserving Buddhist insights into non-self and nonduality, it recognizes the value of our embodied sense of being selves.

2 Foundational assumptions

This naturalized eudaimonic interpretation rests on three foundational assumptions, that: (a) we can never know reality *simpliciter*, but only what reality is for us; (b) what experiential reality is for us is too complex to be exhaustively comprehended or described; and (c) we are all trying to live the best lives possible – lives subjectively happy and good, however we understand those terms.

2.1 Limits on our ability to know reality

The first foundational assumption – that we cannot know reality *simpliciter*, but only what reality is for us – rests on three arguments. The first is that our perceptions are limited by our sense organs. Our eyes can only sense a limited portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, our ears a limited range of frequencies, our noses and tongues a finite number of chemical compounds, and our proprioceptive, kinesthetic, and somatosensory receptors only a limited array of bodily processes and states. In addition, consciousness has limited access to the pre-conscious and pre-attentive processes shaping awareness, an introspective barrier Metzinger calls ‘autoepistemic closure’ (2003, p. 57).

Second, conscious experiences come pre-organized in something like Kant’s *a priori* pure intuitions of space, time, and categories of understanding, e.g., causality. We may presume this evolved along Darwinian lines, but evolution has no mechanism for assuring our accurate perception of things that are irrelevant to adaptive fitness. There may be facets of reality to which we are oblivious.

Third, we do not ordinarily perceive the world as splotches of color and geometric forms, unless we see as an artist might. We perceive it organized into animate beings, objects, and landscapes, understood in terms of their affordances and constraints – the manifold ways they facilitate or obstruct our goals. An object’s meaning is a function primarily of the myriad ways we might knowingly interact with it and the relevance of those interactions to our well-being; e.g., a wooden chair is not just something we sit upon, but also something we might hang a jacket on, hide under, or chop up for firewood.

These three factors prevent us from seeing reality *en toto* and *per se*. We can only perceive it through the limited perspective of what it is for us. While rational thought enables us to coordinate multiple perspectives to aim at an ever-larger understanding of the whole, a still larger understanding – more nuanced and inclusive – is always possible.

2.2 Limits to our ability to describe experience

The second foundational assumption is that our experience of the world is too intricately complex to be exhaustively described by any vocabulary. Imagine describing the taste of strawberry to someone who never tasted one. How much can or cannot be conveyed?

Our culture provides multiple descriptive vocabularies for different facets of reality: the vocabularies of physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, social science, philosophy, religion, history, poetry, literary criticism, etc. There is a reason why we need so many vocabularies. Complex emergent phenomena cannot be completely reduced to more basic phenomena. Physics can never tell us whether Anna Karenina is a better drawn fictional character than Elizabeth Bennet. There can never be a ‘theory of everything’.

Eugene Gendlin argues that all inwardly sensed meanings can be multi-schematically described (1997). It is impossible to exhaust inwardly sensed meanings. There is always more one can say about them, or say differently. Gendlin asks us to examine our felt sense of ‘democracy is government by the people’. We have an immediate felt sense of what this phrase means without having to sequentially parse each word and conjure how to join them to make sense. Our semantic understanding arises in real time without any complex conscious thought process. We have a felt sense of whether we can endorse this statement as ‘true’. If asked to articulate what ‘democracy is government by the people’ means, we could write a lengthy treatise without exhausting everything meant or implied, and there would be many ways we could say it. Once our treatise was published, someone could critique it, explaining what we omitted, said one-sidedly, or failed to notice.

The ideas that are the subject of philosophical discourse are also conceptualizations of felt meanings, incomplete articulations of what the philosophers who used them inwardly sensed. We struggle to understand what terms like Heidegger’s ‘*Dasein*’, Spinoza’s ‘*conatus*’, or Aristotle’s ‘*οὐσία*’ might have meant for them by exploring our felt sense based on their context and our own prior experience. Our initial understandings are, at best, partial, requiring imaginative leaps into other cultures and historical eras. As we reread these philosophers, we hopefully broaden and deepen our understanding as our felt sense of their meanings broadens and elaborates. The same applies to understanding Buddhist terms like *tathāta* (suchness) or *śūnyatā* (emptiness).

2.3 Aspiring to good and happy lives

The third foundational assumption is the neo-Aristotelian assumption that we are all trying to lead the best lives we possibly can, where the word ‘best’ alludes to both the experience of well-being and an evaluation of the overall goodness of our lives. There are wide variations in people’s judgments about what makes them happy or makes a life good. While the words ‘good’ and ‘happy’ can mean many things, they cannot mean just anything. We all have our own felt sense of what these words imply for us, and while they may have a certain unboundedness, they also possess a specificity that limits what they can imply. My mother’s wish that I turn out to be ‘good’ might encompass a wide range of possible instantiations, but ‘being a jerk’ could not have been one of them.

3 Implications of the three foundational assumptions

3.1 Seeing things as they are

What are the implications of these foundational assumptions for a naturalized eudaimonic Buddhism? It follows from the first assumption – that we see things from our limited perspectives – that the statement that meditation allows us to ‘see things as they really are’ cannot be literally true. To the extent it means something useful, it must be non-literal.

The expression ‘seeing things as they really are’ derives from ‘*yathābhūtañāṇadassana*’, a Pāli term for ‘knowledge and vision that accord with reality’ (Buswell and Lopez 2014, p. 1025). Its technical meaning involves seeing all *dhammas* (Pāli: conscious elements or phenomena; Sanskrit: *dharmas*) as being characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. These qualities are concepts, however, and not immediately given percepts. This is why *vipassanā* – insight meditation – is an analytic form of meditation, as opposed to *shikantaza*, which emphasizes ‘non-thinking’ (*hishiryō*) (Heine 2020, p. 5).

Impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self are the kinds of things one observes during insight meditation because one is directed to observe them based on a specific soteriology. One can imagine different soteriologies in which meditation results in ‘seeing’ different sets of ‘facts’ about how ‘reality’ is. For example, a meditating pantheist might observe how all phenomena participate in and are manifestations of the divine. The Japanese for ‘*yathābhūtañāṇadassana*’ is ‘*nyo-jitsu-chiken*’ (Buswell and Lopez 2014, p. 1025), or ‘awareness of the truth as it manifests itself’. Zen meditators will more likely ‘see’ that ‘truth’ as suchness (*tathātā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). All ‘seeing’ in meditation occurs within soteriological contexts that suggest what we ought to look for and what might aid us in our progress. Those contexts constrain which aspects of experience we are likely to attend to, and what we may ultimately discover.²

3.2 Buddhism’s incompleteness

It follows from the second foundational assumption – the necessary incompleteness of any description of reality – that Buddhism’s account of reality must be incomplete. While it may have the virtue of pointing out aspects of reality often ignored by other philosophical systems, its description of reality will always leave something out. However valuable we may find Buddhist theory and practice, its truths must be partial and incomplete. We can only get a larger sense of truth by comparing and contrasting it with our experience and the truths pointed to or disclosed by other philosophical systems.

3.3 Eudaimonia and Buddhism

It follows from the third foundational assumption that if Buddhist practice is to be for anything, it is for living happier and better lives. There can be a wide variety of perspectives on how far it can accomplish that. Mine is that the end-state of Buddhist practice, for most, is more akin to Aristotelean *eudaimonia* than enlightenment as described in classical Buddhist discourses. I am skeptical of the possibility and desirability of ending all attachments, desires, and aversions, or of living in a nonconceptual present, always compassionate, never partial to our well-being, immune from backsliding.

I base this, in part, on observations of Buddhist teachers – many are admirable, but none have achieved anything like the perfection described in the classical Buddhist discourses. I also base it on my understanding as a psychologist of what constitutes human well-being – an understanding that includes attachments to family and friends, fulfillment of some sense desires, and being

partial to the interests of family, friends, and self. Others may make different evaluations – they may believe in greater levels of happiness and goodness that approach those described in the classical Buddhist discourses. Nevertheless, while we may disagree on many things, we all believe that Buddhist practice must, in some manner, improve our happiness and make our lives more virtuous.

4 Buddhist meditation

How can meditation be understood within a naturalized eudaimonic Buddhist context? Let us begin by noting that there are a variety of types of Buddhist meditative practices, including (a) focused attention meditations, (b) open monitoring meditations, (c) analytic meditations, (d) meditations to cultivate positive mental traits, (e) meditations to engender an experience of emptiness/nonduality, (f) meditations to manipulate energies in the subtle body, and (g) meditations to transcend our constructed identities. This list is hardly exhaustive, but intended to emphasize that ‘Buddhist meditation’ is not a singular entity and that ‘Buddhist meditations’ serve various purposes: They are diverse methods for cultivating a variety of valued mental states and experiences intended to foster progress along the Buddhist path.³

Ideas of what meditation is and what it can do are culturally constructed and historically conditioned. There were once widely practiced Buddhist meditations that have, for all intents and purposes, disappeared because they no longer make sense within cultures of modernity. Esoteric Theravāda *Borān Kammatṭhāna* meditation is a case in point (Crosby 2020). It made sense in pre-modern cultures steeped in magical, alchemical, and Ayurvedic understandings of how the world works, but seems almost unintelligible to practitioners today.

Additionally, while there may be significant similarities, say, between Indian Buddhist Theravāda *vipassanā*, Japanese Zen *shikantaza*, and Tibetan Nyingma *Dzogchen* meditations, all open monitoring practices, there are differences between them, and it would be best not to assume they have identical methods, aims, or results. Further, people in different cultural contexts who employ the ‘same’ meditation practices do so with different intentions and expectations, and within different networks of meaning, so what they are doing, experiencing, and accomplishing is probably different. As McMahan points out (2017, p. 25), monks in ancient India might have thought of meditation as a means of disengaging from the world, whereas their modern Western counterparts might think of meditation as a way of intimately re-engaging with it. *Quelle différence!*

4.1 Ordinary shikantaza

I cannot consider every type of Buddhist meditation here, so I will focus on one – *shikantaza*, just sitting – and note that other types of meditation may be similarly considered. Over a lifetime of practice, a *shikantaza* meditator may have a variety of ordinary and extraordinary experiences. I begin by focusing on the ordinary experiences.

The *shikantaza* practitioner is instructed to assume the *zazen* sitting posture and sit without intention, allowing oneself to be fully present, moment-by-moment, with whatever appears in awareness. Of course, the idea of sitting ‘without intention’ is impossible. We have the intention to ‘just sit’ and ‘be present’, however understood. We intend to maintain posture, concentration, and wakefulness. We may hope for the arising of pleasant mental states or think we are preparing the ground for *satori* (sudden awakening). Some of what is happening can be described as becoming aware of one’s subtle or covert intentions and ‘letting them be’ – with an attitude of ‘*gelassenheit*’, ‘releasement’ – as they arise.

Our perceptions are shaped, partly, by our intentions. Our intentions partly determine the aspects of a complex perceptual array that becomes salient for us, and how our perceptual fields organize into foregrounds and backgrounds. Our motivations alter how things appear to us. As von Uexküll (2010) points out, different life forms – and different human beings – have different *umwelten* (perceived life-worlds) uniquely suited to their life forms. A forest may appear quite different to a lumberjack, ecologist, Romantic poet, bat, or squirrel (Loo and Sellbach 2013).

This is relevant to *shikantaza* because our attitude towards our experiential process while practicing *shikantaza* differs from our default attitude and intentional set towards experiencing or engaging in intentional actions. In *shikantaza*, every content of consciousness is intimately observed with an attitude of acceptance, and a willingness for the experience to disclose itself on its own terms. This is different from our usual instrumental attitude toward experiencing in which we intend to discover something pleasant, interesting, or useful, fix something, rid ourselves of something, or improve ourselves in some way. It is this unique attitude and set of intentions that allow experiences to manifest differently, show us another aspect of themselves, and reveal themselves more fully.

Thus, while nothing can be more familiar to us than our bodies, meditators often report they experience their bodies more fully, that their bodies ‘feel’ different, or that they notice bodily sensations that previously went unnoticed. Similarly, familiar emotions can reveal new and unexpected facets when allowed to present themselves without interference. It’s not that we now see things ‘as they really are’, but allow them to present themselves in a different light that may yield unexpected insights into how to move forward from places where we previously felt stuck. Once accepted, the experiential process has its own way of carrying forward.

Most of what is happening during *shikantaza* is an ever-changing succession of sensations, emotions, thoughts, and qualities of mind that come and go in awareness. Over the course of a session, there is a general tendency for the mind/body to settle and stabilize, as if awareness was a mirror reflecting the comings and goings of mental life without attachment, aversion, or commentary – often accompanied by qualities of absorption, openness, stillness, centeredness, embodiedness, and wholeness.

Not every *shikantaza* experience is like this. Sometimes there is an awareness of being caught in a storm of thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations related to some recent or upcoming life event. If so, one is advised to take a step back and watch the features of this onslaught with a bit of distance – although difficult to detach, one may remain cognizant of the process in all its particulars. Other times, one catches oneself on the verge of falling asleep, or experiences one’s mind racing, or experiences a certain lifelessness and boredom. We are asked to observe whatever appears with acceptance, interest, and curiosity.

Our second fundamental assumption was that the complexity of reality exceeds what we can know or say. This is true of *shikantaza*, which is too complex, intricate, rich, and evanescent to be fully captured in words. Beginning meditators are often surprised by how much they experience that ordinarily goes unnoticed, and just how rich that experiential process is. This is especially true for somatic experiencing as we become increasingly aware of vivid sensations occurring everywhere within.

Meditators also experience a growing awareness of their inner reactivity to experiencing. Consciousness, for many, includes an almost continual internal chatter in response to everything noticed. This increased awareness of reactivity makes meditation uniquely useful for Buddhists interested in learning how to deal more skillfully with desires and aversions. This awareness also leads one to identify less with one’s internal dialogue as the essential core of what constitutes one’s ‘self’.

4.2 Ordinary *shikantaza* and conceptualization

It is sometimes asserted that meditation gives us unmediated access to the ‘given’. That is only true in a very limited sense.⁴ All experience occurs within the context of our complete histories of doings and undergoings, and our concepts are inevitably part of the history we carry forward into new experiences. Meditative experience is partly conditioned by one’s intentions in sitting down to meditate, and by everything one has learned about meditation and about the world. All of these shape what one notices as one dips into the stream of experience.

Not everything in the stream of experience is explicitly noticed and felt as a particular ‘this’. Once we can point out an aspect of experience as a ‘this’, we have delineated it, but we haven’t conceptualized it. We have only conceptualized it once we have given it a name.⁵ *Shikantaza* is a continuously evolving stream of undelineated, delineated but not yet conceptualized, and conceptualized moments of experience, one after another.

It is always possible to make a ‘this’ and subsequently conceptualize any aspect of what was previously undelineated. We may notice how much of *shikantaza* is an experience of flux, and the special feel of such noticing as a ‘this’. Later, we may find a phrase that aptly expresses the ‘this’. We might conceptualize it as an ‘awareness of impermanence’, or ‘watching the flow’. There are many possible ways we could conceptualize it, since experience can always be multiply schematized. Similarly, it may feel as if consciousness is a ‘clear, still mirror’, reflecting but unperturbed by phenomena. We may first notice this feeling as a ‘this’ – some unnamed new feeling. Eventually, we may come to conceptualize it as ‘equanimity’ or ‘mirroring’.

Many new felt senses arise during meditation that can be pointed to and subsequently conceptualized in various ways. The *shikantaza* instructions ask us, however, to de-emphasize conceptualization and abstraction as much as possible. While we can never stop the flow of conceptualization by fiat, we can assign it a lesser degree of priority and disinvest in thoughts with increasing ease. As we do, we more intimately contact the experiential flow with relatively minimal conscious cognitive activity, but rarely – in ordinary meditative states – without any. As the formerly undelineated becomes delineated, it can become a valuable new resource for new ways of understanding and thinking about who we are and the path we are on.

I mention these characteristics of ordinary *shikantaza* experience – the intention of simple presence, the richness and intimacy of experience, the enhanced awareness of somatic sensation and reactivity, and its mixture of undelineated, delineated, and conceptualized experience – because we need to say what ordinary *shikantaza* experience is *like* before we can say what it might be good for.

4.3 *Shikantaza* and *satori*

While most *shikantaza* experience is ordinary, practitioners may also experience rare, time-limited altered states of consciousness that the Zen tradition calls ‘*satori*’ or ‘*kensho*’, and which bear some family resemblance to altered states described by other Buddhist traditions (e.g., ‘attainment of cessation’ in the Theravāda, or ‘primordial consciousness’ in the Vajrayāna). These states may be characterized by varying degrees of atemporality, abatement of discriminative thought, and alterations in the self/other boundary and intentionality. If we divide *satori* experiences into Stace’s (1961) introvertive and extrovertive subtypes, the introvertive type resembles Metzinger’s (2020) ‘minimal phenomenal experience’ in that it is non-sensory, non-motor, non-cognitive, non-egoic, and atemporal. In the extrovertive type, the sensory experience of a phenomenal world remains, albeit transformed by an intuition of its all-togetherness.

Experiences of *satori* provide intriguing parallels to Madhyamaka and Yogācāra-influenced Mahāyāna (later Indian Buddhist) and Vajrayāna (Tibetan Buddhist) metaphysical claims about the empty and nondual nature of reality. These experiences are imbued with meaning for the practitioner in that they appear to validate the effort one has put into meditative practice and to experientially realize the claims of Buddhist texts. This can confirm one's faith in the Buddhist path and strengthen one's commitment to self-transformation. In addition, the recognition one receives from one's religious community for having these experiences can socially validate them.

This is not to suggest that most of the value of such experiences lies in post-experience meaning-making or extrinsic validation. People can feel immediately different in the wake of such experiences – differences that may persist over time – including alterations in one's sense of self and/or relatedness to the world. As Stace notes, an experience “of only a few moments' duration” can transform a person's life: A life previously felt to be “meaningless and worthless” can come to acquire “meaning, value, and direction” (1961, pp. 60–61). These experiences can serve as touchstones informing a person's attitude toward life. The kinds of differences they make and the degree to which they serve as touchstones, however, depend a great deal on the context in which they are understood and experienced, and how they are incorporated into the matrix of a person's ongoing beliefs, aims, and projects.

There is a difference, however, between the meaning an experience opens up for us, and whether or not the experience empirically validates some hypothesis about the true state of affairs in the world. As William James concludes, people who report profound mystical experiences “have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we ourselves are outsiders and feel no private call thereto” (1936, p. 415). Arguments against the hypothesis that mystical experiences validate Buddhist metaphysical assumptions include: (a) the diversity of theistic and non-theistic mystical experiences which can be invoked to support a variety of different metaphysical positions (Katz 1978), and (b) the possibility that these experiences only tell us something about the way the brain functions and not about the way the world is.⁶

Meaning and truth value are separate considerations. A man under the influence of psychedelics may perceive the walls ‘breathing’ and come away believing ‘everything is alive’. While this experience may deepen, enrich, and improve his life, surely the walls of his room were not breathing in ordinary terms. His intuition that everything is ‘alive’ may be meaningful and transformative, but seeing walls breathe – something others cannot – does not constitute evidence (according to standards for empirical evidence) for his hypothesis.

While *satori* experiences cannot *prove* Buddhist metaphysical assumptions, we cannot rule out the possibility that they can expand our vision of what may be a genuine and essentially ungraspable nonduality. As such, they are, at best, intimations of, pointers to, and partial glimpses of, that nonduality – our own limited perspectives on it at a certain point in time – and not a full, complete comprehension of it from some omniscient vantage point. This follows from our first foundational assumption that we can never know reality *simpliciter*, but only what it is like for us. It also accords with the view expressed by Eihei Dōgen, the 13th-century founder of Japanese Sōto Zen, that “when one side is illumined, the other is dark” (2016, p. 31). ‘Enlightenment experiences’ do not make us ‘enlightened beings’ in some absolute sense. They may be helpful pointers along the way on a never-ending journey, but however vast one's enlightenment experience, it can always be vaster.

5 The value of meditative experience

Consider the value of meditative experience in the context of trying to achieve a naturalized Buddhist eudaimonic enlightenment. I propose that meditative experience facilitates progress

on the path towards eudaimonic enlightenment and serves as a corrective lens for certain crucial blind spots in our Western mode of being. These roles significantly overlap, but may be considered individually.

5.1 Meditative experience and eudaimonic enlightenment

I have elsewhere outlined the multiple semi-independent developmental lines that constitute the construct of eudaimonic enlightenment (2020, p. 67). These developmental lines include, but are not limited to, growth in: (a) discerning wisdom regarding desire and aversion, (b) metacognitive awareness and non-attachment to thoughts, (c) equanimity, (d) awareness of and radical acceptance of embodied experience, (e) awareness of how our self-concepts inadequately reflect our fullness of being, and (f) awareness of interrelatedness and intimations of nonduality. Progress along these lines contributes to well-being, for each such awareness and skill is a constituent of, or instrumental to, the development and maintenance of well-being. There are direct causal relationships between practicing *shikantaza* and making progress along these lines.

Directly observing desire and aversion as they occur facilitates developing discerning wisdom regarding them. Aristotle saw the virtues as midpoints between excesses and deficiencies that enhance our individual and collective well-being: One improved one's ability to 'hit the mark' regarding these virtues by developing the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) through practice (1973). We can develop this capacity by observing the thoughts, feelings, and behavioral inclinations associated with desires and aversions, and observing the consequences in terms of our well-being and that of others, of yielding to or abstaining from them. We learn non-attachment to thoughts in a similar fashion: by metacognitively observing them, seeing how often they are ingrained reactive patterns, and how we can stop taking them at face value. Developing discerning wisdom regarding desires and greater detachment from thoughts leads to greater equanimity.

I have described how meditation increases awareness of embodied experience. Tuning into the flow of experience allows us to discover self-aspects that exceed our constricted, rigid, narrow, biased, and distorted concepts of ourselves – unexpected feelings, thoughts, and motives that are incongruent with our notions of who we think we are. This allows us to revise and expand our ideas about ourselves to more adequately reflect our fullness of being. We also experience how consciousness is not some ghostly phantom existing behind our eyes and between our ears, but an integral part of our body's ongoing engagement with the world.

Additionally, accepting our moment-to-moment experience trains us to radically accept our particular embodied socio-historical circumstances, and increases our capacity to let our experience be what it is and speak for itself. Perhaps most importantly, the intimacy, immediacy, and whole-hearted presence that is part of an enhanced awareness of embodied experience is a good in itself. This deeper engagement with everything that presents itself is profoundly satisfying. Further, if we bring that intimate attention to our relationships with others, it enriches our being with others, and supports others feeling better about relating to us.

Lastly, moments of *satori* enlarge our understanding of the fundamental nonduality of the larger whole of which we are integrally a part. One may reasonably ask, "Why is enlarging our understanding of nonduality integral to a Buddhist kind of eudaimonia?" Aristotle, for example, saw no need for it – although he did see the need for contemplation of philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) and first principles (*archai*). The answer is complex.

First, an enlarged vision of nonduality helps us appreciate the fundamental interconnection between our well-being and that of others – our dependence on a well-functioning social order

and an unspoiled natural order. Second, it desolidifies the boundary between our in-group and out-groups, making it easier to extend empathy, care, and compassion to outsiders. Third, it decenters us from our inordinate self-focus, refocusing us on how our actions matter to others and the whole. Fourth, it helps us appreciate how a multiplicity of varying perspectives all contribute to our understanding of reality: how each perspective can be partially true – how each perspective, when coordinated with the others, contributes to a new, enlarged, but still incomplete perspective. The more we integrate differing perspectives to intimate some larger sense of the ungraspable whole, the more we can align our actions with the genuine causes of happiness and excellence. In short, a post-*satori* understanding of our fundamental interrelatedness reorients us away from an initial self-centeredness and opens the way for a more universalized and skillful care, concern, and compassion.

5.2 Meditation as a cultural therapeutic

Much of the power of religious practices derives from their relevance to – and their ability to address and redress – existential problems in the cultures in which they are practiced. Meditation derives some utility from its ability to serve as a corrective lens for critical blind-spots in our modern Western mode of being – a mode that emphasizes ratiocination over experiencing, individuality over relatedness, and substance over process. This default mode of being promotes a hyper-rationality and hyper-individualism that alienate us from nature, our bodies, and the experiential ground of being.

5.2.1 Hyper-rationality

The remarkable achievements of science, mathematics, engineering, and medicine over the past half-millennium have caused us to privilege hypothetico-deductive reasoning above all other means of knowing, resulting in a devaluing of ways of knowing that are more ‘intuitive’ and ‘embodied’.⁷ These are ways of knowing that are ‘paralogical’, ‘organic’, ‘embodied’, and ‘holistic’. They are our whole organism’s implicit felt sense of the totality of its ongoing process and circumstances.

While hypothetico-deductive reasoning is more explicit, subject to empirical disproof, and in accord with formal logic, the more we devalue implicit embodied knowledge, the more we become estranged from our ‘first nature’. Implicit embodied knowledge is how we understand things from the inside-out rather than the outside-in, and is a well-spring of hypotheses and creativity. My decades of experience in training psychotherapists, for example, has taught me that novice therapists disconnected from their internal, implicit, embodied process never develop the empathic understanding that would allow them to become successful therapists. Ideally, we become adept at both ways of knowing, and can shuttle between them as appropriate. Meditation teaches us how to tune-in to the embodied experiential flow and serves as a corrective for those who never learned how to attend to it in the first place, or who lost their ability to do so due to trauma, or as an unintended consequence of formal education.

5.2.2 Perspectivism and experiential grounding

Hegel and Nietzsche taught us to think of viewpoints as being relative to their owner’s socio-historical situatedness. The postmodern take is that all views can be accounted for by their owner’s vantage point in history, role in the power structure, relation to the means of production, ethnic, racial, and gender identity, or some other salient characteristic. For postmodernists, there are endless perspectives without any final grounding.

It's true that any state of affairs can be alternatively schematized in a dizzying multiplicity of ways. Theorizing, by its nature, abstracts individual threads from the warp and weft of reality – a patterning that possesses a complexity that always exceeds what we can know or say. This does not mean, however, that there is no complex patterning 'out there' to abstract from. Our multiple schematizations do have an ultimate ground – the ground of our ongoing transactions with the world which form the basis for concept formation, differentiation, and coordination. These transactions are primarily organismic and preconceptual, e.g., respiration, metabolism, autoimmune functioning, locomotion – the processes of living organisms in all their doings and undergoings. These are not separate processes, but abstractions from the intricately complex holism that being a living organism in an environment implies.

Perception, cognition, consciousness, and volition are but specialized elaborations of these more basic transactional processes and never occur in isolation from each other.⁸ Our implicit, embodied, felt sense is our organism's holistic understanding of the situation it finds itself in with all it currently implies. That is the source of 'meaning' in our relations with the world. Hypothetico-deductive reasoning is an elaboration on these more basic modes of transacting with the world. Piaget's conception of thinking as 'interiorized action' is but one of many ways of formulating this. Lived experience is always the ground, the conceptual world always an abstraction from it. While concepts are useful for all kinds of tasks, mistaking them for the ground is like Korzybski's (1933) error of mistaking the map for the territory. Meditation allows us to understand how our speculative views are ultimately grounded in living processes.

5.2.3 *Estrangement from nature*

Estrangement from nature has been a consistent theme in modern Western literature and philosophy. This estrangement is consequent to: (a) urbanization, industrialization, and technological innovation, (b) the Protestant severance of spirit from matter, (c) the Cartesian severance of *res cogitans* (thinking being) from *res extensa* (extended being), and (d) science's mechanistic view of the cosmos and living organisms. It seems as if we no longer belong in the world science imagines – we are strangers in a strange land, odd anomalies.⁹ Meditation reminds us that while science's clockwork universe is built on abstractions drawn from the *lebenswelt* (life-world), the *lebenswelt* remains intact beneath abstractions – always available to be sensed, felt, and lived. Nature's undivided, organic flow continues unhindered and unabated, and we – with all our experiences, concepts, hopes, and dreams – are integral to it.

5.2.4 *Hyper-individuality*

Charles Taylor has outlined the centuries-long development and elaboration of the modern Western sense of self with its increasing emphasis on individuality (1992). This sense of selfhood is, for example, more differentiated from the kinship systems it is embedded in than the East Asian sense of selfhood. It is a hyper-individual sense of self that fosters "feelings of alienation and narcissistic self-absorption" (Guisinger and Blatt 1994, p. 108) that calcify the self/other boundary, and cut us off from immediate intimacy with other beings and the world.

Mahāyāna teachings on nonduality and emptiness have the potential to serve as a corrective to the Western overemphasis on individuality. The question is, "Does meditative experience bolster and reinforce the Mahāyāna vision of radical interdependence, or does it inadvertently reinforce Western hyper-individuality?" The answer is, it depends on one's intentions and the context in which one practices.

It matters, for example, whether one meditates alone or in a *sangha* (a spiritual community); whether one meditates with eyes closed (as in *vipassanā*) or eyes open (as in *zazen*); whether meditation is a striving to attain something, or an openness to being present; whether one's idea

of meditation is ‘going deep inside’, or ‘experiencing being one with everything’. These intentions and contexts shape what one might ‘discover’ while meditating. In the undelineated flow of experience that occurs before we delineate and conceptualize it, any number of aspects of experience can be marked off to be noticed and discovered. Some of these will weaken the self/other boundary; others will reinforce a sense of boundedness. If one thinks of ‘enlightenment’ as something attained through individual striving, individuality is emphasized. If one thinks of it as co-activity with all things, then we are aware, not of our individuality, but of our connection.

6 Conclusion

Whatever meditation reveals is dependent on the attitudes and intentions one brings to it, the conceptual maps that guide one’s meditative progress, and the context in which one meditates. *Shikantaza* is a means for reacquainting ourselves with the ongoing flux of our experiential process. That acquaintance can play an important role in furthering our moral education as beings in the world and with others. ‘Moral education’ is here intended in the Aristotelean sense of learning to skillfully pursue lives that are happy and good. It requires becoming intimately aware of one’s desires and aversions, the way thoughts proliferate in response to events, and the ways one manipulates experience rather than allowing it to be as-is. It also involves an understanding that our rationally constructed world-view is just one of many possible such ones – incomplete and abstracted from lived experience in the life-world. Finally, it also requires a better understanding of our place in the world with others and nature.

Hoyt Edge draws similar conclusions about meditation’s role in moral development:

meditation can be used for moral insight and training ... Wisdom is needed for this life, but so is mindfulness because an attentive and open life is a good life. It is a life in which we can flourish. This is one reason why practitioners describe the meditative experience as a kind of “coming home.” It feels like they have arrived at a natural place, a natural way to walk in the world.

(2013, p. 284)

Edge uses the metaphor of ‘coming home’, while I employ the metaphor of ‘becoming reacquainted with the ground’. I suspect they describe the same thing. Edge’s use of ‘natural’ emphasizes the return to harmony with nature that is part of meditative experience within a naturalized eudaimonic Buddhist context.

We modern Westerners have inherited a historically conditioned world-view that, in its overemphasis on the rational and individual, leaves us alienated from nature and the ground of experience. The theism that once grounded our understanding of what is right and proper no longer proves adequate. Science’s clockwork universe also offers no hints or whispers as to how we ought to conduct our lives; it has naught to say about ‘ought’. An appeal to pure reason alone is insufficient, because reason, in the end, must be grounded in what is intuitively sensed. The only ground left is the ground of experience itself – our body’s implicit sense of what it means to live as social organisms in the world. Its prods and intuitions, while imperfect and requiring validation through reason, remain the ultimate ground for what it means to be human.

In sum, I have argued that considering meditation in the context of a syncretic Aristotelian-Buddhist conception of the *summum bonum* helps clarify its meaning and value. I have also argued that Zen *shikantaza* meditation, or ‘just sitting’, enriches our philosophical perspective by grounding us in being in the world and helping us see ourselves, the world, and our connection to it more freshly. Meditation is a ‘spiritual practice’, in Pierre Hadot’s (1995) sense of the term,

that is suitable for modern Westerners, and that directly engages practitioners with the life-world from which all experiences arise.

Notes

- 1 'Eudaimonia' is an ancient Greek term often translated imperfectly as 'happiness', but is contrasted with the more popular hedonic connotations of the latter, and is more concerned with notions of flourishing, well-being, and the attainment of moral virtue and practical wisdom (Aristotle 1973).
- 2 This point about the potential circularity of the relationship between the instructions framing meditative practice and the Buddhist metaphysical insights it allegedly produces, as opposed to its allegedly enabling them to 'see reality as it really is', for example, is taken up as the focus in Struhl (this *Handbook*, Chapter 16).
- 3 Vago (this *Handbook*, Chapter 11) and MacKenzie (this *Handbook*, Chapter 15) examine the ways in which empirical studies indicate different results for a number of these different methods, and Huebner and Hayman (this *Handbook*, Chapter 17) examine ways in which various such approaches to meditation may have positive or negative outcomes.
- 4 Cf. Stone and Zahavi (this *Handbook*, Chapter 22), Coseru (this *Handbook*, Chapter 23), and Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24) for divergent views about what is "given" in meditative experiences.
- 5 This follows Gendlin's (1997) use of 'conceptualization'.
- 6 Consider Metzinger's hypothesis that minimal phenomenal experience is the nonperceptual, mode-neutral way the brain represents part of its own process, supervening on its internal modeling of its ascending reticular arousal system (ARAS) tonic alertness signal (2018).
- 7 Cf. Epstein's 'intuitive-experiential thinking' (1998) or Gendlin's 'felt sense' (1997).
- 8 The word 'transactional' is inadequate because it implies pre-existing separations within an essentially undivided organismic/environmental process. Process is always 'interaction first'. See Gendlin (2018), p. 30.
- 9 For a history of the mechanical metaphor in biology, see Riskin (2016). For a refutation of the mechanistic view, see Nicholson (2019).

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