

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

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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

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