

Meditation Is Never Meditation: Critical Remarks on the Decontextualization and Hybridization of Religious Tradition in a Globalizing World

Almut-Barbara Renger

Abstract

What is meditation? How should one do it? How often, for how long, in what posture, with what techniques? Opinions on these questions differ, just as the goals of meditation practices vary. In the twenty-first century, the English word meditation – derived from the Latin *meditatio* – has become a collective term that lends itself to various uses in many different cultural contexts and is enmeshed in the dynamics of cross-border entanglements around the world. It can refer to a whole host of practices associated with transcendence, but also to practices that present themselves as entirely intramundane. Focusing on certain historical and systematic aspects, this article explores diverse uses of the originally European term and the ideas and notions associated with it, from Greco-Roman antiquity to the meditation practices of the late modern era, which mix and integrate different geographic and cultural elements and are not fixed on a particular ideology or denomination. Passing through a series of cultural transformations, circulations, and crossings – each with their specific agencies, discourses, and routes between Europe, Asia, and North America – the article investigates the semantic changes the term has undergone, from the methodical meditation of the philosophical schools of the Roman imperial period and the Christian monastic practice of the audible recitation of biblical texts to the vast plurality of meanings and concepts of meditation in a globalizing world. The focus then zooms in on the modern, recent development of globalizing meditation, addressing aspects of the decontextualization and hybridization of religious tradition, in the context of which – after nearly coming to an end in Europe around 1800 – meditation was (re)constructed as a practice bound neither by cultural context nor by social barriers, particularly not by institutionalized religion. By bringing together several select examples of this development – from Theravāda and Zen Buddhism, among others – the article stresses the heterogeneity of meditative practices and their attachments to their various historical and socio-cultural contexts of creation, arguing against widespread clichés (such as the idea of Buddhism as a meditation system rather than a religion) and universalist conclusions about the “essence of meditation.”

Keywords: *meditatio*, Buddhist modernism, detraditionalization

Prof. Almut-Barbara Renger currently teaches at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Basel, Switzerland, and is also affiliated with the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany.

When students ask me to comment on the concept and practice of meditation from the point of view of my areas of expertise, I usually get a queasy feeling. For one thing, there are as many answers to the question “What is meditation?” as there are practices to which the term is applied. Furthermore, I know a deep understanding of meditative practices must include an exhaustive understanding of the complex teachings, institutions, and belief systems of which such practices are an integral part. These practices – along with their intentions and goals, which can be subsumed under categories such as relaxation, healing, social-emotional competence, so-called paranormal abilities, redemption, and salvation¹ – can only be understood when grounded in a thorough knowledge of these contexts. And finally, this question is mostly asked of me in “Introduction to Buddhism” seminars, where students without prior knowledge tend to assume that meditation is the central and most important practice in Buddhism – which is simply not true. But instead of giving in to my discomfort and rejecting the question, and because I know that images of meditating monks circulating in the media are more about clichés and stereotyping than about the social reality of Buddhism, I usually give three answers. Firstly, “meditation” – as it is widely used today – is a modern, collective term. Secondly, the practices to which this term is applied are often decontextualized – that is, extracted from their traditional religious settings and communities. Thirdly, meditation as understood in this sense would not exist without Buddhist modernism. And then I am trapped! For to adequately deal with these (admittedly overly succinct) answers, which indicate that we owe contemporary understandings of meditation to modern developments, I would have to be very verbose. But, as a rule, the time allotted in these seminars is insufficient. After all, the subject under consideration is Buddhism, not meditation.

In this article, I will take the opportunity to elaborate on these three brief answers, focusing on aspects of the decontextualization and hybridization of religious tradition in a globalizing world. I understand the phrase religious tradition in the reasonably broad sense of Ninian Smart’s seven “dimensions of religion”² – ritual, narrative and mythic, experiential and emotional, social and institutional, ethical and legal, doctrinal and philosophical, as well as material – as including ideas, values, and norms as well as their expression and symbolization in texts and artefacts, practices and representations. My aim is to discuss certain observations and hypotheses, which can be pointedly summarized in the phrase “meditation is not meditation.” I will not offer a systematic overview of forms of meditation. Such surveys have already been widely circulated in histories of Pāli Buddhism, Mahayāna and Vajrayāna. Since most readers of this volume will likely be specialists in Buddhism, I would say that such an overview

¹ See Klaus Engel, *Meditation: Geschichte, Systematik, Forschung, Theorie*, 2nd rev. ed. (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 1999); Martin Nicol, “Meditation II. Historisch/Praktisch-theologisch,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 22, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2000), 337–53; Udo Tworuschka, “Meditation I. Religionswissenschaft,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 22: 328–37.

² Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

would constitute carrying tea to China or beer to Munich. Rather, I would like to invite readers to take a stroll through the cultural and religious history of the term meditation, together with its associated concepts and ideas, notions and practices. For this purpose, I shall concentrate on two aspects: first an observation, and then a hypothesis. Firstly, the widespread misconception that meditation is central to Buddhist practice goes hand in hand with the fact that, in many parts of the Global North,³ many of the decontextualized practices disseminated under the category of meditation are adapted from cultures that originally had no knowledge of the European term meditation. Secondly, this situation is the result of cross-border entanglements around the world. Research in global history addresses these entanglements from a postcolonial perspective, emphasizing a circle of influence across borders and cultures, and using terms and concepts such as “global connections” and “global society.”⁴ So follow me, if you would; accept my invitation to a passage through history on the occasion of the question of meditation – on the tortuous paths that combine various cultural links and dynamics of cultural and religious history between and among the continents – while keeping these two aspects in mind.

The route we shall take is divided into a couple of stages, each of which passes through a series of cultural transformations, circulations, and crossings, each with their specific agencies, discourses, and paths between “East” and “West.” We will first turn to some of the various meanings of the term meditation and its popularization in the twentieth century. This leads us from Greco-Roman philosophy and Christian monasticism to the meditation practices of the late modern era, which mix different geographic and cultural elements and are not fixed on a particular ideology or denomination. Then we will explore how meditation, after nearly coming to an end in Europe in 1800, rose up again amid the dynamic exchanges of cultural and religious history between Asia, Europe, and North America. In this context, the Euro-American view that meditative methods – taken, for instance, from Theravāda or Zen Buddhism – are independent of religious teachings and symbol systems gained ground. In the final stage of our journey, we shall also consider the repercussions of this development in Asia and the “looping” or “feedback effect” it involves.⁵

My approach in this article, which illuminates changes to and extensions of the concept of meditation – together with the practices, conceptions, semantics, and discourses associated with it – contains several select examples that have been presented in detail elsewhere. So it is sufficient to touch on them briefly here. Bringing

³ The phrase “Global North” in this article refers to the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and developed parts of Asia, as well as Australia and New Zealand, although these countries are not actually located in the Northern Hemisphere.

⁴ See Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780–1914. Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Jürgen Osterhammel and Niels R. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History*, trans. Dona Geyer (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (London: Routledge 2006); Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁵ David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 57.

these specific examples together in this way seems to me to be helpful in understanding how much the term meditation – which emerged discursively as a collective in the course of the modern encounter and confrontation of Asian, European, and American actors and traditions – may lead us to overlook the heterogeneity of meditative practices and their attachments to their various historical and socio-cultural contexts of creation, and therefore how easy it is to come to essentialist conclusions about the “essence of meditation” and to develop stereotypes, such as the idea that Buddhism is not a religion, but rather a system of meditation.

Semantic Shifts and Decontextualization: From Greco-Roman Philosophy to MBSR

Let’s start from scratch. Long before the term meditation became something like a collective singular – in the sense in which Koselleck observes in the study of history⁶ – what did it mean?

In general educational and scholarly use, as it has developed in Mediterranean-European cultural history, “meditation” denotes an in-depth reflection on something, for which modern Chinese words such as *mingxiang* 冥想 (“to think deeply, contemplatively”) and *chensi* 沉思 (“to immerse oneself in thinking”) are used. In a specific way – especially in religious, philosophical, and psychological contexts – this can mean intensive, focused thought, and sometimes also active thinking, which sets in motion various processes, emotions, or mental states.⁷ The term’s Latin origin provides further elucidation. The verb *meditari* (in the transitive form, “to think about constantly, contemplate, ponder;” or in the intransitive, “to reflect”), which linguistically goes back to the Proto-Indo-European root **med-*, is related to the Greek μέδομαι (*medomai*, meaning “provide for, be mindful of” or “plan, contrive, devise”) or μήδομαι (*mēdomai*, meaning “to be minded, intend” or “plan and do cunningly or skilfully”).⁸ In Latin versions of the Septuagint – the oldest continuous translation of the Hebrew-Aramaic Bible into the Greek language of everyday life, which originated in Hellenistic Judaism

⁶ Koselleck observes that the plural form of *Geschichte* has been compressed into what he calls the “collective singular” – e.g., when “histories” (in the sense of “stories”) are raised to the level of a unitary History; see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 270–77. I would argue that the same holds true when one speaks about *the* meditation or *the* Buddhism, when such terms are used either as a collective singular that acts and makes demands, or as a unitary entity to which various kinds of practices are subordinated.

⁷ See Burkhard Mojsisch, “Meditation I,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 5, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Darmstadt: WBG Academic, 1980), 961–65; Alois Payer, “Meditation,” in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, vol. 4, ed. Hubert Cancik, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), 127–31; Tworuschka, “Meditation I,” 328–37; Günter Butzer, “Meditation,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 5, ed. Gregor Kalivoda et al. (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2001), 1016–23.

⁸ See Peter G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 1090; Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 1089, 1125.

about 250 years before the Christian era – it was also used to translate μελετᾶν (*meletān*, meaning “take thought *or* care for” or “pursue, exercise”) into Latin.⁹

Philosophy in Greco-Roman antiquity, which was influenced by rhetoric, was already familiar with forms of methodical meditation in the sense of in-depth reflection.¹⁰ Oriented toward a self-sufficient life in a world-immanent sense, such forms of meditation were primarily of an intellectual character and had the structure of a conversation with oneself rather than a prayer directed to a transcendent being, such as (a) God or gods. In addition to techniques for steering attention in the narrower sense, we find procedures for attentive listening, reading, and writing or the exercise of “good thoughts” – keeping in mind the wisdom of life and assessing various life situations using techniques such as contemplating noble examples and edifying sayings.¹¹ Above all, thinking about and imagining death played an important role. While this theme was already of great importance in Plato’s thought (428/427–348/347 BCE), it is also a foundational motif in Seneca’s philosophy (c. 1–65 CE), and it recurs in the works of many Christian authors, such as Hieronymus (347–420) and Augustine (354–430).¹² In early Christian monasticism, activity denoted by the word group *meditari* – *meditatio* was valued as an important perceptible testimony of memorized or recited biblical texts.¹³ The practice of prayerfully reading biblical texts, which is best known from medieval Christianity, is the *lectio divina*, which recommended spiritual exercises – *lectio* (attentive reading), *meditatio* (object-free perception), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (objective consideration, contemplation) – to collect the mind. It was presented systematically in the *Scala claustralium* (published prior to 1150) of the Carthusian monk Guigo II (prior to 1174–1193), which was translated into various languages in the Late Middle Ages.¹⁴

Since then, the term *meditatio* (in the European vernacular Italian “*meditazione*,” Spanish “*meditación*,” French “*meditation*,” German “*Meditation*,” English “*meditation*”) and the practices associated with it have developed a great variety of meanings, both in Europe and beyond. Through interactions within Eurasia, individual terms in Asian languages have been widely received as linguistic equivalents for the European term “*meditation*,” particularly the Sanskrit term *dhyāna* ध्यान (Pāli: *jhāna* ज्ञान) and its phonetic rendering as *chan’na* 禪那 in Chinese. In these processes of reception and translation, the implications and connotations of the European

⁹ See Liddel and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1089; Emmanuel von Severus, “Das Wort ‘meditari’ im Sprachgebrauch der Heiligen Schrift,” *Geist und Leben* 26 (1953): 365–75.

¹⁰ Details are to be found in the 1954 book on spiritual direction in antiquity by Paul Rabbow (1867–1956), in which the classical philologist analyzed the entire ensemble of techniques of soul management, later also described in the lectures of Pierre Hadot. See Rabbow, *Seelenführung. Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich: Kösel, 1954).

¹¹ Rabbow, *Seelenführung*, 23–150.

¹² See Mojsisch, “Meditation I.”

¹³ Heinrich Bacht, “‘Meditatio’ in den ältesten Mönchsquellen,” *Geist und Leben* 28 (1955): 360–73.

¹⁴ For further details, see Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne. Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien*, 2 vols. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 32–52.

understanding of meditation partly fell by the wayside and were partly transformed. Today, when one speaks of *chan* 禪 as a meditation practice in an Asian context, one is not usually referring to the methods of Greco-Roman philosophy or Christian monasticism. Rather, the term addresses an Asian technique of physical-mental concentration, which is attributed to Buddhism – particularly to Chan Buddhism – although Chan was originally not distinctive within Chinese Buddhism in its use of meditative techniques.¹⁵

Several important factors in this development of the usage of the word include the adoption of the Indian word *dhyāna* as a transcribed foreign word (*chan'na* 禪那, *chan* 禪 in its shortened form) in the process of the dissemination of Buddhism in China, as well as its application in translations of Indian Buddhist texts carried out by the group around the Parthian An Shigao.¹⁶ The word *chan'[na]* was thus used in China to designate early Buddhist practices, such as the preparatory technique of counting one's breaths, leading to mental concentration (in Sanskrit *ānāpānasmṛti* आनापानस्मृति). This usage prevailed and was continued as the designation for the *Chanjong* 禪宗 as Buddhist schools multiplied and differentiated themselves throughout the Chinese cultural sphere, while the Chan school, allegedly founded by the Southern Indian Bodhidharma (around 440–around 528), spread to various East Asian countries – to Japan as *zen* 禪 and to Korea as *seon* 선, among others.¹⁷

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the lively Euro-American-Asian exchange in a globalizing world did the rest, with economic, political, and cultural interdependencies gradually becoming commonplace. Within these transcultural dynamics, which fostered the popularization of Asian doctrines and practices in Europe and North America, meditation was constructed as a practice bound neither by cultural context nor by social barriers – particularly not by institutionalized religion. The popularization of the techniques of the Indian yoga philosophy referred to as *dhyāna* played a major role in this decontextualization, as did the techniques of the Chan, Seon, and Zen traditions – which, to a greater extent than any other Buddhist schools in the course of history, have become associated with the practice of meditation (as will be discussed in more detail below). As a result, the term meditation was recoded in international public consciousness, as reflected in feuilleton and other branches of journalism – increasingly dissociated from its European imprint, its associations with ancient philosophy and Christianity. Thus it is used today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as a generic term, which is applied to many different societies and

¹⁵ Peter Hershock, “Chan Buddhism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, spring 2017 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/buddhism-chan/>.

¹⁶ According to legend, An Shigao was a prince who renounced his claim to the throne in order to serve as a missionary Buddhist monk in China in the second century CE. For further details, see Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China. The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 33–36.

¹⁷ See Stephen Addiss, Stanley Lombardo, and Judith Roitman, eds., *Zen Sourcebook: Traditional Documents from China, Korea, and Japan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008).

cultures of the past and the present and denotes very different practices – tending, in its casual formulations, toward Asia.¹⁸

In this manner, the term meditation continues to denote methods of deep contemplation – for example, in the sense of the *Meditations* (second century CE) of Marcus Aurelius (121–180) or the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) by René Descartes (1596–1650), as well as specifically Christian practices,¹⁹ including Catholic retreats and spiritual exercises. More often, however, it addresses techniques for bringing about altered states of waking and consciousness resulting from the focusing of attention, which have their roots in Asia, particularly in traditions bundled under the controversial terms Hinduism and Buddhism. The wide acceptance of the originally Asian practices, for which the term meditation is commonly used today, across the societies of many (particularly) Western countries is due to the fact that these techniques play a pivotal role far beyond a personal search for meaning. Supported by neuroscience research, they are also (often with great fanfare) applied in medicine and psychology.²⁰ The goal here is to prevent and to heal illnesses, or at least to support therapy by using decontextualized forms of Buddhist meditation and body-mediated techniques which are considered to be meditative, such as yoga, tai chi, and qi gong. The spectrum of application ranges from chronic pain to stress-induced inflammatory reactions and depression.

This development – in which the historical, cultural, and social decontextualization of practices called meditation and the psychologization of the belief systems from which they originate is clearly evident – has been critically problematized, despite the benefits it may have for healthcare and for human beings in general. David McMahan, for example, questions whether the Buddhist practices to which the term meditation is applied can still be effective once their specific religious and ethical elements are filtered out.²¹ After all, it is precisely these elements that have

¹⁸ See also Richard E. King, “Meditation and the Modern Encounter between Asia and the West,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, ed. Miguel Farias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 18–40.

¹⁹ On meditation in various Christian contexts, see Martin Laird, “Western Christianity and Meditation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, ed. Miguel Farias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 144–62; Cyril Hovorun, “Eastern Christianity and Meditation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, 163–80.

²⁰ See, for example, Deane H. Shapiro, Jr. and Roger N. Walsh, eds., *Meditation. Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Aldine, 1984); Michael Murphy and Steven Donovan, *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation. A Review of Contemporary Research with a Comprehensive Bibliography 1931–1996* (Sausalito: Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1997); Antoine Lutz, John D. Dunne, and Richard J. Davidson, “Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*, ed. Philip David Zelazo, Morris Moscovitch, and Evan Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 499–552; Maria Fernanda Ospina, Kenneth Bond, Mohammad Karkhaneh, et al., “Meditation Practices for Health: State of the Research,” *Evidence Reports/Technology Assessments* 155 (2007): 1–263; Wolf Singer and Matthieu Ricard, *Beyond the Self: Conversations Between Buddhism and Neuroscience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Dusana Dorjee, “Psychophysiology of Meditation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, 462–80; Tim Lomas, “Emotion and Meditation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, 481–502.

²¹ See McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 183–214.

shaped such practices for the purpose of achieving specific goals within certain socio-cultural contexts. Can a Western Buddhist, asks McMahan, who meditates in the workplace and tries to deal sympathetically with her children, achieve the same results as a monk in ancient India, who left his family behind and spent his time studying Buddhist texts?²² Can Catholics, ask Freiburger and Kleine, practice Japanese *Zazen* 座禪 without believing in the emptiness of all phenomena and the insubstantiality of the person?²³

The popularization of Theravāda Buddhism's most famous contemporary meditation exercise – the Vipassanā practice, also referred to as “insight” or “mindfulness meditation,” which emerged from the traditions of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Sri Lanka²⁴ – provides an excellent example of the decontextualization of meditative techniques and their transplantation into new contexts; it is as prominent an example of this decontextualization and transplantation as is modern yoga in its many varieties.²⁵ In the Euro-American sphere, both mindfulness meditation and yoga are included among the various types of spiritualities offered to the market. Such techniques are generally available on the edges or outside of the major Christian denominations as well as in complementary medicine, sports, and education. Due to the “pizza effect,” as promulgated by the Indologist and cultural anthropologist Agehananda Bharati, both are also propagated and practiced in an altered form in Asia.²⁶ To a certain extent, they stand alongside Western theories and practices; to a certain extent, they link up to these theories and practices to create hybrid formations. MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), a complementary medical treatment program that has been taught since 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zin and his colleagues at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (USA), is a relevant example of this. MBSR – which is used, among other things, in the context of behavioral and psychodynamic psychotherapy methods – integrates Vipassanā practice with modern yoga, Zen, and the exercise of body perception, in which one mentally “scans” each area of the body. This program is a central part of the controversial

²² McMahan, “Context Matters – An Interview with Buddhist Scholar David McMahan,” *Tricycle* (Winter 2013), <http://www.tricycle.com/interview/context-matters>.

²³ Oliver Freiburger and Christoph Kleine, *Buddhismus. Handbuch und kritische Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 234.

²⁴ See Erik Christopher Braun, “Ledi Sayadaw, Abhidhamma, and the Development of the Modern Insight Meditation Movement in Burma” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2008); Brooke Schedneck, *Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Global Commodification of Religious Practices* (London: Routledge, 2015).

²⁵ See Jean Byrne and Mark Singleton, eds., *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives* (London/New York: Routledge, 2008); Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz, eds., *Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Vienna University Press, 2018); Suzanne Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020).

²⁶ Agehananda Bharati, “The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1970): 267–87.

mindfulness movement, which has moved beyond its origins in the USA and is attracting worldwide attention.²⁷

Hybridization and Essentialization: From Mesmerism to Osho

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, as is already apparent in the sections above, the implicitness with which different practices from different cultures are subsumed under the term meditation is a multi-causal condition. Of the many reasons for this, one we have not considered thus far lies in the comparison-based classifications to which points of contact and similarities between practices have led – for example, the importance of a low stimulus environment and an ascetic lifestyle, or opinions on when, how long, how often, in what posture, and with what technique (regarding, for instance, breath or eye position) one should practice.²⁸ The types and divisions construed from these comparisons may encourage us to overlook the contrived nature of the category of meditation and instead to see it as a unified and distinct phenomenon, whose manifestations are contingent on the historical and sociocultural situations in which it occurs.

There are many reasons why such classifications might be developed and propagated, based on various academic and non-academic presuppositions and agendas undergirded by different phenomenological views. Some rely on the assumption that meditation is a transcultural given, the different instantiations of which can be examined; others portray meditation as transhistorical, presuming that its key aspects do not change over time; still others claim that meditation is a human universal. When we consider the related uses and discussions of the category “religion” and the controversy surrounding classification in this instance,²⁹ approaches of this kind are not surprising. Employing these classifications, however – that is, ascribing to meditation an immutable essence, divorced from time, which is not affected by historical and sociocultural realities, or extrapolating a pre-ancient tradition to which all meditation can be traced back – removes us from the realm of discursive negotiability. In view of the fact that all systematizations of meditation refer back to the original diversity of the standardized practices, such a pointedly essentialist understanding – such a universalist perspective – is untenable and, from a historical perspective, simply wrong.

²⁷ See Ronald E. Purser, David Forbes, and Adam Burke, eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement* (Cham: Springer International, 2016).

²⁸ See Payer, “Meditation,” 127–31; Engel, *Meditation*.

²⁹ For more on this ongoing debate, see Arthur L. Greil and David G. Bromley, eds., *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries between the Sacred and Secular* (Amsterdam: JAI, 2003); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013); Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, “Definition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9–32.

That opinions and views of this kind nevertheless endure – most notably in the contemporary alternative religious field, which, in its heterogeneity and open structures, has been described as a “holistic milieu”³⁰ – is largely due to the fact that many of these forms of popular meditation are cocktails of ingredients from different cultures. This phenomenon corresponds to the process of hybridization that assists and is assisted by economic globalization, as Peter Burke puts it.³¹ It is a global trend that has been described and analyzed from diverse postcolonial perspectives, by theorists such as Néstor García Canclini (born 1939), Stuart Hall (1932–2014), and Homi Bhabha (born 1949), whose works respond to the multi-cultural awareness that emerged in the early 1990s. A great number of the popular practices in the alternative religious field are hybrids, created on the basis of the view that meditation is independent of religious belief and can be enacted and adapted in whatever way required. Having arisen from accelerated intercultural and religious encounters, which open(ed) new possibilities and spaces for religious practices to enter into diverse contexts, such practices demonstrate the deconstruction of traditional religion and the rise of hybrid forms of religiosity in the modern era, in which divisions between the secular and the religious have been blurred. Partly extracted from their traditional religious settings and communities, partly newly invented, these practices are entangled in multiple fields. Typically, they are combined with cultural techniques and activities pertaining to health and well-being, in which “meditation” is shaped and commodified as a highly desirable product which promotes healing and therapy, travel and tourism. The effect this is having – for example, in Thailand – is demonstrated by Brooke Schedneck in her study on tourism and the global commodification of religious practices.³² In Thailand, international meditation centers have developed as new institutions, where some retreatants (often but not exclusively Thai) are presented with meditation as but one of a variety of practices within the framework of Buddhist settings, ideas, and values; in contrast other participants (often non-Thai, mostly but not exclusively from the West) are offered a psychological understanding of meditation as a secular practice that is largely a matter of individual development.

Of course, the adaptation of meditation to the diverse tastes and needs of a global audience is not entirely new. It has a considerable history; among the most explicit and active drivers of this movement in the twentieth century was the leader of the Rajneesh movement, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, also known as Osho (1931–1990). In this truly global guru and the movement he inspired, we have a particularly dazzling example of the late twentieth century’s tendency to blend and commodify images, ideas, beliefs, and practices from different contexts, wedding the idea of otherworldly

³⁰ Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution. Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

³¹ Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 2.

³² Schedneck, *Thailand’s International Meditation Centers*.

transcendence to the pursuit of material wealth.³³ Similarly to his compatriot Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008) in transcendental meditation, Osho-Rajneesh found a large following worldwide by aligning the practices he offered with a proliferation of various discourses and by creating opportunities for global participation through religious and cultural translation and transplantation.³⁴ In the mid-1970s, he initially offered a dozen forms of meditation and therapy techniques – among them, for example, the three-day Enlightenment Intensive. This method of “self-experience” and “truth-seeking” combines elements of a multi-day Zen Sesshin (a prescribed period of intense meditation) in a Western style with methods of interpersonal communication, in which group participants try to answer the question, “Who am I?”³⁵ Over the course of the following years, the number of practices rose to around eighty. Some of them – for instance, Dynamic Meditation, the core practice of the Rajneesh movement³⁶ – are still part of the program of the Osho International Meditation Resort and the many small Neo-Sannyas centers, such as the one in Cologne, Germany.³⁷ *The Orange Book*, which recommends the regular practice of certain exercises at certain times of the day, documents many more practices.³⁸ These exercises, mostly called “meditations,” combine elements from Hindu and Buddhist traditions with psychological findings and therapy models from Europe and North America, in particular the human potential movement, which aimed at a spiritual transgression of the human and the realization of all-encompassing unity and hoped to be able to initiate a comprehensive change in humanity.³⁹ These exercises continue to be practiced by a vast assortment of individual actors and groups around the globe.

The influx of followers and adherents Osho-Rajneesh experienced was a result of the same dynamics of mutual reference between Asia, Western Europe, and North America as the remarkable success of MBSR, as mentioned above. Together with the expansion of so-called Western culture over large areas of the world, one can observe a

³³ See Hugh B. Urban, *Zorba the Buddha. Sex, Spirituality, and Capitalism in the Global Osho Movement* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Almut-Barbara Renger, “Re-Imagining an Ancient Greek Philosopher: The Pythagorean Musings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho),” in *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*, ed. Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 287–318.

³⁴ See Thomas A. Forsthoefel and Cynthia Ann Humes, eds., *Gurus in America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), esp. 55–79, 169–192; see also Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*.

³⁵ This method was developed in the 1960s by Charles Berner and was offered not only in Osho’s ashram, but also by numerous figure(s) in both the United States and Europe in the 1980s. For further details, see Lawrence Noyes, *The Enlightenment Intensive: Dyad Communication as a Tool for Self-Realization* (Berkeley: Frog Books, 1998).

³⁶ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 58–63.

³⁷ The Osho International Meditation Resort’s program – offering such things as “Living-In Programs,” “Courses for Personal Growth,” “Daily Meditation Schedule,” “Mindful Work as Meditation,” “Multiversity Programs,” and many more – is regularly updated and can be found at: <https://www.osho.com/meditation>. The Osho UTA institute in Cologne also publishes its daily meditation program and updates it regularly, under the tab “Programm,” at <https://www.oshouta.de>.

³⁸ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *The Orange Book. The Meditation Techniques of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh* (Antelope: Rajneesh Foundation, 1981).

³⁹ See Jessica Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, and the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2013).

notable “Easternization of the West”⁴⁰ throughout the twentieth century, with processes of change taking place in various fields of discourse – such as theology, political thought, religion, and science. Triggered and fostered by factors such as Christian missionary work, colonialism, and discourses of Orientalism as well as by growing mobility and the development of new communication technologies, these processes did not occur without many of the Asian discourses and practices involved having already gone through a process of “Westernization” before being absorbed into the Western world. Moreover, these processes also relied on an “Easternization of the East,” insofar as “Easternized” Western practices, discourses, and actors in turn influenced (and still influence) Asian traditions in their transformed, “Westernized” versions.⁴¹

A key transition point for the emergence of modern meditation culture out of these complex interrelationships and interpenetrations of Asian and Western thought and practice was Mesmerism, as Karl Baier has shown in his detailed study on meditation and modernity.⁴² After its eventful history in Europe from the Middle Ages to the early modern era,⁴³ meditation experienced a rebirth out of Mesmerism. This technique – with which the physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), who developed it, sought to heal his patients – paved the way for a rediscovery of meditation. In the Late Middle Ages, monastic meditation practices had begun to spread beyond Christian monasteries; for the literature of the early modern period, the meditative interpretation of the world as a sign of God’s divine work was of great importance.⁴⁴ In subsequent centuries, however, meditation was increasingly devalued – particularly in its non-discursive forms – on the basis of three factors in particular: firstly, the condemnation of Quietism, which had made a case for forms of contemplative prayer (with names such as the “prayer of silence” and the “prayer of the heart”); secondly, the rationalism of Enlightenment; and, last but not least, the moralization of religion with respect to a bourgeois work ethic. As a result, the corresponding meditative methods almost died out in Europe.⁴⁵

The turn back to meditation was brought about by the Mesmerists’ search for evidence that there is a principle – the *fluidum* – that flows through the universe, through all organisms, and so also through the human body, and that diseases are caused by blockages of this free flow, which trained healers could eliminate by the laying on of hands.⁴⁶ To substantiate this thesis, Mesmerists consulted Asian teachings and

⁴⁰ Colin Campbell, *The Easternization of the West. A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007).

⁴¹ See Jørn Borup, “Easternization of the East? Zen and Spirituality as Distinct Cultural Narratives in Japan,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 16 (2015): 70–93.

⁴² Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 179–252.

⁴³ See Peter Dinzelbacher, “Meditation,” in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 6, ed. Norbert Angermann et al. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1993), 450–52.

⁴⁴ See Gerhard Kurz, ed., *Meditation und Erinnerung in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000).

⁴⁵ See Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 142–78.

⁴⁶ See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 430–35.

practices. Carl J. H. Windischmann (1775–1839), a professor of pathology and the history of medicine as well as the history and systematics of philosophy at the University of Bonn, was one of the most important players in this field. Taking up previous equations of the term *fluidum* with the Sanskrit word *prāṇa* प्राण (“breath of life, life force”), which is comparable to the Chinese term *qi* 氣, he interpreted Upanishadic sources – which refer to the heart and an inner movement of ascension from the heart to the crest – according to the principles of Mesmerism.⁴⁷

Influential individuals and movements followed up on this interpretation – partly through direct and partly through mediated reception. One of the most famous figures to refer to Mesmerism is Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891), who co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York (1875) together with Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907). In the first volume of *Isis Unveiled*, for example, she mentions the concentration on the solar plexus, which is known from Mesmerist literature.⁴⁸ By identifying it with several modern and ancient practices from different cultures of Eurasia which emphasize the navel region, she creates a parallel that was familiar to the German Mesmerists. Blavatsky – who is known for her inclination to essentialize, combine, and synthesize a multitude of esoteric and occult ideas of Asian and European provenance in order to revive an “ancient wisdom” which underlay all the world’s religions – had come into contact with Mesmerism and spiritualism in Russian Bohemian circles.⁴⁹ Due to the considerable influence of her essentialistic approach on contemporary and subsequent spiritual actors and reform movements in both the Euro-American and the Indo-Asiatic region, she significantly contributed to the widespread dissemination of the content of Mesmerist thought.

Among the many other factors that led to the development of modern meditation culture in its many hybrid forms, the growing interest in body exercises (such as yoga, gymnastics, and dancing) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is one of the most important.⁵⁰ This interest was emphatically shared by the Life Reform movement, which spoke out against a unilateral materialistic, economic, and socio-structurally functionalist view of the human being and in support of the benefits of a focus on the “whole person.”⁵¹ In the context of this reform movement, which displayed the highly heterogeneous features of a religiosity outside of established institutional religious structures, there was a debate over whether the traditional

⁴⁷ See Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 221–43.

⁴⁸ Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled. Vol. I: Science* (1877; repr., Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1998), xxxix.

⁴⁹ See Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 297–306.

⁵⁰ See Bernd Wedemeyer-Kolwe, “Von Asien nach Europa. Aspekte zur Rezeptionsgeschichte fernöstlicher Körperpraktiken,” in *Zen, Reiki und Karate. Japanische Religiosität in Europa*, ed. Inken Prohl and Hartmut Zinser (Münster/Hamburg/London: LIT, 2002), 249–66; Wedemeyer-Kolwe, “Der neue Mensch”. *Körperkultur im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004), 25–189.

⁵¹ See Eva Barlösius, *Naturngemäße Lebensführung. Zur Geschichte der Lebensreform um die Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1997); Kai Buchholz and Klaus Wolbert, eds., *Die Lebensreform. Entwürfe zur Neugestaltung von Leben und Kunst um 1900*, 2 vols. (Darmstadt: Häusser, 2001).

religions of Christianity and Judaism or the new communities and religious imports from Asia could liberate the modern individual from the alienation and artificialization of life and thus lead people back to themselves. Meditative and naturopathic methods, an effort to free the body, and a healthy diet all played an important role in this process, as did an affinity to theosophy and anthroposophy as well as to the religious teachings and practices disseminated through the publication and translation of Asian sources. Epoch-making works from the German-speaking world include *Sutras of the Vedanta* (*Sutras des Vedanta*, 1887) and *60 Upanishads of the Veda* (*Upanishads des Veda*, 1897) by Paul Deussen (1845–1919) as well as *Speeches of Gotamo Buddho* (*Reden Gotamo Buddhos*, 1896/1902) by Karl Eugen Neumann (1865–1915). Through its Monte Verità colony, founded in 1900 near Ascona, the Life Reform movement was an object of fascination for a wide range of influential scholars, writers, and artists – such as Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) – who spread the contents of the reform movement through society more broadly via their own work.

Detraditionalization and Modernization: Vipassanā, Zen, and Chan

In view of the rapidly increasing modernization processes that have been taking place on every continent, at various levels of intensity, since the nineteenth century, it is not surprising to find that there were religious reform movements taking place around 1900 in Asia, too – in India,⁵² but also in many other countries, such as Burma.⁵³ In spite of the diversity of their respective intrinsic, religious, social, and political aims, a common impetus behind these movements was the desire to distinguish themselves from traditional monastic traditions and to emphasize the importance of lay practice.

Typical examples of this can be found in the context of modern Buddhism, in which various transformations “emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity,”⁵⁴ with the result that Buddhism “could become almost anything in the transnational flow of representations.”⁵⁵ Particularly noteworthy is the case of Sri Lanka. Under the influence of British colonial rule, especially in polemics against it – supported by Western sympathizers such as Henry Steel Olcott, who prepared an influential *Buddhist Catechism* (1881) using the structure of the Protestant catechism in 1881 – Ceylon (what is today Sri Lanka) experienced a substantive reformulation of the content of Buddhist teaching and the distinct responsibilities of Sangha, the community of monks and nuns, and the laity in the

⁵² See David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁵³ See Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement. Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007).

⁵⁴ McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 6.

⁵⁵ Thomas Tweed, “Buddhism, Art, and Transcultural Collage: Toward a Cultural History of Buddhism in the United States, 1945–2000,” in *Gods in America. Religious Pluralism in the United States*, ed. Charles L. Cohen and Ronald L. Numbers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 193–227, esp. 194.

nineteenth century.⁵⁶ These complex developments and discourses, variously described as “Buddhist modernism” and “Protestant Buddhism,” illustrate the extent to which the dynamic exchanges between Europe, Asia, and America result(ed) in global changes to religion. The Vipassanā movement, with its effective transformation and global popularization of the Theravāda practice of the same name,⁵⁷ is built on the innovations that emerged from these nineteenth-century disputes between Singali lay Buddhists and the clergy over claims to religious sovereignty. Once a meditation form known only in small monastic circles and passed on exclusively through close teacher-disciple relationships, Vipassanā practice was made available to a larger, lay audience and became popular far beyond Asia. Today, removed from its original institutional context, it forms a main pillar of the stereotypical view of Buddhism, widespread especially among non-Buddhists, as primarily a system of meditation – a destiny Vipassanā shares with Zazen, in particular.

In contrast to such clichés, Buddhist studies emphasizes that rituals and worship practices – such as the ancestral cult, prayers, the cult of relics, and pilgrimages – are the core of Buddhism,⁵⁸ those monks, nuns, and laypeople – both over the course of history and today – who practice meditation as a central religious practice are a small minority.⁵⁹ Ian Reader’s study of Zen Buddhism in Japan demonstrates that this even applies to temples of the Soto School (*Caodong zong* 曹洞宗 in Chinese), which is commonly perceived as an institution focused on the practice of silent sitting; again, even here, meditation is only the focus in rare, exceptional cases, and is moreover the standard practice only in a dwindling number of temples.⁶⁰ However, studies of this kind do not – or do, but only insignificantly – weaken the continually reproduced public image of Zen Buddhism as “meditation Buddhism.” With the suppression of traditional institutional contexts and monastic duties, Zen Buddhism continues to be reduced to the practice of sitting meditation – thanks in part to the circulation of standardized images of monks sitting in the lotus position, as reproduced in journalism, advertising,

⁵⁶ See George D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed. Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Sven Bretfeld, “Buddhistische Laien, buddhistische Profis: Individualisierung von Religiosität als Folge einer Neuverteilung religiösen Wissens im modernen Buddhismus Sri Lankas,” *Transformierte Buddhisten* 1 (2008): 108–35.

⁵⁷ Richard Gombrich, “From Monastery to Meditation Centre. Lay Meditation in Modern Sri Lanka,” in *Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Philip Denwood and Alexander Piatigorsky (London: Curzon Press, 1983), 20–34; Gil Fronsdal, “Insight Meditation in the United States: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth Ken’ichi Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 163–80; Schedneck, *Thailand’s International Meditation Centers*, esp. 24–44.

⁵⁸ Renger, *Buddhismus. 100 Seiten* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2020).

⁵⁹ See Robert H. Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228–83; McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*; Freiburger and Kleine, *Buddhismus*.

⁶⁰ See Ian Reader, “Zazenless Zen. The Position of Zazen in Institutional Zen Buddhism,” *Japanese Religions* 14, no. 3 (1986): 7–27.

and entertainment.⁶¹ Also common, especially in meditation centers, is the evocation of the image of Bodhidharma practicing wall contemplation (*biguan* 壁觀) – with his face turned to the wall – in the Shaolin Monastery on Mount Song, although research into the history of Chan stresses that this had nothing to do with the practice of meditation in the traditional sense.⁶²

As in the case of the practice of Vipassanā, which today stands in for Theravāda Buddhism in public perception, reform movements and processes of appropriation and demarcation between Asia, Europe, and North America are at the root of this reduction. They are the foundation upon which the Chan, Zen, and Seon sects have become some of the most famous schools of Buddhism in the Global North today. Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki⁶³ (1870–1966) – who spread the image of a Zen Buddhism that would enable people to have individual, self-induced religious experiences and thus to dive deeper into existential wisdom – was particularly instrumental in this process. Under the influence of William James’ Gifford Lectures, published in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Suzuki interpreted Zen in psychological terms – as a kind of universal mysticism, which promotes the individual’s freedom from social influence by awakening him or her to a new, transindividual reality and, at the same time, a perception of wholeness.⁶⁴ This unorthodox interpretation made Zen comparable to forms of mysticism that scholars such as James had emphasized as the fountainhead of all religious sentiment.⁶⁵

The backdrop of this detraditionalization in Japan, where Suzuki came from, is the period of political upheaval and growing Japanese nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the tendency in many Asian countries was to consider Buddhism as backward and in need of reform. At that time, intellectuals – particularly those involved in confrontations with Christianity – developed models of a “modern” Buddhism that could be reconciled with scientific thinking in an attempt to liberate Buddhism from elements that were considered irrational, thus seeking to make Buddhism fit for modernity.⁶⁶ One important event for the global spread of meditation and of this reformed Buddhism was the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893. Appearing at this event, alongside such important figures as the Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist and writer Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), was a Japanese delegation of priests – including Suzuki’s teacher, Sōen Shaku (1860–1919) – who contributed to the impression of Japanese Buddhism as rational, empirical, and less dogmatic than Christianity. One of those impressed by this presentation was the

⁶¹ See Rick Clifton Moore, “Spirituality that Sells: Religious Imagery in Magazine Advertising,” *Advertising & Society Review* 6, no. 1 (2005), http://works.bepress.com/rick_moore/11.

⁶² See Reader, “Zazenless Zen,” Freiberger and Kleine, *Buddhismus*, 241–43.

⁶³ In his works and publications in English, he is identified as D. T. Suzuki or Daisetz Suzuki.

⁶⁴ See Richard M. Jaffe, “Introduction,” in *Selected Works of D. T. Suzuki*, vol. 1: *Zen*, ed. Richard M. Jaffe (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), ix–lvi, esp. xxxviii–xlii.

⁶⁵ See Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism,” 228–83.

⁶⁶ See Monika Schrimpf, *Zur Begegnung des japanischen Buddhismus mit dem Christentum in der Meiji-Zeit (1868–1912)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000); Freiberger and Kleine, *Buddhismus*, 424–29.

German-American author and publisher Paul Carus (1852–1919), with whom Shaku began a lively exchange and to whom he finally sent his pupil, Suzuki, in 1895, both to assist Carus as translator and to continue his studies under him.⁶⁷

Suzuki remained in the United States for 13 years and became the most prominent spokesman for Zen Buddhism in the West, both through his work as a translator and through the writing of his own books, especially after his return to Japan. Construed as a spiritual method for realizing individual happiness and universal truth, Suzuki's Zen attracted the attention of numerous influential artists and intellectuals, leaving its mark on beat poetry and the hippie movement. It even found a place in psychoanalysis, particularly among influential figures such as Erich Fromm (1900–1980), who saw in Zen an opportunity to gain access to the unconscious,⁶⁸ and among Japanese psychologists, who accommodated this concept of Zen.⁶⁹ As a result, Suzuki's interpretations became increasingly well known, and Zen became the most popular variation of Buddhism in America and Europe after World War II. A key role in this process was played by prominent Japanese Zen masters, such as Shunryū Suzuki (1905–1971) in the United States and Taisen Deshimaru (1914–1982) in France, in whose centers – so-called Dōjōs – Zazen was given top priority as the central practice of Zen.

The high appeal of Zazen in the United States and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s made a substantial contribution to the increasing understanding of meditation as the essence of Buddhism. Individual forms of meditation were separated from their respective religious tradition's historical, dogmatic, and cultural frameworks and transplanted into a new context – to the extent that offers for products such as “Zen-Sesshin for Managers” could be made, as exemplified by the famous case of the Benediktushof and its Zen master, Willigis Jäger (1925–2020), in southern Germany.⁷⁰ In the German-speaking cultural arena, where Jäger comes from, the Jesuits Heinrich Dumoulin (1905–1995) and Hugo Makibi Enomiya-Lassalle (1898–1990) pioneered the adoption of the meditative method of Zen in a Christian context. Their understanding of Zen was guided by the independent Japanese sect known as Sanbō Kyōdan,⁷¹ a lay reform movement that has stripped meditation of traditional Buddhist teachings and forms and sees the central Zen experience as that of “enlightenment.”⁷² Dumoulin and Lassalle held meditation courses and developed a broad publication program, eliciting very different reactions – for example, they were criticized both for cloaking Zen in a Christian garment and for promoting Zen as a Christian teaching –

⁶⁷ See Martin J. Verhoeven, “Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the Transformation of Asian Thought,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, 207–27.

⁶⁸ See McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 192–94.

⁶⁹ See Polly Young-Eisendrath and Shoji Muramoto, eds., *Awakening and Insight. Zen Buddhism and Psychotherapy* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002).

⁷⁰ See Inken Prohl, *Zen für Dummies* (Weinheim: Wiley-VCH, 2010), 291–99.

⁷¹ Literally translated, this phrase means: “Religious Organization of the Three Treasures.”

⁷² See Sharf, “Sanbōkyōdan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 3–4 (1995): 417–58.

which made them famous far beyond the Christian context. The result was a growing number of followers. From the middle of the 1960s until the middle of the 1970s, persons from bourgeois-liberal circles as well as figures from alternative cultural milieus and church environments all attended meditation courses.⁷³

In all the ways described above, spread by influential Japanese figures as well as some – especially Christian – actors from Europe and North America, Zazen has experienced a development similar to that of the Vipassanā practice in the dynamics between the continents: after centuries in which only a minority of members of monastic institutions and laypersons had practiced meditation regularly and intensively, the interest in meditation in Asia has also increased. In Japan, several temples now offer meditation courses – some of which are specially designed for foreigners, others for the employees of Japanese companies. In addition to the practice of Zazen, these courses include the recitation and copying of sutras, participation in cooperative work such as house cleaning, and much more, for the purpose of promoting discipline and obedience. However, in the vast majority of temples in Japan, meditation and other training for laypeople do not play an essential role; instead, the usual Buddhist tasks and functions on behalf of the community – such as funeral rites and the commemoration of the dead – are at the forefront.⁷⁴

Closely connected to the example of Japan is that of Taiwan, which was under Japanese rule between 1895 and 1945. Here too, and in a particularly striking manner in the East Asian cultural sphere, a transnational flow of meditative practices to and from the island can be observed. While in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries only monks and a few devoted laypersons had seriously engaged in meditative practices, over the last four decades meditation has become a much-requested practice, as can also be observed in the rise of tourism pertaining to it.⁷⁵ This turn to meditation – which has accompanied the emergence of Buddhist colleges associated with famous Buddhist leaders, such as Hsing Yun (born 1927), the founder of Fo Guang Shan – includes practices from various schools and traditions.⁷⁶ The most striking of these belong to Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhism as well as to the Chan School, with famous monks promoting a cosmopolitan, modern form of Buddhism, which transcends national and sectarian boundaries by integrating Chan Buddhism with elements of non-Chinese Buddhist traditions. One of them is the well-known Chinese Buddhist monk and religious scholar Sheng Yen (1931–2009), who established a new Chan Buddhist

⁷³ See Martin Baumann, *Deutsche Buddhisten. Geschichte und Gemeinschaften*, 2nd rev. ed. (Marburg: diagonal, 1995), 80–84.

⁷⁴ See Prohl, *Zen für Dummies*, 177–90; Borup, “Easternization of the East?” 70–93.

⁷⁵ See Tzuhui A. Tseng and Ching-Cheng Shen, “Meditation Tourism: Exploring the Meditation Flow Experience and Well-Being,” in *Health, Tourism and Hospitality: Spas, Wellness and Medical Travel*, ed. Melanie K. Smith and László Puczkó, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 429–34.

⁷⁶ See Mario Pocesci, “Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Traditions,” in *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 79–99, esp. 93–97.

school called the Dharma Drum Lineage (*Fagu zong* 法鼓宗), which unites the two lineages he was heir to: Linji and Caodong.⁷⁷

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), signs of a similar development have begun to emerge. Among the religions that have experienced a revival there in recent decades, Buddhism – especially in the form understood as traditionally Chinese – is particularly popular. Since the Communist Party of China began to pursue a more liberal handling of religion under Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), in the context of the rehabilitation of the Buddhist Association of China, which had been dissolved in 1966, many Buddhist temples and monasteries have been (re)built, and monks and nuns have been (re)ordained.⁷⁸ The spread of various forms of Buddhism among the people and the number of lay practitioners, together with individualized and secular receptions of Buddhist content and symbols – for example, in literature, the arts, and new media – have also increased steadily in recent decades.⁷⁹ In particular, there is a growing interest in Chan Buddhism, after the writings of D.T. Suzuki were translated into Chinese in the mid-1980s and a kind of Chan fever (*chanxuere* 禪學熱) broke out.⁸⁰ More and more people flock to meditate in Chan camps on weekends – for example, in the Longquan Temple on the outskirts of Beijing. “Retreats are proving popular among Chinese seeking solace and meaning in their lives” – so writes the *South China Morning Post*, commenting on this development among some of China's temples in the paper's international edition in December 2015.⁸¹ And in October 2018 the online multimedia platform *Buddhistdoor Global* reported on the launch of meditation retreat programs at Yuquan Monastery in Dangyang, Hubei Province, which were intended “to lead people to liberation by improving their quality of life, purifying their minds, and balancing mind and body.”⁸²

It remains to be seen to what extent – as the meditation revival in monasteries in Mainland China gradually becomes known internationally – spiritual tourism beyond the borders of the People's Republic begins, and also what role might be played by the

⁷⁷ See Jimmy Yu, *Reimagining Chan Buddhism: Sheng Yen and the Creation of the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁷⁸ See Daniel Overmyer, ed., *Religion in China Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Zhe Ji, “Buddhism and the State: The New Relationship. Increasing Numbers of Believers Bring Great Changes to the Monastic Economy in China,” *China Perspectives* 55 (2004): 2–10; Adam Yuet Chau, ed., *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁷⁹ Ji, “Non-institutional Religious Re-composition Among the Chinese Youth,” *Social Compass* 53, no. 4 (2006): 535–49; Ji, “Buddhism in the Reform Era. A Secularized Revival?” in *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*, ed. Adam Yuet Chau (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 32–52.

⁸⁰ See Ji, “Buddhism in the Reform Era.”

⁸¹ See Kathy Gao, “Now and Zen: China's Buddhist Temples Open Doors to Modern Mainland Soul-searchers,” *South China Morning Post*, International Edition, December 24, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/1894443/now-and-zen-chinas-buddhist-temples-open-doors-modern-mainland>.

⁸² Guoying Stacy Zhang, “The Revival of Meditation in China: A Seven-day Retreat at Yuquan Monastery,” *Buddhistdoor Global*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/the-revival-of-meditation-in-china-a-seven-day-retreat-at-yuquan-monastery>.

so-called Sino-Tibetan conflict, as it is presented in standardized images in the media. It is conceivable that, with skillful marketing and support from the Chinese government, the focus of Western interest in the coming decades will shift from Japanese Zen to Chinese Chan, and it may even result in a run on Chinese Chan masters and meditation retreats in China. For – despite all the changes brought about by reforms during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republican Era, with Japanese Buddhist missionaries active in China at the time, and despite all the adjustments to the religious policy of the People’s Republic that the “Chinese” Chan has undergone – it can always be claimed that mainland China’s Chan is more ancient and therefore more authentic than the Japanese tradition. The idea that older is better and that things were grander and more perfect in ancient times appears to be very common across the globe and has a firm grip on many culturally and politically important agents of Western civilization. Hence, it is not unlikely that contemporary Chan’s blatant modernity – for example, around the Shaolin Temple at Mount Song or in the form of concepts such as *shenghuochan* 生活禪, as promoted by the Chinese monk Jinghui (1933–2013)⁸³ – will be overlooked.

Concluding Remarks

As different as the conditions in Asia, Europe, and North America from the late nineteenth to the beginning of the twenty-first century may be, it is nevertheless worthwhile to look at them together. In all of these contexts, religious renewal movements have appeared as a response to the modernization of society and to global flows of commodities and cultures, images and information, practices and traditions across time and space. In all of these contexts, traditional forms of religion have been criticized, reforms have been demanded, and aspects of religious traditions have been disseminated outside of traditional religious communities. Over the course of these processes – and in the diverse dynamics of appropriation and demarcation between continents, cultures, and nations – practices considered “meditative” have been revitalized and transformed according to the shifting tastes of a global audience, with the result that meditation is now considered a global practice and is imbued with much greater importance than ever before. A global meditation culture has been and still is developing, widely promoted in various media – such as books, magazines, and television – and decisively determined by the decontextualization and detraditionalization of old, handed-down practices. This process illustrates how

⁸³ See Fenggang Yang and Dedong Wei, “The Bailin Buddhist Temple: Thriving under Communism,” in *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies*, ed. Fenggang Yang and Joseph B. Tamney (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 63–87; Ji, “Buddhism in the Reform Era;” Renger, “Buddhismus im Rahmen staatlicher Vorgaben: Zum Leben und Wirken des Chan-Meisters Jinghui (1933–2013) in der Volksrepublik China,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 66, no. 3–4 (2014): 295–328; Yuaning Wu, “The Collective Practice of Buddhism in Contemporary China: Living Chan (生活禪 *shenghuo chan*) as a Case Study” (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2020).

religions are globalized, reinterpreted, and translated for new audiences according to the ways in which they resonate with and can be appropriated by different cultures.

Together with the prevalence of a particular understanding of meditation, which is characterized by Asian practices, the development of a global meditation culture is also reflected in the academic study of religion. One example among many is the lemma *meditation/contemplation* in the most recent edition of the handbook *Religion Past and Present (Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, or RGG)*. This entry places much greater emphasis on the Indo-Asian than on the Mediterranean-European geographical area: both in section 1, with its focus on religious studies in general, and in the sections that follow the section on Christianity, namely “Indian religions” in section 3 and “Buddhism” in section 4.⁸⁴ Thus the weighting of this comprehensive entry demonstrates several paradigmatic points in the contemporary study of religion. Firstly, semantic shifts in the use of the historical term “meditation” have long been absorbed in standard language and general use. Secondly, the development of “meditation” as a modern collective term is firmly established in the taxonomy and systematics of research and science. Thirdly, a globally applicable hybrid category has taken shape in scholarly practice, and the mental maps of this category are no longer sought solely in Europe, but also – and especially – in Asia. Of course, as I hope to have made clear above, this does not legitimize the universalist interpretation and essentialization of a wide range of practices as “meditation.” Such universalizations and essentializations of practices which have been removed from their institutional contexts and hybridized with various elements from other contexts have a tendency to disguise the heterogeneity of what is signified by meditation, suggesting that “meditation is meditation.” To summarize my argument, and to repeat it once again – meditation is never meditation!

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⁸⁴ See Michael von Brück, Martin Nicol, Bettina Bäumer, and Heinz Mürmel, “Meditation/Kontemplation,” in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 5, ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al., 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 964–70.

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