

**The
Interplay
of Practice
and Context
in Traditions of
Self-Cultivation**

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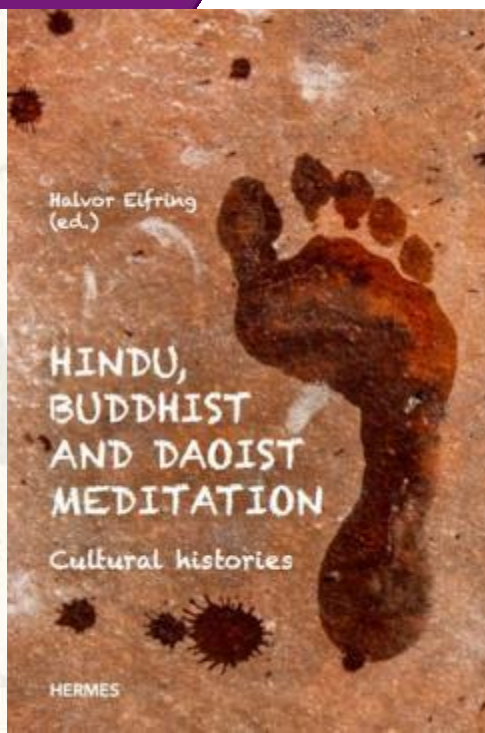
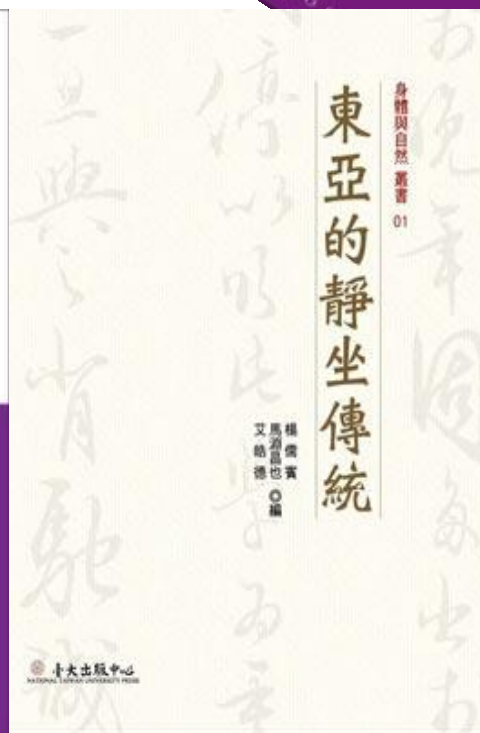
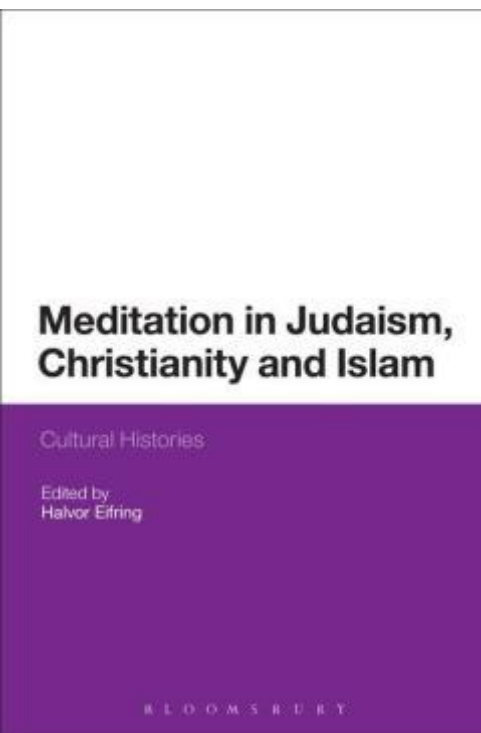
**A Comparative View
of Meditative Cultures**

Two conferences

- Taiwan 2009: East Asian Meditative Traditions
- Norway 2010: Cultural Histories of Meditation



Five books





Practice and context

- Scholars tend to prioritize religious doctrine and sociocultural contexts over meditative practice
- Meditation often meaningless out of context
- Early sources more interested in doctrine
- Descriptions of practice tend to be prescriptive and idealized
- Practice surrounded by taboo and secrecy

Practice and context

- Social and cultural constructivism
 - Contextual determinism
 - Self-hypnosis or self-suggestion



Practice and context

- Beyond constructivism
 - Agency
 - Body and energies
 - Affect and intuition
 - Spiritual, noumenal or perennial dimensions



Practice and context

- Tension between doctrine and practice
 - Practice seen as more important
 - Does practice bring the adept away from doctrine?
 - Kill the Buddha when you see him 見佛殺佛
- Textual material and ethnographic studies





Practice and context

- Cultural interpretations vs. psychobiological mechanisms
 - Breath
 - transience (Buddhism)
 - cosmic energy (Yoga, Daoism)
 - breath of life (Christianity)
 - Heart
 - *chakra* energy centre (Tantra)
 - middle *tanden* 中丹田 energy centre (Daoism)
 - spiritual battleground (Sufism)
 - spiritual love (Christianity)
- Comparative perspective shows how cultural interpretations interact with psychobiological mechanisms

Comparative meditation studies

- Few and far between
 - Different from studies of mysticism
 - Different from scientific studies
 - Different from popular treatment



Comparative meditation studies



Western

- Early Hebrew
- Judaic
 - Merkavah, Kabbalah, Hasidism
- Christian
 - Byzantine, Hesychast, Roman, English, German, Spanish...
- Neo-Platonist
- Islamic
 - Sufi

Comparative meditation studies



Indic

- Brahmanic
- Yoga, Tantra
- Hindu
 - Shaivism, Vedanta
- Buddhist
 - Early Buddhist, Theravada, Esoteric, Tendai, Jodo, Zen, Shingon, Nichiren
- Jaina

East Asian

- Daoist
 - Classical
 - Mediaeval
 - Inner Alchemy
- Confucian
 - Early Confucian
 - Neo-Confucian

Comparative meditation studies



- West: content-oriented
 - devotional, thematic, scripture-based
 - semantic, affective, symbolic, imaginative
- East: technique-oriented
 - bodily, sensory, awareness-oriented
 - pre-logical
 - in addition to content-oriented practices

Globalisation of meditation

- Pre-modern
 - Early Indian influence on Kabbalah, Jesus Prayer, dhikr, sama'



Globalisation of meditation



- Modern
 - De- and re-contextualisation:
East → West → East
 - Technical orientation of Eastern practices fits
better with modern secular and scientific thinking

Tradition vs. modernity

- Traditional
 - Religious
 - Doctrinal
 - Institutional
- Modern
 - Secular and scientific
 - Technical
 - Individualist
- New Age
 - Spiritual
 - Eclectic
 - Non-institutional



Tradition vs. modernity



- Non-western modernities
 - Sumarah
 - Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, agnostics
 - individual choice
 - communal meditation
 - Cinnabar-field 丹田 meditation
 - claims historical origins in deep antiquity
 - denies actual historical origins
 - Quiet sitting 靜坐
 - Japan (Okada Torajiro) and China (Jiang Weiqiao)
 - health-oriented and secular or ecumenical

Tradition vs. modernity



- Who can learn meditation?
 - Specific castes
 - Full-time renunciants
 - no family, career, wealth
 - eremitism: mountains, forests, deserts
 - monasticism: convents, ashrams
 - line of transmission
 - Part-time renunciants
 - retreat: 7-10 days, 30 days, 3 months, 3 years
 - Lay people

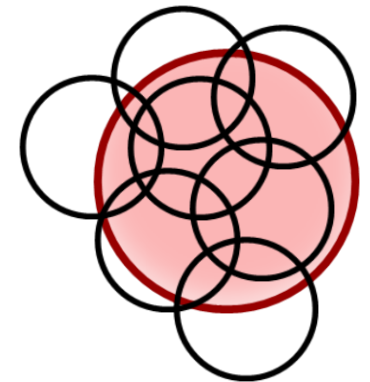
What is meditation?

- Is meditation one thing or many?
- Polythetic definition and family resemblance
 - meditatio, oratio, contemplatio
 - dhikr, sama'
 - dhyana, samadhi, bhavana, yoga
 - 靜坐、冥想、禪坐、存想
- No monothetic core (unlike “species”)



What is meditation?

- Many things, one definition
- Generic, monothetic definition
- Prototypes and gradience
- Stipulative and heuristic - not a natural class
- Anachronistic? Essentialist? Euro-centric?



What is meditation?

- Attention-based technique for inner transformation
 - Not state of mind
 - Not artistic or philosophical product
 - Technique
 - Attention
 - Inner transformation



Meditation is a technique

- Deliberately undertaken
- Systematic practice
- Set aside from other activities
- Continuous
 - Repetitive
 - Durative
- Effects
- Psychobiological mechanisms



Meditation is a technique



- Ambivalence
 - pathless path (Meister Eckhart)
 - gateless gate 無門關 (Zen)
 - “have no technique” 無伎倆 (Sixth Patriarch)
 - “two means” vs. “without means” (Epistle of Prayer)
 - “The truth is a pathless land” (Krishnamurti)
 - shi-kan ta-za 只管打坐
 - method of no method (Sheng-yen 聖嚴)
- Reason for ambivalence
 - goal-orientation in the way of practice or devotion

Meditation builds on attention



- Focus of attention
 - Directing attention to a static or dynamic object
 - “Any object”
- Mode of attention = mental attitude
 - Onepointedness
 - Open acceptance
 - Detachment

Meditation aims at inner transformation

- Religious
- Spiritual
- Psychological
- Philosophical
- Existential



Meditation aims at inner transformation



- Long-term fundamental changes bringing about the anchoring of the person in more fundamental aspects of existence
 - Getting closer to God (Christianity, Islam, Sikhism)
 - Getting closer to Self (Yoga, Yantra/Cakra)
 - Enlightened to fundamental emptiness (Buddhism)
 - Realizing one's Buddha nature (Mahayana Buddhism)
 - Getting closer to the Way (Daoism, Neo-Confucianism)
 - Changing perceptual, emotional, intellectual or behavioral patterns

Meditation aims at inner transformation



- Reaching toward the same ultimate reality?
- Do structural parallels reflect similarities of substance?
- Ineffable experience of a non-phenomenal reality?

vs.

- Different traditions, different experiences?
- Structural parallels gloss over differences?
- Effable and phenomenal experiences?

Meditation aims at inner transformation



- Gradual vs. sudden change
 - Meditative practice vs. religious conversion
 - Individual agency vs. passive reciprocity
 - Within a tradition vs. crossing traditions
 - Gradual vs. sudden enlightenment
 - 漸悟 vs. 頓悟 (Zen)
 - “sudden and without any means” (Cloud of Unknowing)
- Interplay between meditation objects and an openness to surprise everyday events

Meditation aims at inner transformation



- What is the self that is being transformed?
 - a social, cultural and linguistic construction, a tabula rasa influenced from outside
 - seat of individual consciousness and agency springing from within
 - a postmodern collection of sub-selves
 - a cosmic or divine impulse
 - no self

Prototypical but non-essential features

- Closed eyes
- Seated posture
- Short-term changes of state



Meditative states of mind



- State vs. trait
 - Sufi *ahwal* vs. *maqamat*
- Ambiguity
 - English *meditation*
 - Arabic *muraqaba*, *mushahada*, *mu'ayana*
 - Sanskrit *dhyana*, *samadhi*
 - Chinese *chán*, Japanese *zen*



Meditative states of mind

- Dahui 大慧: Trying to attain quietness instead of breaking their mind of birth and death
- Xuyun 虛雲: Greedily chasing after the realm of purity
- Cloud of Unknowing: A spurious warmth, engendered by the fiend
- Epistle of Prayer: Neither care nor consider whether you are in pain or in bliss
- Jon Kabat-Zinn: Any state is a meditative state
- Are Holen: Neither a feeling, nor a particular experience



Meditative states of mind

- Arousal-reduction
 - Silence, calmness, stillness, quietude, tranquility
 - Mental and physical relaxation
 - Opposite of ecstasy and shamanism
- Mental absorption
 - Absorption vs. concentration
 - Opposite of mind wandering?
- Mental clarity
 - Subtle awareness, mindful presence
 - Opposite of sleep, drowsiness, sloth
- Contact with fundamental aspects of reality
 - Personified god, self, way/path, emptiness, timelessness
 - Perennialism? Situatedness? Ambiguity?

Meditative states of mind



- Arousal-reduction
 - Meditation and ecstasy
 - Stressful states – doubt, actualization
- Mental absorption
 - Vipassana
 - See through the illusory nature of thoughts
 - Mind wandering as part of meditation
- Mental clarity
 - Sleep as part of meditation
 - Yoga Nidra
- Contact with fundamental aspects of reality
 - Difficult to define

Meditation vs. prayer



- Continuous vs. sequential activity
- Technical form of self-transformation vs. communicative expression of devotion, petition, submission or gratitude to a divine being
- Overlap: Jesus prayer, dhikr, japa, nen-butsu; visualization
- Wordless prayer, divine meditation

Meditation vs. mysticism

- Practice vs. experiences or states of mind
- Meditation *may* be part of mysticism



Meditation vs. ritual

- Individual vs. communal
- Continuous vs. sequential
- Meditation may be surrounded by ritual
- Ritual may contain meditative elements



Meditation vs. shamanism

- Self-transformation vs. other-transformation
- Not a strict line



Meditation vs. body practices

- Hatha Yoga, Tai-ji, Qi-gong, Wu-shu
 - Continuous vs. sequential



Meditation vs. psychotherapy

- Individual vs. communicative
- Continuous vs. non-continuous
 - Cf. meditation guidance



Directive vs. non-directive meditation



- Directive meditation – outside-in
 - Seeks to lead the mind and body towards preset goals
 - Seeks to limit the free flow of spontaneous mental activity
 - Probably includes Open Monitoring and Loving Kindness
- Non-directive meditation – inside-out
 - Facilitates spontaneous mental activity
 - Includes Transcendental Meditation, Acem Meditation, Relaxation Response, Clinically Standardized Meditation
 - Probably includes some forms of breathing meditation

Directive vs. non-directive meditation



- Meditative effect of mantras
 - comes from their place within the cosmologies surrounding them, which endow the mantras with symbolic meaning and help the meditator to discover the knowledge already cultivated by the tradition
 - process that starts in the mind and body, e.g. psychobiological relaxation response, with no conceptual or symbolic meaning involved

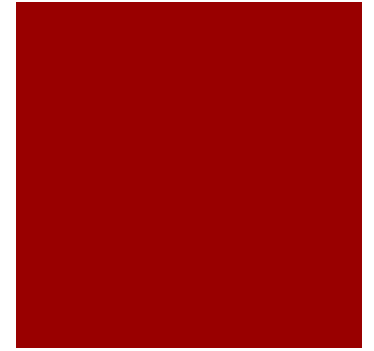
Directive vs. non-directive meditation



	Directive	Non-directive
Context	Suggestive	Non-suggestive
Meditation object	Thematic	Non-thematic
Mental attitude	Concentrative	Non-concentrative

Context

- Suggestive
 - States of mind
 - Personality cult
 - Magico-mythological
- Non-suggestive
 - Process and practice
 - Teaching and guidance
 - Concrete experience





Meditation object

- Thematic
 - Culturally embedded
 - Some topics are universal: love, death
 - Slow and associative reflection – rumination of animals
- Non-thematic
 - Body, senses, attention
 - Asian and modern practices
 - Interpreted in content-oriented language (breath, heart, sound)
 - Thematic content designed to break down ordinary logic
- Apophatic practices
 - beyond cognition, emotion, senses towards an ineffable reality

Mental attitude



- Concentrative
 - Forceful focus on meditation object
 - Narrow focus on meditation object
 - Suppression of digressive thoughts
- Non-concentrative
 - Effortless focus on meditation object
 - Open focus on meditation object
 - Acceptance of distracting thoughts
- Concentration vs. absorption

Mental attitude



- Forceful vs. effortless focus
 - Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清
 - press the keyword forcibly
 - do not cling to the keyword
 - Cloud of Unknowing
 - hammer the cloud and the darkness above you
 - work with eager enjoyment rather than with brute force

Mental attitude



- Narrow vs. open focus
 - one-pointedness
 - Just let thoughts arise, while you recite the Buddha's name



Mental attitude

- Suppression of digressive thoughts
 - Watchfulness: prayer that is free from thoughts (Hesychios)
 - Deluded thoughts 妄念, 妄想 (Hanshan)
- Exploration of digressive thoughts
 - Scrutinize every mental image or provocation (Hesychios)
 - Watch diligently the place where a deluded thought arises and disappears, to see from where it arises and where it disappears (Hanshan)
- Acceptance of digressive thoughts
 - Sexually aroused elephant (Hemachandra)
 - TM, Acem Meditation, some mindfulness practices

Conclusion



- Attention-based technique for inner transformation
- Directive vs. non-directive (outside-in vs. inside-out)
- Comparative perspective reveals the complex interplay between cultural interpretation and psychobiological mechanisms

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