

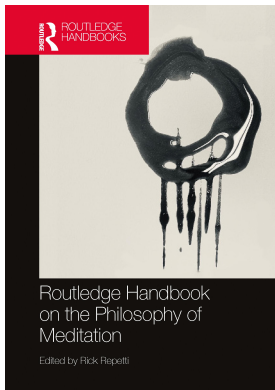
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 08 Jun 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation

Rick Repetti

Engaging metacognitive practices

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127253-7>

Sonam Kachru

Published online on: 17 May 2022

How to cite :- Sonam Kachru. 17 May 2022, *Engaging metacognitive practices from:* Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation Routledge

Accessed on: 08 Jun 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781003127253-7>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

5

ENGAGING METACOGNITIVE PRACTICES

On the uses (and possible abuse) of meditation in philosophy

Sonam Kachru

1 Introduction

Consider the following argument:

- (a) To be relevant to philosophy, meditation must be an epistemically distinctive, reality-involving instrument involving experiences that are (i) true, (ii) consistent with reason, and (iii) epistemically novel.
- (b) But we have reason to think meditative practices cannot satisfy conditions (i)–(iii) in (a).
- (c) Therefore, meditation may not be relevant to philosophy.

We might resist this argument by learning something from the failure of meditation as a reality-involving instrument intimated in (b). Thus, in the next two sections I consider arguments for (b) from contemporary philosophy and pre-modern Indian philosophy to motivate another way of thinking of meditation and thus other ways of construing the relevance of meditation to philosophy.

2 Mere experiences

Why might (b) be true? Consider an argument reconstructed from Nozick's discussion of the epistemic status of meditation-based enlightenment experiences (1989, pp. 244–5; 1981, p. 158).¹ After “yogic breathing” in meditation one can have uncommon experiences as of unusual contents or regions of being, putatively ‘apparent deeper realities’. But what experiences would people have had were they to perform such exercises though there were no deeper realities? To understand what reality contributes to the experiential content in meditation, Nozick argues, one must know the counterfactual condition specifying what experiences one could expect were there no such reality. If, as Nozick seems to think may be likely, the answer is “the same sorts of experiences”, then there is reason to be wary of the apparently revelatory character of experiences of deeper realities: They may not ‘track’ reality.

Set aside the difficulties with Nozick's counterfactual (truth-tracking) theory of perceptual knowledge (Schaeffer 2003). The point is to offer a route to (b) above. I'll develop another argument below, derived from the Buddhist philosopher Kamalaśīla (reconstructed in Tillemans 2013), who offered it in the context of an influential 8th-century debate between two Buddhist philosophers on the merits of two styles of meditation. Kamalaśīla was arguing against a meditation instructor, "The Teacher" (Héshang), aka Moheyan, who advocated a style of meditation involving forms of unstructured observation, or versions of "[nonconceptually] looking at mind". The basic idea, though much contested, is this. Withdrawing from attempts to shape or evaluate the mind with sets of normative categories (whether evaluative, such as pure/impure, or doctrinal, such as empty/non-empty), one simply observes and so awakens to the real nature of mind (Tillemans 2013, pp. 291–2).

Kamalaśīla may not have grasped the difference between the open monitoring of spontaneous and dynamically varying thought (which Moheyan appears to have advocated; van Schaik 2015, pp. 284–304) and the lack of thought (which Kamalaśīla took Moheyan to have advocated). But Kamalaśīla is not obviously wrong to take Moheyan's suggestion to have been this: Meditation is an epistemic vehicle capable of revealing (or exemplifying) the reality of mind when it gives up any role for normative practices of appraisal, including reasoning through analysis or argumentation (Tillemans 2013, p. 293).² Note that this gives us a reconstruction for Moheyan's reason why meditation cannot be epistemically new and congruent with reasoning. I'm more interested, however, in Kamalaśīla's two-fold argument against this.

Kamalaśīla first draws a distinction between two different things it can mean to be aware of what is real, one epistemically interesting, the other not. The former involves knowing what is real while the latter involves a case in which the contents of one's awareness may overlap with a description of what is real, though one has no way of reliably knowing that it does. The two sorts of awareness have contrasting epistemic value. The latter, for Kamalaśīla, no matter how psychologically compelling, therapeutic, or true, is epistemically uninteresting. By extension, any practice that involves the entertaining of content produced without reference to the conclusions of reasoning will be rationally unfounded (Tillemans 2013, p. 297). Thus, a meditative practice, even if its contents happen to be describable as real, need not be epistemically interesting to philosophy, nor recommended.

Kamalaśīla raises another point, that meditation should be something other than passive revelation of non-conceptualizable and 'deeper' realities. Consistent with a long line of Indian Buddhist philosophers, Kamalaśīla thinks of meditation as a process of habituating oneself to the conclusions of reason with the goal of *experientializing* them: Through rumination on the conclusions of reasoning, one can habituate oneself to the point of realizing – making real – in experience, and eventually coming 'to see', that dimension of the Buddha's teachings that one knows to be true, but which one cannot (absent meditative training) typically perceive, e.g., the fact of small-scaled, moment-to-moment intrinsic change (Tillemans 2013, pp. 298–9, Dunne 2006, Pecchia 2020).

Such an experience – when categorized as the perceptual experience of yogis or, as was more common when using vocabularies specific to Buddhists, as a variety of epistemic insight (*prajñā*) – has been presented as making an epistemic contribution (Albahari 2014). Some modern interpreters, like Tillemans, may demur: What if the experientializing process makes no epistemic contribution to knowledge "distinct from or over and above" the contributions of philosophical thinking about reality (Tillemans 2013, p. 298)? Thus, Nozick's arguments, along with those of Kamalaśīla's Moheyan and Tillemans's reconstructed Kamalaśīla, provide us with the means to present a dilemma: Insofar as meditation is thought of as independent from philosophical reasoning and thus as a novel epistemic instrument, it conduces to epistemically com-

promised situations. But the degree to which it is non-independent is just the degree to which it either fails to be (a) of epistemic interest or (b) worthy of reality (as a Zen master, such as Moheyan, might see it).

3 The costs of reality-involving meditation

Things may be worse. Meditation, when continuous with philosophy as the experientialization of truths ruminated on, may not be epistemically idle. Its contributions, however, may come at an unwelcome cost.

Dharmakīrti, to whose views on meditation Kamalaśīla is indebted, conceded that the experientialization process resembles wishful *seeing*, such as might characterize the experiences of madmen, lovers, or the grief-stricken who hallucinate the presence of those they are obsessed about (Dunne 2006, p. 500). Dharmakīrti maintains that such experiences remain distinguishable from meditative experientialization in terms of their truth value, (rational) etiology, and causal effects (Dunne 2006, p. 500). One might also think the experience of a yogi (meditator) is not truly parallel to psychosis or intoxication, partly because it is not experienced by the yogi as debilitating or unstable; a yogi experiences X in an apt way, as congruent with scripture and in accordance with the ethical norms befitting an exemplary individual (Hayes 1997; Albahari 2014, p. 32, n. 14). But such clarifications may only serve to show us why things are worse than we supposed. A brief diagnosis from the Indian philosophical work, *Of Vasiṣṭha and His Yoga (Yogavāsiṣṭha)*, shows why.

The meditation-derived experiences of yogis are sometimes credited as doing epistemic work; e.g., we may describe meditative experiences as integrating what we know to be true with tacit action-guiding beliefs that continue to contradict it (Albahari 2014). Here, meditation is epistemically relevant habituation to communal norms. But this, *Of Vasiṣṭha and His Yoga* effectively argues, may be a mechanism for community-wide epistemic closure: “Their philosophies [those of the Kapila, the Vedāntins, the (Buddhist) Vijñānavādins, the Jainas, and others] are the expressions of their experiences which are the fruit of their own practice, which is in accordance with the convictions in their mind” (IV. 20, 21; in Venkatesananda 1993, p. 162). Here’s how closure works. People of X scriptural community are taught to believe X, then habituate themselves to see the world as instantiating X; and seeing X, they take that to warrant their thinking X and their being X.

I believe this way of putting things helps itself to an observed parallel between the account of meditative process favored by Buddhist epistemologists in South Asia and the role of affective priming and cognitive construction in the fixing of experiential content, as diagnosed by Dharmakīrti:

Experience (*anubhāva*) generates convictions of certainty (that X is Y) according to the repetition of thoughts (*vikalpābhyāsa*). For example, even though there is no difference in the seeing of visible properties, there are ideas of a corpse [on the part of an ascetic], and object of desire [on the part of a libertine], and something to be eaten [on the part of a dog].

(Hayes 1997)

To the mechanism of cognitive and affective priming, we must add another ingredient to generate epistemic closure: conviction in the epistemic authority of experience (thought to remain untouched by priming) and an investment in the game of justifying commitments on the basis of perceptual experience. Acknowledgments of cognitive penetration and affective

bias can form an unstable mix as long as we continue to credit the epistemic authority of experience.³

The problem is not merely the fact that distinct, collective patterns of seeing the world are reproduced at the level of experiences, but that experiences, manifesting extra-experiential contributors to experience, are used to reinforce the very commitments shaping experience. Consider the epistemic mechanism of integration, on which we credit meditation with the adjustment of inconsistent beliefs and experiences to become congruent with what we know. If meditation involves integration, we might extend the criticism in *Of Vasiṣṭha and His Yoga* this way. It is intimating that scriptural and religious communities use meditation to form so-called ‘echo-chambers’. If so, perhaps communities deliberately cultivate only experiences that reinforce their beliefs, blocking experiences conflicting with how one has habituated oneself to see reality (Nguyen 2020).

Something has to give. Recall that Zen teacher Moheyan attempts to forego all cognitive structuring in order to reveal experience. Dharmakīrti, however, gives up on neither the truth of cognitive penetration nor does he cease valuing the epistemic contribution of experience. Meditation, he would maintain, is salutary priming, though whether he or his successors also credit the experience of reality thought to result therefrom with epistemic *authority* is not so clear. For the interlocutors in *Of Vasiṣṭha and His Yoga*, however, seeing the truth of bias and the rational etiology of experience should cure us of any temptation to even hint at the authority of experience in epistemic contexts. Orienting to bias and construction requires a kind of cognitive therapy involving philosophical knowledge based on analysis (*vicāra*; Slaje 2000, pp. 173–4) and narrative re-description, not meditative cultivation of pseudo-perceptual experiences. Given that text’s skepticism regarding the epistemic function of philosophically primed experience and the resulting instability of epistemic closure, we may ask: Should philosophers stick with the tools they know or risk dalliance with potentially epistemically compromising meditative practices?⁴ And if they seek out meditation for non-epistemic reasons, would that make meditation merely of therapeutic relevance to the persons philosophers are?

4 Meditation as metacognitive engagement

Here’s another way to put it. Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa, a critic of Buddhist claims for the epistemological value of meditative experience, said of yogic perception that it should not be classified as perception, but as imaginative projection (Jha 1983, p. 72). Need this be devastating for the philosophical interest of meditation? Only from the perspective of those who continue to recruit meditation in the context of the authority of perceptual experience. Though perhaps the problem is even simpler. We may yet benefit from the truth in Kumāriḷa’s insight by thinking of meditation as involving praxis, and not merely experience. Alternately put, meditation should be seen as a technology of transformation, not revelation.⁵

Nozick viewed meditation as a vehicle of revelation because his interest in meditation was framed by his interest in enlightenment. He thought of enlightenment in terms of a fourfold structure involving “an experience, a contact with deepest reality, a new understanding of the self and also a transformation of it” (1989, p. 243). This concern hijacks meditation by linking it with investments in mysticism, especially in the “noetic quality” of mystical experiences and the “depths of truth” William James said they seemed to plumb, to those who experience them, in contrast to the discursive intellect (1985, p. 380). Surely, meditation has been linked to transformative experiences in Buddhist traditions as well (Gyatso 1999; Deleau 2012), and to the perceptual contributions of meditation (in the context of enlightenment and beyond).⁶ But it need not be.

We may think of meditation, instead, as some medieval Buddhists thought of exercises of attention: as part of the normative business of concentration and structuring the stream of thought, or “the placing of mind and mental factors in an equable and right way on a single content for the establishment of . . . awareness”, as Buddhaghosa puts it in his *Path of Purification* (Ñāṇamoli 2011).⁷ This provides us with a distinctive way of thinking about transformation and experience. When describing experiences in the context of reality-involving mystical or enlightening transformation, it is tempting to treat them as being proto-propositions, merely truth-evaluable states. But if the norms governing success are not limited to those of representational accuracy, other features of experiences (e.g., their pliancy, the control they are compatible with, their level of freedom from reactive attitudes, etc.) may come into prominence. As does what *we are doing* to shape experience.

Against Nozick’s four-fold structure of enlightenment, I recommend working with a reconstruction of Buddhaghosa’s four-fold structure of meditation as metacognitive engagement, a structure that articulates meditative activity as consisting in: (a) a topic of engagement; (b) a variety of metacognitive engagement; (c) the resulting mental states, feelings, and capacities; and (d) the reasons for which the engagements are pursued. Buddhaghosa allowed for a range of topics and a variety of engagements. The types of topics can vary from stimulus-dependent inputs to stimulus-independent eidetic content; from simple contents involving a name or brief description to complex inferentially structured textual passages. The kinds of mental acts, or modes of engagements may vary too – subtly, as in the difference between noting (e.g., labeling the types of mental content as they arise) and counting (e.g., breaths), or more dramatically, as in the difference between observing and imagining something. Engagements can be thought of as meso-level activities, as when one tries to bear something in mind for an hour, or micro-scaled activities, as when one tries to keep attention placed on some dynamically varying process, from one second to the next. Though Buddhaghosa would likely have seen it as a contradiction, we may generalize such a rubric to allow for unfocused and unstructured exercises of observing mind-wandering (like Moheyan’s meditation) to count as an instance of the normative shaping of thought.

It is helpful to think of Buddhaghosa’s structure of meditation – (a) and (c) being fairly explicit in Buddhaghosa’s work, and (b) and (d) implicit (Crosby 2014, pp. 149–54) – as elements in a co-ordinate description of meditation as metacognitive praxis irreducible to a mere subpersonally characterized sequence of events or passive experiential states (Ram-Prasad 2018, pp. 99–140). Tied as such motivational reasons are to the psychological states and temperaments of individual practitioners (Gethin 2004, pp. 212–15), the structure brings agents and activities to the fore. And it is as *action* that meditation, described above as being sensitive to re-description, is best thought of as a process of imparting exemplary and normative shape and structure to the mind.⁸ The process involves awareness of what one is doing to shape the mind and awareness of what one has thereby done – the process, like all action, being sensitive to the descriptions under which such activity is intelligible.

To describe such a process as involving metacognition invites a broader characterization of metacognition than is possible when we think of metacognition merely as (reflectively held) thoughts about thought.⁹ And to describe it as a skill-based, initially effortful activity invites a broader characterization of procedural metacognition than is available on current accounts of the same. There are difficulties here. For our purposes, what matters is this: Practicing meditation, understood as metacognitive skills in action, as Buddhaghosa and many other Buddhists understand it, does not only make one into X – it makes one aware of what “making oneself into X” involves. It is not only a normative exercise of implementing a norm; it is a practice developing awareness of and fluency with normativity in action.

In the *Yogācārabhūmi* one is told to think of comparable meditative activities as one would the training of an apprentice painter: the process involves repeatedly attempting to replicate a master's flawless exempla (Deleanu 2012, p. 16). We may use this to reconstruct an orientation to metacognitive practice derived from some Buddhist manuals: Making oneself an exemplary X involves (at least) two things: (a) an (en)active part, shaping the mind through acts of awareness to become X (Stuart 2020, p. 295); and, as part of the success conditions, (b) a norm-rich variety of awareness: involving awareness of what becoming X entails for the quality and reach of what is disclosed thereby. As one meditation text suggests, the awareness of a skilled meditator is not unlike the meta-awareness a painter brings to bear when successfully painting (Stuart 2020, pp. 294–5). I'll call such sensitivity to normativity in experience 'attentional contextualism'.

The first part of contextualism requires seeing that even observational content such as "I am going", "this is anger", or just "blue" – to say nothing of more complex varieties of content in imperative or optative moods – may function as Davis and Thompson recommend:

Not as a phenomenological analysis of experience, or as a metaphysical analysis of the nature of reality, but rather as a holding in working memory a mental representation that functions to direct top-down attention in ways that can have transformative effects.

(2015, p. 51)

Contextualism also requires seeing the fungibility of experience in that attention can be used to widen or narrow the scope of what shows up in experience and that the quality and reach of one's attention, and the forms of awareness involved in metacognitive practice, impact individual items within the experiential field (as surely as running, carrying a weight, or resting can change the quality of one's breath, as Buddhaghosa has it (Nāṇamoli 2011, p. 268)).¹⁰ Such attentional contextualism limits what one is entitled to claim on the basis of experience. And on my reconstruction (inspired by Ram-Prasad 2018, pp. 99–140, and Stuart 2020), this is entailed as a part of the virtues one is expected to acquire and practice through training, e.g., metacognitive vigilance regarding the fungibility of experience and cognitive pliancy regarding new forms of experience.¹¹

If attentional contextualism and its associated virtues may help inoculate us from some of the consequences of thinking of experience as being 'reality-involving',¹² this need not mean that we must think of meditative experience as being entirely insulated from reality. Consider, e.g., visualizing one's body as decomposing. Contrast this with visualizing movements in one's intestines. Neither involves simple perceptual contact, as both involve imagination. But the latter, say Northern Buddhist scholastics, involves attention contoured by context-relevant appeals to our best accounts of what is the case (associated with content captured in sentences in the indicative mood); while the former (guided by content captured in sentences in the imperative mood) involves attention imaginatively shaped according to terms set by us (Greene 2012, p. 174). Traditional commentators say that the latter is cognitive and yet also in some sense perceptual. Attentional contextualism makes no such concession: the idea of *reality-following content* (involved in contouring experience to what we know to be the case) need not entail the idea of *reality-involving content*; overlooking the top-down character of attention-shaped content, the latter encourages us to think of the experiences resulting from meditation, instead, as having the nature of bottom-up perceptual pathways to knowledge of reality or as making contact with deeper realities. On my view, meditation can allow us to habituate ourselves to new ways of seeing as well as new ways of being based on new descriptions of reality. But that only requires reality-following,¹³ not reality-involving content.

5 Meditation and new theoretical objects

If meditation can make philosophical insight real for philosophers, that would yield a variety of personal benefits. But philosophers have also used meditation in various ways to benefit philosophy as a discipline of knowledge by creating experiences and/or experiential skills that produce new theoretical objects or new characterizations of available theoretical objects to incorporate into theoretical explanations. By a ‘theoretical object’ I mean a phenomenon that comes in for attention in the theory and practice of an epistemic culture, like philosophy or science, typically as an element in explanations or as the target of explanation.¹⁴ In pre-modern Buddhism, e.g., meditative and ritual experiences were used as exempla to help generate, and calibrate responses to, theoretical questions, such as: Can there be non-existent objects of consciousness (Greene 2012, pp. 162–3)? Can there be phenomenality without intentionality (Tomlinson 2018)?

In contemporary cases, meditative experiences subsequent to attentional exercises have suggested refinements of psychological data (Davis and Thompson 2015, pp. 591–3). More generally, the cultivation of meditative states gives theorists an opportunity for the reliable production of a range of ‘atypical’ states (e.g., lucid dreaming, as distinct from dreaming or wakeful states, or observed, deliberate mind-wandering, etc.). And herein lies a valuable, related, distinct contribution: the production of first-personal (though not naïve) reports of a variety of possible experiential contents, at various temporal scales of different kinds of attention. The idea is not news.

Late 19th- and early 20th-century introspective (and experimental) psychology included calls for introspective training regimens for observers (Schwitzgebel 2013, pp. 71–90), though the story of first-personal reports as a method in scientific research was too short to have had lasting impact on psychology (Thompson 2008, pp. 228–9). Perhaps the possible reinvention of such methods in conjunction with attentional regimens in meditative traditions will prove longer-lasting. However, on the view developed above, meditation need neither avoid nor overcome bias, at least no more than introspective training attempted (Schwitzgebel 2013, p. 79). It was the detection (and so, the attenuation of the epistemic perniciousness) of bias that mattered. That is a goal that attentional training committed to attentional contextualism is well-placed to serve.

6 Even if it won’t make one cleverer

Can practices of attention help someone become a better philosopher, even when the task does not involve reporting on or producing experiences? In a letter written in 1924, Frank Ramsey reflected on a course of psychoanalytic treatment in Vienna and considered the relevance of psychoanalysis to work in the foundations of mathematics. While it couldn’t make you cleverer, he conceded, it could help with examining one’s motivations.

Ramsey had come to believe that approaches in theoretical work can be influenced by unconscious factors, e.g., one’s attitudes (e.g., love or hidden antipathies for particular theories), over-arching attitudes (say, approaching mathematics as a game, science, or art), character (being timid or lazy), etc. (Misak 2020, p. 170). What one takes to be a theoretical matter (solving a problem) and under one’s epistemic control may be compromised, Ramsey claimed, “by obscure unconscious things [that] may decide your attitude” (Misak 2020, p. 170). Ramsey’s advice is prudential and ethical: “If you see these [biases] in other people you must be careful and take stock of yourself” (Misak 2020, p. 170). But can stock-taking against attention- and awareness-hijacking factors be limited to purely discursive methods, like psychoanalysis, cognitive therapy, or argumentation?

Aśoka, a Buddhist ruler who ruled over much of the Indian subcontinent (c. 268–c.232 BCE), would have thought not. Consider the practice of self-inquiry or self-examination (‘stock-taking’) he recommended to judges regarding miscarriages of justice. Aśoka presents the following case: Persons X and Y may be treated differently by a judge, despite presenting no morally relevant difference, such that X is freed while Y suffers. Such miscarriages can happen when “One fails to act [impartially] on account of the following: envy, anger, cruelty, hurry, want of practice, laziness, fatigue” (Hultsch 1925, p. 96). The overlap with Ramsey’s list of biases is striking. As is the conclusion: Certain states may impede one’s ability to attend to others in a way necessary to count as acting according to a professed norm or virtue. Instead of advocating psychoanalysis, however, Aśoka suggests that the application of an ideal like impartiality requires metacognitive training involving what I describe as attention-hijackers, or ethical defeaters: psycho-physical considerations that block the exemplification of a virtue or norm in practice, and of which, in principle, through the modification of one’s cognitive, affective, and physical behaviors, awareness and control are possible.

Aśoka is most likely offering a secularized version of Buddhist practices of attention and vigilance, with particular emphasis on the influence such practices are said to have on attention-distorting states like aversion and hatred, sleepiness and tiredness, agitation and depression, and doubt (Gethin 2004, pp. 207–8). Aśoka was invested in the virtue of impartiality in the pursuit of justice. Independently, McRae has argued that the (closely related) virtue of open-mindedness requires, in part, something similar: an achieved second-order awareness of and freedom from reactive habits of first-order thought in an affectively charged context (2016, p. 101). More generally, we might consider the uses of meditation this way: inquiring into the inter-relation of norms and entailed virtues, we can always ask which, if any, virtues might entail second-order metacognitive states only reliably achieved through effortful training and practice (*id.*, p. 104).¹⁵

Thinking like this will suggest that possession of a virtue (or professing a norm) might require awareness of richly contoured psychological contexts, replete with states entailed by virtues and others inconsistent with their exemplification. Whether this will involve thinking in terms of what Gendler calls ‘aliefs’ – action-generating, affect-involving, and explicit-belief-discordant mental factors that have associated representational content (Zawidzki 2019, pp. 36–7) – or frameworks operating ‘in the dark’, structuring affect and behaviors without explicitly showing up in reports as objects of possible acceptance or dismissal,¹⁶ may be debated. The point is this. To truly possess some X that one professes or wishes to have, one may need to be sensitized in experience to the patterns of interacting inner states that correlate with X, learning to tell which patterns contribute to its full exemplification and which, as with attention-hijackers or defeaters, block its full exemplification.

Let me clarify. For those who believe that such metacognitive skills are relevant to the practicing philosopher, the goal is not that we may use meditation to discover the virtues we need; nor is it useful when justifying antecedent commitments as to what psychological health (or the right account of some particular virtue and its exemplification) should look like. There is no ethical given to be realized in meditation, any more than there are epistemological givens to be revealed in it. People who adopt programs of self-cultivation without acknowledgment of the philosophical disagreement about the norms being internalized, to use an inimitable example from Zhuang Zhou, resemble the archer declared skillful for hitting a target not designated in advance (Ziporyn 2009, p. 103).¹⁷

Our goal, recall, was to see a connection between philosophy and metacognitive training. I’m suggesting a variety of connections, but only to this extent: Putting our professed commitments into practice can involve a domain often overlooked in ethics, that of intra-psychic dispositions and norm-involving patterns of mental action, a kind of normative dynamics in real-time –

practicing metacognitive skills with different normative specifications of possible targets can increase our general sensitivity to the presence of normativity in psychological functioning, and may offer us the chance to acquire a feel for the phenomenological difference different norms can make to the embodied texture of our life and thought. Put broadly, meditation may play a significant role in virtue epistemology as a tool for the sort of practical ethical cultivation that improves the philosopher's toolkit.

7 Living with and as gods

This way of characterizing meditation allows me to recommend to philosophers, firstly, that we be able to experience what it is like to exhibit (or fail to exhibit) a virtue by being able to observe (in real time and in a reality-following manner) one's short-term psychophysiological dynamics; we must also, however, become sensitized to our long-term (and averaged-out) patterns of inner and outer behavior. Metacognitive engagement involving attentional contextualism invites a person to sensitize themselves to their normatively salient psychological weather as well as to their psychological climate.

This way of putting things allows one to see something about the way meditation might more centrally connect with philosophy than indicated. At least, it may have once done so, given an emphasis on radical ethical transformation found among some philosophers in antiquity. Famously, Socrates in the *Phaedo* presents philosophy as a "practice of dying" (Armstrong 2004, p. 172), regarding practices by which philosophers purify their souls of the body's influence while seeking knowledge of "what is pure, ever existing, immortal, and changeless" (*id.*). The transformative ambition may be expressed by thinking that philosophy, as some ancient Greek practitioners had it, was about 'becoming like a god'.¹⁸

For Epictetus, when we control desire for certain classes of goods we not only share in the gods' condition and power, but eventually become like them (Higginson 1865, pp. 381, 161). For Epicurus, to live as a god among mortals, to have immortality present in a mortal frame, is possible by exercising ethical precepts and making them second nature (Klein 2012, p. 161). If ancient philosophy aimed at securing a truly ethical life within a mortal frame, the disciplining and awareness of one's habits of knowing and being that this was thought to entail may have required some variety of metacognitive praxis, if not always meditation. Some think purely cognitive techniques sufficed;¹⁹ others maintain that the techniques of bodily and mental purification in Greek religious ritual and the reason-involving techniques of mental purification in Greek philosophy were linked, and were understood as being linked, in ancient as well as Hellenistic contexts (Petrovic and Petrovic 2016, pp. 55–100). My point is merely this: Meditation as metacognitive practices of attention *can* be thought to fit in with the picture of ancient philosophy as (transforming) purification.²⁰ The parallel way that talk of living with the gods was ethicized in ancient South Asia can show us how.

From early ritual and philosophical concerns that sought union or companionship with Brahma (Gombrich 2006, pp. 59–60) there emerged "*brahma-vihāra*", attentional practices which, as emphasized in early Buddhism, involve "spending time as gods (Brahmas)" or "living like gods" (Collins 2020, pp. 128–31). Through practice, the refined cognitive and affective states made available by these exercises – involving the cultivation of pro-social attitudes and patterns of attention towards oneself and others deemed ethically and psychologically beneficial – become, as Buddhaghosa puts it, "how one lives" (Heim 2017, n. 18). On this view, to effortfully disengage from the patterns imposed on attention (by sensory stimulation and negative reactive attitudes to which one is habituated) may enable one to achieve a condition analogous to the state of gods, thought to enjoy excellences of mindedness by virtue of always being mindful of

others, their purity of state (free of sensory attraction, anger, jealousy, etc.), and their enjoying unbounded phenomenological horizons and occasions for the exercise of ethically virtuous attitudes.

Aśoka thought that bracketing out substantive normative commitments in metaphysics and the soteriology of individual traditions allowed one to characterize all philosophical traditions (Greek and Indian) as engaging in a shared metacognitive pursuit of inner purity and self-control (Hultsch 1925, pp. 14, 36). The concern to live like non-mortals – as an immortal in a mortal frame, to echo the Greek (Long 2019), or unboundedly in a bounded condition, to echo the Indic phrasing – foregrounds a similar concern, while also bringing something else to the fore: a concern with a variety of achieved freedoms. In the mid-19th century, Thomas Colebrooke (drawing on William Enfield’s characterization of Greek philosophy in antiquity) thought a shared emphasis on freedom connected Greek and Indian philosophy (1824, p. 26). The kind of freedom at issue, I suggest, is an achievement, consisting, as Repetti’s helpful account would have it, in having the sort of mind (first-order) one wants to have (second-order) (2019, p. 154). For some ancient Indian philosophers, meditation is the means to such freedom, particularly as manifested in attentional control.

To make the case, we must continue to think of the meditating philosopher as an agent and not merely a passive owner of mere experiences. More particularly, we must think of the agent in a ‘deep’ way. That is, echoing Frankfurt, we must think of the agent as having things be true of her that do or do not mesh with her higher-order desires (1971). Furthermore, we need to think of the relevant varieties of freedom in action vertically, in terms of whether what is happening accords with one’s higher-order desires, and not only horizontally, in terms of the right causal sources or antecedents for the action.

Can we find such a deep (meditating) agent in ancient Indian philosophy? In *The Questions of King Milinda*, the (fictional) Buddhist Nāgasena explains to the Bactrian Greek King Milinda that acting out of some motivating inner state (e.g., lust) is insufficient to hold someone responsible for an action: One has to see whether such a motivating state is consistent with what a person identifies as their ethical commitments – for one can be an unwilling addict, a state thought to characterize the vast majority of us (Rhys Davids 1894, pp. 17–19). Perhaps contemporaneously, Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (2.60) connects such concerns with meditation: “For even as he strives effortfully, the stirring senses snatch the mind of one with discrimination by force” (Gambhirananda 1998, p. 194). Striving for X, one is driven to Y by subpersonal or personal vectors of influence at odds with one’s considered desires or cares for X. On this picture, we are ever hostage to the capture of attention by sensory stimulation and under the sway of habits, moods, inherited biases, among other (often unconscious) conditioning factors (*id.*, pp. 195–6). To be as one wants to be requires having the mind they want to possess, representing an achievement consequent to bringing oneself under metacognitive control.

Note that control of the *senses* is neither necessary nor sufficient for freedom on this picture. As Kṛṣṇa continues, “Engaging objects with the senses, one who is unyoked to attraction and aversion, self-controlled, self-restrained, attains tranquility” (2.64).²¹ As if emphasizing the interplay of ethical defeaters and freedom, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* (verse V.10) instructs the aspiring practitioner of ethics to see that states like anger (introducing bias and inclining one to suffering) can make us (or our intending minds) unfree (*asvatantrikṛta-cetanā*) (Lévi 1907, vol. 1, pp. 21–2), rendering us constitutionally incapable of doing as we wish. An implication of this is that we are not best regarded as true agents, exemplifying the kind of freedom with respect to action that alone merits praise and blame, until we secure metacognitive awareness and (where relevant) control over the kinds of affective and epistemic factors which can wrest control of our mental life away from what we profess to want.

Similarly, Kṛṣṇa speaks of the need of being *ātma-vaśya*, controlled by (one's second-order) self, or *vidheya-ātmā*, one whose (first-order) self is subservient or obedient (to a second-order normative order) – phrases indicative of the structure that Repetti's account of freedom involves: One has the mind (first-order) one wants (second-order) to have by shaping (second-order) the mind (first-order) one has (2019, p. 154). The point is fairly generalizable across ancient Indian practices of self. The Buddhist poet Aśvaghōṣa in his *Beautiful Nanda*, for example, speaks of the achievements of self-mastery (5.25; Covill 2007, p. 103), highlighting, additionally, the felicities of independence (*svatantratā*) (Covill 2007, p. 159) and a kind of well-being: an autonomy and freedom from illness manifested in one's behavioral patterns, including one's ability to exercise metacognitive awareness as an acquired skill (*svasthā*) (Covill 2007, p. 127, §137, p. 6.43, §7.20).

How such an achievement was generally thought to pair with engagement with reality-involving analysis using reasons in argument, however, is a more complicated affair. I set it aside here except to say this. For Aśvaghōṣa, analysis of what is really the case, the kind of thinking that challenges what one (thinks one) knows about oneself and which can change one, advancing past all psychological and somatic resistance, appears only truly to be an option for a free mind, self-contained, one trained to pliancy and clarity in meditation (Covill 2007, pp. 285, 321–3).

In speaking of the benefit of metacognitive practices to persons inspired by Frank Ramsey, we spoke of persons *qua* professional philosophers. We did not include every benefit accruing to the person as a whole. For the ancients, however, the gap between the person as a whole and the person *qua* philosopher presumably would not always (or ever) obtain. This is partly what it means to think of ancient philosophy as having been practiced as an encompassing *way of life*. For the ancient philosopher, self-transformation on the basis of contouring one's ways of being minded (including the shaping of attention no less than belief) was often linked to behavioral regimens thought to govern every aspect of one's life, down to the least details of gesture, diet, and comportment (Collins 2020, pp. 87–90, 148–50). (Recall that the Greek philosophers spent much time in the gymnasium.) If the connection between ancient philosophy and meditation as metacognitive training is more direct, then the conception of philosophy is far more demanding than the profession it has become today.

8 Conclusion

My goals were modest. Thinking of meditation as normative attentional practices, with the help of reconstructions from pre-modern South Asian sources, helps us see that meditation need not be 'reality-involving' or 'alethically relevant' to be philosophically interesting. We might, instead, argue for a less contentious connection between philosophy and meditation when we give up the demand that meditation be reality-involving, though I have only indicated that this is so.

The resulting picture of meditation views meditation as a suite of metacognitive attention-training practices closely linked to intrinsically normative and ethical concerns – an enactment of normative concerns in awareness, and awareness of normativity in action. In some classical Indian Buddhist presentations of the path of philosophical training, metacognitive practices of attention link ethical training, which comes first, to epistemic achievements, typically thought to follow after the preparatory practices designed to make the mind a supple enough epistemic instrument to apply to discovery and contact with reality. Philosophers have looked ahead on the path towards the ostensible epistemic benefits of meditation. I am arguing that we should look the other way, situating the claims meditation may make on contemporary philosophical attention within the realm of ethical self-understanding and ethical self-cultivation, broadly construed along virtue epistemological lines.

Notes

- 1 See Legum (this *Handbook*, Chapter 1), for a well-developed version of Nozick's (1981) objection based on two competing foundationalist epistemologies in analytic philosophy, namely, those of Chisholm and Plantinga.
- 2 Practices of withdrawing from normative appraisal in meditation were criticized on ethical grounds by Confucian philosophers in China and Korea (Kaplan 2019, pp. 17–18), as they are today by critics of the so-called 'McMindfulness' movement, such as Purser and Loy (2013) and Purser (2019); cf. Repetti (2016).
- 3 For contemporary versions of the resulting puzzles, see Siegel (2017).
- 4 For a critique of the general strategy of attempting to verify Buddhist claims by experiencing them in meditative practices, and an alternative possible solution to this problem, see Struhl (this *Handbook*, Chapter 16).
- 5 For an argument in support of the general strategy of viewing meditation not as a truth-tracking method for acquiring propositional knowledge or *knowledge-that* (knowledge that Buddhist propositions about impermanence, say, are true), but as a transformative methodology for acquiring *knowledge-how* (knowing how to live without suffering, with practical wisdom), see Gowans (this *Handbook*, Chapter 10) and Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12).
- 6 See Greene (2012), p. 164, n. 115.
- 7 Cf. Ram-Prasad 2018, p. 110.
- 8 Cf. Davis and Thompson (2013), p. 591, (2015), pp. 44–5.
- 9 Cf. Proust (2013), p. 4.
- 10 Cf. Ram-Prasad (2018), p. 124.
- 11 For an in-depth analysis of the potentially universal normative potential of these sorts of meditative skills, see Davis (this *Handbook*, Chapter 18).
- 12 For an objection from phenomenology to the effect that these sorts of meditative skills threaten to move practitioners away from reality, see Stone and Zahavi (this *Handbook*, Chapter 22).
- 13 Vervaeke (this *Handbook*, Chapter 12) appears to be promoting a similar view, based on a variety of cognitive science considerations.
- 14 Cf. Daston (2000), pp. 1–2.
- 15 Cf. Repetti (2019), who argues that Buddhist meditation practices more generally cultivate the broader meta-mental freedom of mind ranging over all voluntary first-order mental states, including freedoms of the will (as per Frankfurt), of the emotions (as per McRae), and so on for each element of the voluntary.
- 16 Cf. Albahari (2014), pp. 21–2, 26.
- 17 Cf. Zawidzki (2019), pp. 48–9.
- 18 Cf. Sedley (1999), Adluri (2013), p. 7, Burkert (1960).
- 19 Cf. Cooper (2012), pp. 17–19.
- 20 See Pigliucci (this *Handbook*, Chapter 24), for an in-depth discussion of the Stoic version of attention training meditative exercises and how they square against contemporary, Buddhism-informed versions of mindfulness.
- 21 See also Flood and Martin (2013), p. 55.

References

- Adluri, V., ed., 2013. *Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Albahari, M., 2014. Insight knowledge of no self in Buddhism: an epistemic analysis. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 14(21), pp. 1–30. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3521354.0014.021>.
- Armstrong, J.M., 2004. After the ascent: Plato on becoming like a god. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 26, pp. 171–83.
- Burkert, W., 1960. Platon oder Pythagoras? Zum ursprung des wortes 'philosophie'. *Hermes*, 88(2), pp. 159–77.
- Colebrooke, H.T., 1824. On the philosophy of the Hindus. Part I. *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1(1), pp. 19–43.
- Collins, S., 2020. *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined*. Edited by J. McDaniel. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Cooper, J.M., 2012. *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Covill, L., 2007. *Handsome Nanda*. New York: New York University Press.
- Crosby, K., 2014. *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity*. West Sussex: Wiley.
- Daston, L., ed., 2000. *Biographies of Scientific Objects*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Davis, J.H., and Thompson, E., 2013. From the five aggregates to phenomenal consciousness: towards a cross-cultural cognitive science. In: S.M. Emmanuel, ed. *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. West Sussex: Wiley, pp. 585–99.
- Davis, J.H., and Thompson, E., 2015. Developing attention and decreasing affective bias: toward a cross-cultural cognitive science of mindfulness. In: K.W. Brown, J.D. Creswell, and R.M. Ryan, eds. *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 42–61.
- Deleanu, F., 2012. Far from the madding strife for hollow pleasures: meditation and liberation in the *Śāvakabhūmi*. *Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies*, XVI, pp. 1–36.
- Dunne, J.D., 2006. Realizing the unreal: Dharmakīrti's theory of yogic perception. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 34, pp. 497–519.
- Flood, G., and Martin, C., 2013. *Bhagavad Gīta*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Frankfurt, H., 1971. Freedom of the will and the concept of a person. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68(1), pp. 5–20.
- Gambhirananda, S., 1998. *Bhagavad Gīta with the Annotation Gūḍhārtha Dīpikā*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama. Svapna Printing House.
- Gethin, R., 2004. On the practice of Buddhist meditation: according to the Pali Nikāyas and exegetical sources. *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 9, pp. 207–08.
- Gombrich, R.F., 2006. *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Greene, E.M., 2012. Meditation, Repentance, and Visionary Experience in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of California, Berkeley, CA.
- Gyatso, J., 1999. Healing burns with fire: the facilitations of experience in Tibetan Buddhism. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 67(1), pp. 113–47.
- Hayes, R.P., 1997. Whose experience validates what for Dharmakīrti? In: P. Bilimoria and J.N. Mohanty, eds. *Relativism, Suffering and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 105–18.
- Heim, M., 2017. Buddhaghosa on the phenomenology of love and compassion. In: J. Ganeri, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 171–89.
- Higginson, T.W., 1865. *The Works of Epictetus*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.
- Hultsch, E., 1925. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum. Vol. I. Inscriptions of Aśoka*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- James, W., 1985. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Reprint. Edited with an Introduction by M.E. Marty. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Jha, G., 1983. *Slokavartika*. 2nd ed. Delhi: Satguru Publications.
- Kaplan, U., 2019. *Buddhist Apologetics in East Asia: Countering the Neo-Confucian Critiques in Hufu Lun and the Yusōk Chirūi Non*. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Klein, D., trans., 2012. *Epicurus: The Art of Happiness*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Lévi, S., ed. 1907. *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*. 2 vols. Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion.
- Long, A.G., 2019. Immortality and the ethics of a finite lifespan: Aristotle, early Stoics and Epicureanism. In: A.G. Long, ed. *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy: Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 63–86.
- McRae, E., 2016. Equanimity and the moral virtue of open-mindedness. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 53(1), pp. 97–108.
- Misak, C., 2020. *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nāṇamoli, trans., 2011. *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Nguyen, C.T., 2020. Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. *Episteme*, 17(2), pp. 14–161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epe.2018.32>.
- Nozick, R., 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nozick, R., 1989. *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Pecchia, C., 2020. Seeing as cognizing: perception, concepts, and meditation practice in Indian Buddhist epistemology. *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatique*, 74, pp. 771–96. <http://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2019-0028>.
- Petrovic, A., and Petrovic, I., 2016. *Inner Purity and Pollution in Greek Religion. Volume I. Early Greek Religion*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Proust, J., 2013. *The Philosophy of Metacognition: Mental Agency and Self-awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Purser, R., 2019. *McMindfulness*. London: Repeater.
- Purser, R., and Loy, D., 2013. Beyond McMindfulness. *Huffington Post*. http://www.huffington-post.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html.
- Ram-Prasad, C., 2018. *Human Being, Bodily Being: Phenomenology from Classical India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Repetti, R., 2016. Meditation matters: replies to the anti-McMindfulness bandwagon! In: R. Purser, D. Forbes, and A. Burke, eds. *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context and Social Engagement*. New York: Springer, pp. 473–94.
- Repetti, R., 2019. *Buddhism, Meditation, and Free Will: A Theory of Mental Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Rhys Davids, T.W., 1894. *The Questions of King Milinda. Part II*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Schaeffer, J., 2003. Perceptual knowledge derailed. *Philosophical Studies*, 112, pp. 31–45.
- Schwitzgebel, E., 2013. *Perplexities of Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sedley, D.N., 1999. The ideal of godlikeness. In: G. Fine, ed. *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 309–28.
- Siegel, S., 2017. *The Rationality of Perception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slaje, W., 2000. Liberation from intentionality and involvement: on the concept of jīvanmukti according to the Mokṣopāya. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 28(2), pp. 171–94.
- Stuart, D.M., 2020. Map becomes territory: knowledge and modes of existence in middle period Buddhist meditation practice. In: C. Pecchia and V. Eltschinger, eds. *Mārga: Paths to Liberation in South Asian Buddhist Traditions*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, pp. 277–301.
- Thompson, E., 2008. Neurophenomenology and contemplative experience. In P. Clayton and Z. Simpson, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 226–35.
- Tillemans, T.J.F., 2013. Yogic perception, meditation, and enlightenment: the epistemological issues in a key debate. In: S.M. Emmanuel, ed. *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 290–307.
- Tomlinson, D., 2018. The Tantric context of Ratnākaraśānti's philosophy of mind. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 46, pp. 355–72.
- van Schaik, S., 2015. *Tibetan Zen: Discovering a Lost Tradition*. Boston, MA: Shambala.
- Venkatesananda, S., 1993. *Vasiṣṭha's Yōga*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Zawidzki, T., 2019. Metacognitive skill and the therapeutic regulation of emotion. *Philosophical Topics*, 47(2), pp. 27–51.
- Ziporyn, B., trans., 2009. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.