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*Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the
Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice*

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A Review of Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice

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Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice.

B. Alan Wallace. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xi+292 pages, ISBN-13: 9780231158343 (pbk), \$27.95.

Discourse and debate over “Buddhism and Science” is fraught with underlying tension, as varying approaches, apologetics, and epistemes come into and fade from view. In *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic*, B. Alan Wallace brings together his work in the study of Buddhism and Science and his promotion of meditation and contemplative practice towards affecting a shift in the conversation between Cognitive Science and Buddhism. Situated somewhere between a scientific episteme and a Buddhist worldview, Wallace outlines the “materialist problematic” in the study of modern science and philosophies of mind. Embarking on a “middle way” of skepticism that neither outright eschews traditional authority nor dispenses with rigorous and rational inquiry, Wallace

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seeks to insert a Buddhist-inspired “empiricism” into the discourse as a way of overcoming a certain nihilism that emerges in materialist frameworks.

Meditations is divided into two parts: “Restoring Our Human Nature” and “Transcending Our Human Nature.” The first segment is concerned primarily with thinking through and beyond reductive and materialist commitments in scientific fields, commitments that collapse human nature into physical happenstance. In it, Wallace first calls into question the supposition that consciousness and subjective experience are merely derived from material and physical events. His concern is that commonly held and “un-falsifiable” assertions that the brain produces emergent properties (thoughts and mind) preclude research into alternative theories and deprive us of earnest engagement with consciousness, and thereby we are alienated from our own minds. To that end, Wallace draws uncritically on William James and a generalized “Buddhism” to propose instead an open-ended epistemology that leaves room for a subjective and introspective dimension of the mind sciences, which is both skeptical and “radically empiricist.” He argues for the introduction of a third dimension to what he and others in the Buddhism and Science dialogue term “Mind Sciences.” This dimension would complement neurological and behavioral approaches, and would allow the mind and mental qualia to be examined and analyzed directly and in greater depth.

The second segment, having sought to extract consciousness from the occlusion of materialism, proceeds to engage Buddhists' modes of contemplation to think through a disentangling of habituated suffering and genuine happiness. Wallace adopts a Buddhist hermeneutic of the mind—that humans have an intrinsic potential for balance and well-being—and analyzes modern, clinical incorporations of mindfulness. Though generally supportive of such ventures, he mounts a well-pointed critique that such usages of mindfulness meditation tend to overlook the ethical dimension of Buddhist contemplative traditions,

noting that any such extrication sunders their profundity. Particularly, he distinguishes the passive, nonjudgmental presentations in some contemporary psychologized mindfulness practices from those found in Buddhist traditions, wherein one goes beyond mere “nonjudgmental attention” to recognize and purify afflictive mental states. That is to say, he highlights that an ethical subject-cultivation is at play in Buddhist traditions, and the depth of that cultivation is lost by reducing “meditation” to a simple distanced observation.

Wallace concludes his meditations by drawing on explications of *samatha* and *vipasyana* in Indian Buddhist traditions, and Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) from Tibetan traditions, to demonstrate and herald an investigation into the causes of cyclic existence towards seeing “pristine awareness”—the highest realization within Dzogchen. He widens his earlier discussion of “clinicized” mindfulness, noting that a refined and stabilized attention—which can be arrived at by way of Buddhist contemplative practices—could bring a well-focused open gaze to contemporary Cognitive Science. Namely, such a focus would aid in bringing into view and questioning epistemes and ideologies—such as materialism and consumerism—that hinder real progress in the human condition. As a coda to the book, he draws on contemporary interpretations of quantum theory and Buddhist logics of illusoriness to propose a move beyond materialist, closed frameworks, towards openness to possibility and a weaning away from the search for a reified “world.”

Putting *Meditations* in conversation with the wider dialogue between Buddhism and Science, Wallace may find himself still at odds with a field that often seems colored by a reigning materialist lens. The revolution in the “Mind Sciences” that he proposes would entail unhinging those materialist commitments and restoring a focus on introspective and subjective analysis to which early psychologists—William James and Wilhelm Wundt—attended. This is a tenuous partnership: the “pure experience” James favored could itself be

delusional or afflicted. As Janet Gyatso has noted,² there is a certain tension in bringing James into conversation with Buddhisms. There may be resistance from the field to the non-mutually verifiable and non-reproducible elements such a dimension would bring—i.e., the question of empiricism—regardless of how refined the attentional stability and clarity brought about by contemplative practices may be. And yet, at times it seems as though Wallace constructs a “straw man” of sorts out of “materialism,” inasmuch as materialism is not a monolithic term, nor is it the *only* approach to science widely used. One might presume that this reductionism is evidence of his employment of a certain rhetoric that appeals to a wider readership.

A significant aspect of Wallace’s approach is his suggestion that ultimately “Buddhism” can help inform and progress “Science.” As David McMahan³ and Donald Lopez⁴ have elsewhere noted, a common trope of the dialogue between Buddhism and Science is that the latter is typically heralded as the legitimator of Buddhism—in that exchange the epistemic authority gets displaced from Buddhist texts and teachers onto the scientist, who can validate and confirm the tradition’s claims. Wallace’s writing reverses the flow of authority within the discourse when he suggests that Cognitive Science might gain a more nuanced and robust understanding through incorporation of certain introspective “technologies.”

Further situating the text, Wallace’s project here falls in an interstice, somewhere between critique and discourse. He calls for a divorcing of the normative use of “science” from “materialism,” calling into question an unexamined association of materialistic-science-as-

² Gyatso, Janet, "Healing Burns with Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67.1 (1999): 113-147.

³ McMahan, David. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁴ Lopez, Donald. *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008

truth. He suggests that—because this assumption often appears in Western pedagogy and education—society would benefit from a more critical presentation of the scientific field. He hints that materialism (or any other aspect of science) is itself just one other episteme, and a more nuanced and un-tethered approach to science would “herald a broadening of horizons for science and the spiritual traditions of the world alike” (59). Thus, by way of critique he brings into view the issue of materialism being authorized—by structures of power—and made centrally visible in educational systems.

Meditations remains ensnared within a broader discourse of Buddhist Modernism with commitments that fall between the legacy of the secular/Enlightenment/Euro-American discourse on religion and subjectivity. At one valence, the heralding of openness across cultural and religious practices (though it is by no means a negative thing) is itself a discursive move that carries certain implications with it. The pluralistic impulse here—to inform our own practices by means of contemplative practices from the Buddhist world—is accordant with elements of modern secular values, especially regarding the presumed ease and importance of importing certain “spiritual” ideologies and practices without any attendant cultural “baggage.” At another level, this text falls prey to the tendency within the Buddhism and Science dialogue to flatten multiple Buddhisms into a singular Buddhism that is trans-temporal and divested of history, and we are presented with an instance of it here in the treatment of Buddhism as univocal in its interaction with Cognitive Science. We lose a sense of the multivalency of Buddhist traditions

Hence, we can get a glimpse of *Meditations*’ location between discourse and critique. One on hand, Wallace “reverses the flow” of authority in Buddhism and Science, saying that Cognitive Science has something useful and important to gain from Buddhist insights (such as a more nuanced, inwardly-directed dimension of cognitive inquiry), whereas some popular press conversations tend to herald “science” as

the key to proving and unlocking “Buddhism.” And yet, on the other, he inherits and takes on some of the very methods and inflections such modernist sensibilities encompass.

Overall, Wallace’s text is a thoughtful and well-written popular press publication that is useful more as an example of the discourse on Buddhism and Science than as a scholarly study of that dialogue, as in Donald Lopez’s work. Wallace’s rhetoric, though problematic at times, speaks to a popular readership that may be less attuned to the scholarship of Buddhist Studies and that is self-reflexive about how Buddhism is transformed in its interaction with modernity. One of the more intelligent works in the Buddhism and Cognitive Science discourse, *Meditations* might serve to begin re-directing elements of the narrative and epistemic flow of “Buddhism and Science” and “Buddhism and the West.”