

The Uses of Attention

Elements of Meditative Practice

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Meditation may be defined as attention-based techniques for inner transformation.¹ In other words, meditation is a *practice* aiming at an *effect*:

Practice: Attention-based technique



Effect: Inner transformation

The term “inner transformation” implies long-term and fundamental changes, in contrast to the mental states discussed by Bronkhorst and Anālayo in this volume. We shall leave the further elaboration of this effect to a later occasion.

Our emphasis in this essay will be on the elements involved in the practice. We shall explore typical features of meditative techniques, primarily by investigating two aspects of attention: its focus and its mode. The essay will also consider some general tendencies in the gradual refinement of such technical features as the meditation moves towards what may be characterized as more

¹ This is a modified version of the definition in Eifring, 2013b. On this definition, see also Eifring, ms.

advanced stages. Such tendencies may be observed both within and outside the Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist traditions, spanning large parts of the Eurasiatic continent.

Practice as problem

Our emphasis on the technical practice is not unproblematic. Like most human activities, meditation is embedded within social, cultural and historical contexts. It is often understood to achieve its meaning and effects just as much from such contexts as from any technical features of the practice itself. One of the Daoist texts discussed by Eskildsen in this volume even claims that meditation is useless unless it takes place at the exact proper times on each day, because its basic aim is to align the meditator's activities with the rhythms of the natural cosmos. In the descriptions of Daoist clepsydra meditation cited by Komjathy, the emphasis lies on social, material, ritual and cosmological factors, the actual meditative practice most often being understood rather than made explicit. Houtman, moreover, shows how some forms of meditation may be seen as having strong political implications. However, while by no means denying the immense influence of sociocultural and even political features, this essay will focus on aspects of the practice that are assumed to have effects beyond such contextual elements, though usually in interaction with them. Frequently, such effects are attributable to general psychobiological working mechanisms.

Another challenge to our emphasis on the practice itself lies in the fact that even the sources in which meditation is singled out for special attention do not always pay much attention to technique, but are instead concerned with states of mind. Thus, the Buddhist "first absorption" discussed by Anālayo does not primarily refer to a specific practice, but to a mental state. The Burmese hermitess interviewed by Houtman gives few technical details of her practice, but describes with surprising frankness the positive and negative states and experiences she has gone through in her meditative process. Bronkhorst likewise emphasises the concern with meditative states over meditative practice, and questions whether we can ever achieve a "cultural history of meditation", since a history of such states is bound to be elusive.

There are even quite a few meditative traditions that look upon meditation techniques with suspicion. In non-dualistic Buddhist contexts like Chinese Chán and Tibetan rdzogs chen, techniques are sometimes met with scepticism exactly because of the above-cited dualism between practice and effect. In several Christian traditions, a technical orientation is seen as coming in the way of a personal relation to God or Jesus. A similar attitude is found in Sikhism, where techniques are held to interfere with the ideal attitude of humble devotion. In the 20th century, one of the issues J. Krishnamurti brought up when he broke away from the Theosophical Society was the reliance on techniques: “The truth is a pathless land.”²

Many sources, however, including some of the texts under scrutiny in this volume, do treat technical practice as a core issue. The Tantric meditation manual *Vijñāna Bhairava* discussed by Bäumer describes 112 methods of meditation. The Buddhist sources discussed by Dessein go into much detail about the “contemplation of the repulsive”, including the meditative awareness of dead bodies in various stages of decomposition. One of the Daoist sources discussed by Eskildsen also clearly specifies the meditative procedures to be adopted in order to attain the kind of visions sought after.

Furthermore, in spite of the negative views of techniques in Christianity and Sikhism, the ubiquity of technical features in the devotional practices of both has been thoroughly documented.³ Most scholars agree that early Chán opposition to techniques was primarily a rhetorical move that did not reflect the actual situation, in which monks were indeed seen to practise seated meditation.⁴ Much the same can probably be said about rdzogs chen.⁵ Paradoxical expressions like “the pathless path” and “the gateless pass”⁶ are exactly that: ways of expressing the paradox of having to employ

² Lutyens, 1999:78.

³ Eifring, 2013b; Myrvold, ms.

⁴ Most famously, the *Platform Sūtra* 壇經 combines critical views of meditation with admonitions to disciples to continue meditating after their master has passed away.

⁵ Per Kværne, personal communication.

⁶ Meister Eckhart: *der weglose weg*; Chán: *wú-mén-guān* 無門關.

techniques to achieve results that go far beyond what they can reliably produce. With few exceptions, they do not amount to denials of technical practice, but admonitions to avoid goal-orientation and passive reliance on techniques.

The historical study of meditative practices is challenging, and not only for the reasons cited by Bronkhorst. First, the written source material is very limited, most sources preferring to discuss at length the ideological underpinnings of meditation and the often idealized and excessively systematized states of mind it is supposed to bring about, rather than the techniques that may bring the adept to them. Even so-called meditation manuals, including *Vijñāna Bhairava*, usually contain little more than brief verses or aphorisms; they are merely hinting at the technical features of the methods involved. The details are left to the oral guidance of an experienced living teacher. That seems to be exactly the way this ancient work was used by the 20th-century Kashmiri master Lakshman Joo.

The divulgence of meditative practice is also sometimes surrounded by taboos. In many living traditions today, the details of meditative practice are only discussed with one's teacher. Even Buddhist monks, who live in adjacent cells in the same monastery and who have been practising communal meditation together every day for years, often still do not know much about each other's inner practice.⁷

In the written sources, accounts of meditations are most often normative and scholastic and may not correspond to the actual practice. As Bronkhorst shows for Jainism, formulations that were never meant to provide descriptions of meditative practice were sometimes interpreted as such by ancient scholars, who have typically been at least as interested in systematicity as in practicability, leaving later practitioners with the difficult task of making practical sense of more or less absurd descriptions. The large scholastic meditation manuals of southern Buddhism, such as Buddhagosa's *Visuddhimagga* (5th century CE), are typical examples of systematic expositions with a strong theoretical and doctrinal emphasis,

⁷ Cf. Shaw, 2006:11.

but which nevertheless have functioned as practical textbooks for meditating monks throughout the centuries.

One difficulty regards the relation between language and reality. In some contexts, the same form of meditation may be referred to through the use of several different terms, as Komjathy argues for Chinese Daoism: *bàoyī* 抱一 (embracing the One), *jìngzuò* 靜坐 (quiet sitting), *rùjìng* 入靜 (entering stillness), *shǒuyī* 守一 (guarding the One), *xīnzhāi* 心齋 (fasting of the heart-mind), and *zuòwàng* 坐忘 (sitting-in-forgetfulness). At other times, however, the same term may refer to a number of different practices. The linguistic designation itself, therefore, often tells us little about the actual practice.

Yet another problem concerns the vague borderline between practice and effects. For instance, descriptions of meditative concentration may be conceived either as injunctions to act with particular mental focus (practice) or as accounts of the total mental absorption to which meditative practices are supposed to lead (effects). Anālayo mentions a similar problem regarding happiness or bliss, which is usually described as the result of meditative practice, but is sometimes also seen as a factor contributing to meditative progress, and thus in some respects as a part of the practice. In the Daoist sources discussed by Eskildsen, the borderline between practice and effects takes another turn, as it is not entirely clear whether the visions described are actively brought forth by inner visualization or just spontaneous results of meditative practice.

In fact, practice and effects are not always even theoretically distinguishable. When Bäumer quotes *Vijñāna Bhairava* as urging the practitioner to contemplate “in a thought-free way on any point in the body as mere void”, this presupposes the prior achievement of an empty or “thought-free” state, which is often cited as a meditative effect, but here in turn it becomes part of a more advanced part of the practice.

It follows from all this that a culturally and historically valid analysis of the elements of meditative practice is fraught with problems. It also follows that a first attempt at making such analysis must put to use all available historical sources and make interpreta-

tions and conjectures based on comparisons both within and across cultural and temporal boundaries. This includes contemporary sources, which are often more informative regarding practical details, as well as the budding knowledge of meditative practice emerging within the sciences.

This approach may not sit well with the constructivist perspective that has dominated cultural and religious studies in the past decades. Such constructivism came partly as a reaction against exaggerated claims to universality within phenomenological studies of comparative religion. Constructivism has in turn, however, brought with it an equally exaggerated readiness to dismiss commonalities across cultures by characterizing them as superficial, simply because various cultures conceptualize what looks like the same phenomena differently. In fact, it is not obvious what influence such different conceptualizations have on the psychobiological effects of the elements of meditative practice. For instance, to the extent that the meditative uses of breath in different cultures resemble each other, the conceptualization of breath as cosmic energy in Hinduism and Daoism, as an illustration of transience, inconstancy and mutability in some Buddhist practices, as an aid to concentration or absorption in other Buddhist practices, and as the breath of life in Christianity may or may not matter for the actual psychobiological effects of meditation. In this essay, we shall treat the basic elements of meditative practice, such as the various uses of breath, as our primary objects of investigation, granting only secondary importance to the conceptual frameworks surrounding them in the different cultures.⁸

Attention-based techniques

According to our definition, meditation is not just any form of practice but a *technique* and, as such, typically characterized by the following elements:⁹

⁸ For further discussion, see Eifring, ms. Kapstein's (2004:282ff.) discussion of the psychobiological basis for light experiences across different religions may be relevant in this context. For a wider discussion of trends and perspectives that break with constructivism, see Ferrer & Sherman, 2008.

⁹ Eifring, 2013b:8.

1. It is a deliberately undertaken practice aiming to produce certain effects.
2. Its procedures are specified with some degree of clarity.¹⁰
3. It is clearly set aside from other activities in time.
4. It is sustained — repetitive or continuous — rather than sequential.
5. It involves aspects of the nervous system, and the effects are based on some general psychobiological working mechanisms.

The most typical cases, including most forms of meditation, display all these characteristics; less typical cases may lack one or two of them. For instance, the “contemplation” of different body parts, first in one’s own body and then in a dead body on a charnel ground, as described by Dessein in this volume, is sequential rather than sustained (point 4), since the focus of attention is deliberately changed during the practice. Moreover, some meditation-like practices are not clearly set aside from other activities in time (point 3), as in cases where the meditative prayer of East Syrian Christianity and the *kōan* practice of Chán Buddhism aim to go on uninterruptedly during the day and even at night during sleep.¹¹ The distinction between what counts as meditation and what does not is not always clear-cut. For instance, there is considerable overlap between meditation and activities such as prayer, ritual, shamanism, and mysticism, none of which necessarily involves the use of techniques in our narrow sense.¹²

According to our definition, meditation techniques are based on the active use of *attention*. Most obviously, the focus of attention is directed towards a *meditation object*, and much of the variation between meditation techniques springs from the variety of meditation objects: breath, body, sound, word, image, imagination, etc.

¹⁰ Cf. Cardoso et al., 2004 and 2008.

¹¹ Seppälä, 2013; Schlütter, ms.

¹² There is also, however, considerable overlap between meditation and other practices that do involve techniques, such as modern-day relaxation techniques and certain forms of exercise.

Less obvious but at least as important is the *mental attitude*, or the mode of attention, defined on the basis of questions like: Is the focus of attention narrow or open? Is the generation of the meditation object forceful or effortless? And to what extent are unintended elements like spontaneous thoughts allowed to bring the attention away from the meditation object?

While some meditation objects are external physical entities, the use of attention always ties them to the mind, to conscious awareness. In this sense, meditation is always a mental exercise, even when it is concerned with the body or with material objects. The subtle modulation of attention is a central element in meditation techniques. The modern concern with “mindfulness” underlines this fact, rooted in the ancient Buddhist notions of *sati*, *satipaṭṭhāna* and *bhāvanā*,¹³ but this is no less true of other meditative practices, though sometimes in quite different ways. The most salient features of meditative practice regard the various uses of attention: *where* (meditation object) and *how* (mental attitude) attention is directed.

Meditation objects

In our terminology, a meditation object is the intended focus of attention during meditation. Additionally, spontaneous digressions leading away from this object will often become the focus of attention during meditation, but not as a result of deliberate activity.

In this sense, we shall argue that all forms of meditation make use of meditation objects. When the term “objectless” is used about a meditation in some modern sources, this is invariably because the notion of a meditation object is conceived in a narrower sense than here. In such sources, there are at least three ways of understanding the term “objectless”. Firstly, it may be used to describe what we would call a *spontaneous* object, such as the natural breath or natural bodily sensations, both of which are used as foci of meditative attention in several Asian meditative traditions, although they are not produced or generated for the purpose of meditation. Secondly,

¹³ In Pali; Sanskrit forms: *smṛti*, *smṛtyupasthāna* and *bhāvanā*. See Braarvig’s contribution to this volume.

it may describe a *holistic* object, ideally encompassing everything that enters into the field of attention with little or no distinction between its centre and periphery, as in the form of Chán or Zen meditation referred to as “simply sitting”.¹⁴ Thirdly, it may describe an *apophatic* object, i.e., an object that is defined in negative terms and therefore often considered “objectless”, such as the “formless” meditations of Buddhism and similar Hindu practices described by Bäumer in this volume, as well as the God of the Christian *via negativa*.¹⁵ In these and all other cases, meditation builds on an intended focus of attention, however blurred the borderline between centre and periphery may be. Like any other meditation object, even spontaneous, holistic and apophatic objects may be interrupted by unintended distractions or digressions that intermittently bring the mind away from its intended focus.

In the following, we shall look at some of the building blocks of which meditation objects may consist. Simply speaking, these building blocks usually relate to the *location* of the object, the degree of *agency* of the meditator, and the mental *faculty* (or faculties) involved in perceiving and producing the object.

Location

A meditation object may be *external*, *bodily* or *internal*. External objects are located outside the meditator, while internal objects are located inside the meditator. Bodily meditation objects share properties with both types.

An external meditation object has a physical existence outside of the meditator. In this volume, the most obvious external meditation object is the rotting body of the Buddhist “contemplation of the repulsive” described by Dessein. There are many others: a scenery, the sound of trickling water, a burning candle, a material yantra or mandala, a mantra or a prayer or a text recited by somebody else (or, in modern times, played on a CD or MP3 player), a written text, a cross, a mural or other image of religious scenes etc.

¹⁴ Chinese *zhǐguǎn dǎzuò*, Japanese *shikan taza* 只管打坐. See Leighton, 2004:viii.

¹⁵ Cf. Muppathyil, 1979:152.

Since such objects are perceived by the awareness of the meditator, they are never purely external but are representations in the mind of the meditator. Their basis, however, is related to the existence of a physical object outside the meditator.

An internal meditation object is conjured up by the meditator, and its only existence lies within his or her consciousness, with no direct physical or external existence. This is the case when, for instance, a mantra, koan, prayer or text is produced in the thoughts of the meditator rather than being recited aloud, or when a yantra, mandala or other image is visualized mentally rather than being related directly to a physical painting or figure. In Buddhist *vipassanā* and mindfulness, spontaneous thoughts and emotions may themselves become the objects of meditation.

In between external and internal meditation objects, bodily objects constitute a third group, which includes both natural breath and active breathing exercises, natural body sensations and attempts at directing energies in specific directions through the body, spontaneous bodily impulses and specified movements of the body. The various forms of Tantric *bhāvanā* practices discussed by Bäumer, though highly metaphysical in nature, are still often directly related to the body. This includes the down-to-earth exhortation to “meditate on the state of fullness” when one is “filled with joy arising from the pleasure of eating and drinking”, but also the much more abstract contemplation on “all the elements constituting the body as pervaded by void”. A bodily meditation object has its basis in a physical object, the human body, but this object is not located outside the meditator and is therefore experienced from the inside and the outside simultaneously.

Bodily meditation objects are widely used within Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist and Neo-Confucian forms of meditation. To our knowledge, they are hardly found in the typically devotional practices of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. In these traditions, body and breath only occur as secondary or auxiliary elements, not as primary meditation objects.

The following table gives a schematic view of the difference between internal, bodily and external meditation objects:

	Internal	Bodily	External
Mental	•	•	
Physical		•	•

Table 1. Types of meditation objects according to location.

Often the same object has both internal and external variants, such as mantras listened to (external), repeated aloud (bodily), or repeated mentally (internal). Furthermore, one and the same meditative exercise may involve external, bodily and internal elements, as when the *Vijñāna Bhairava* advocates “experienc[ing] the consciousness ... in the body of others as in one’s own”. Finally, the link between external meditation objects and physical reality is sometimes quite tenuous, as when the *Vijñāna Bhairava* talks of “fixing one’s mind on the external space which is eternal, supportless, empty, all-pervading and free from limitation” (see Bäumer’s contribution).

In many traditions, internal meditation objects are considered more “advanced” than external ones.¹⁶ They provide the mind with less tangible content and are assumed to require more training and experience. Internal meditation objects are also typically seen as being subtler than the coarse materiality of external and, to some extent, bodily objects. This is true even in cultures, such as the Chinese, where the distinction between body and soul, matter and mind, is usually thought to play a rather minor role. Most meditative traditions place matter and mind in the same category, both belonging to the mundane world of forms rather than the divine or formless realms to which meditation often aspires. However, most of these traditions also make distinctions between different levels within the mundane world of forms, the subtler ones seen as being more conducive to meditative processes than the coarser ones.

Some traditions advocate a process of gradual interiorization of the meditation object. If the starting point is an external meditation

¹⁶ See, for instance, Muthukumaraswamy (forthcoming) on *ajapa-japa* in the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta tradition.

object, its interiorization implies gradually letting go of the concrete physical impression, for instance by closing one's eyes and retaining only a mental representation of the object, in effect turning it into an internal meditation object.¹⁷ If the starting point is an internal meditation object, its interiorization may imply gradually letting go of any conscious or unconscious bodily support for the object, as when the repetition of a sound is supported by the rhythm of the breath or by muscular tensions in the speech organs, so as to raise it to a subtler, more purely mentalistic level.

If the starting point is a bodily meditation object, its interiorization typically goes in the direction of the “subtle body”, attempting to activate energy centres that have no place within a conventional physiological description of the “coarse body” but which are still believed to have a manifest effect on the body and mind. In meditative contexts, Indian chakras and Chinese dāntián (丹田) are the most prominent examples of such energy centres.

In addition to acting as a meditation object in its own right, both the coarse and the subtle body may function as the site of meditation objects. For instance, the mental or even physical repetition of mantras may be linked to one of the chakras, or to the movement of the breath, and the movement of the breath may itself be a meditation object linked to the lower dāntián (beneath the navel). Even in traditions that do not use bodily meditation objects, such as Christianity and Islam, the coarse or subtle body may function as the site of other meditation objects, as when a meditative prayer is linked to the breath or placed in the heart.

Agency

Meditation objects may be actively generated during meditation, or they may be spontaneous – naturally present without any action on the part of the meditator. As we shall see, this distinction mainly applies to internal and bodily meditation objects, not to external ones.

¹⁷ During a talk in the Bongamsa Temple in Korea in 2010, the monk Jeongmyeong Seunim referred to his own experiments with the Theravada practice of gradually interiorizing the image of an external object, until the image remained in the mind even when his eyes were closed.

Self-generated objects usually follow pre-set patterns, and they are actively brought forth by the meditator during meditation. For instance, a mantra or a meditation sound is typically given to the practitioner by his or her teacher but has to be generated – recited or mentally repeated – by the practitioner during meditation. The same applies to the active visualization of specific religious symbols, images or deities during meditation, as well as the active modulation of the breathing patterns and body movements in Yoga and Tàijí. All of these require active intervention from the practitioner during meditation, though this does not exclude spontaneous modulations, as when the meditation object naturally changes quality in the course of a meditation session.

In contrast to the self-generated objects, spontaneous meditation objects require no active intervention from the practitioner, apart from directing the attention towards that object. Spontaneous meditation objects are linked to natural processes of the mind or body: stimulus-independent thoughts, moods, feelings, body sensations, body movements, and, most commonly, the natural movement of the breath into and out of the body. The meditative use of such objects is particularly common in the various *vipassanā* and mindfulness traditions within Buddhism. Typically, their use is seen as an opportunity to discover the basic nature of reality.

For external meditation objects, this distinction does not apply. External meditation objects are not generated in the moment of meditation but have an outside existence independent of the meditator before, during and after. We might consider distinguishing between external objects produced for the specific purpose of meditation and objects that are naturalistic and not man-made at all. Typical examples of the former would be visual images, such as Buddhist mandalas and Orthodox icons, while typical examples of the latter would be sounds from a waterfall, rays of the sun, views of a lake, or less pleasant objects like a skull or a rotting body. However, this distinction is far from clear-cut, as mandalas and icons may have other uses than meditation, and even a waterfall or a lake may be partly man-made and include objects like bridges, boats and people in activity. One of the most widely used external meditation objects, the burning candle, is clearly man-made, though seldom with the specific purpose of meditation. Its flame is

usually generated by the meditator, and the movements of the flame are natural rather than man-made and probably achieve some of their meditative effect from their volatility. What turns naturalistic events into meditation objects is the way they are approached by man.

Faculty

While all meditation objects occupy the focus of attention, they do so in different ways. The mental faculties involved in the perception of the meditation objects may be divided into three main categories: cognitive, affective and sensory. Each of these may be further divided into a number of subcategories.

Cognitive meditation objects often make direct use of linguistic elements, such as words, phrases or sentences, and they are based on the semantic meaning. Typical examples include concepts (love, no-self, God etc.), names (Kṛṣṇa, Amitābha Buddha etc.), prayers (Jesus prayer) and passages from scripture (Ṛgveda, Lotus sūtra, Dào dé jīng etc.). Metaphors and symbols (cross, swastika, sun, light etc.) may also be given linguistic form but are more often imagined visually. The same applies to narrative elements, as in the Jesuit visualizations of stories from the New Testament, or Daoist visualizations of the meditator travelling through space and placing his body within the Big Dipper. Meditations on existential topics like death are partly based on a cognitive approach, though they often aim for going beyond the cultural conceptualizations, in order to penetrate the naked reality of the issue involved. This can be argued to apply to other types of cognitive meditation objects as well: by focusing on a concept, one seeks to understand the reality behind this concept, and by focusing on a metaphor or a symbol, one seeks to arrive at a deeper understanding of the underlying reality to which it points. In the same vein, it may be argued that the meditative recitation of scriptures is often less focused on a linear understanding of the literal meaning of the text than on using the text as a basis for non-linear and associative reflection. The riddle-like koans of Zen go one step further: though linguistic in form, they are often explicitly stated to have nothing to do with semantic meaning, thus representing a de-signification of the signifier. Non-

semantic and non-symbolic uses of mantra and aniconic uses of yantra take the full step away from the cognitive content and bring us to the category of sensory (auditory and visual, respectively) meditation objects. In sum, cognitive meditation objects often involve a tension between their superficial logical, semantic and symbolic content and what is often conceived as their deeper meaning or function.

Affective meditation objects may involve a number of different feelings, the most typical ones being love, loving kindness and devotion on the positive side, disgust on the negative side, and the mindful observation of spontaneous feelings, whether positive or negative, on the neutral side. Such meditation objects are often complex, involving not only the feeling itself but also a person, thing or divine being associated with this feeling. In the case of loving kindness, which is often used as a translation of the Buddhist term *mettā*,¹⁸ this typically starts with oneself, then continues with kin, friends and teachers, and gradually extends to strangers and enemies, eventually encompassing all sentient beings. In other cases, a sense of love may be triggered by the visualization of beautiful scenes involving nature or living beings, thus coming close to being the effect of visualization rather than a meditation object in its own right. Love may also be closely associated with God. In other cases, feelings of devotion are directed towards teachers or teachings, or towards God, gods or other divine or sacred beings, places, institutions etc. On the negative side, the contemplation of rotting bodies discussed by Dessein in this volume combines feelings of disgust or repulsiveness with the objects triggering these feelings.

In all these cases, it is difficult to say whether the meditation object is the feeling itself or the object associated with the feeling; the focus of attention may change back and forth between the two. In the case of loving kindness, however, it is clear that the feeling is the most stable part of the practice, the objects of loving kindness changing throughout. Similarly, the sense of disgust or repulsiveness is the most stable part of the contemplation of rotting bodies, presumably increasing during the practice. As for the love

¹⁸ In Pali; Sanskrit form: *maitrī*.

associated with God, it is sometimes linked to the idea that God *is* love, thus minimizing the difference between the feeling and the object associated with it. Finally, in the case of love and loving kindness, it is not always obvious that we are dealing with a feeling or emotion in any conventional sense. If God is love, this hardly means that God is understood as a feeling, especially in works like the 14th-century English mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, whose God is apophatic and beyond any conceptualization. Similarly, the Buddhist practice of loving kindness meditation does not have to be conceived as an exercise in suppressing all non-loving feelings but rather as an attempt at establishing a mental attitude of acceptance beyond one's personal likes and dislikes, which may still be present, only less dominant. Thus, just as cognitive meditation objects often seek to go beyond the semantic and symbolic signification, affective meditation objects are often refined into mental states or attitudes far beyond the realm of plain feelings.

Sensory meditation objects are usually visual, auditory or tactile. They are less often olfactory or gustatory, except for meditative uses of incense, which is seldom the main focus of attention, and modern mindfulness practices focusing on the eating of raisins, including paying attention to their taste.

Visual meditation objects may be static, like the Christian cross, a Hindu yantra or a Buddhist mandala, or dynamic, like Daoist visualizations of space travel or Jesuit visualizations of events from biblical history. Sometimes a static external image, such as a medieval church mural or a renaissance etching, may form the basis for the inner visualization of dynamic events. The constant but mutable light from a candle is somewhere in between static and dynamic, as are external sceneries or inner representations of light used as meditation objects.

Auditory meditation objects include mantras and meditation sounds based on combinations of vowels and consonants; these are often devoid of semantic meaning, though their sound qualities are sometimes interpreted symbolically as representing the divine or the cosmic powers. A different kind of auditory meditation object includes natural and human sounds in the external and bodily environment, to which attention is directed with increasing receptivity.

Tactile meditation objects include bodily sensations (both the “coarse” and the “subtle” body), the awareness of the breath moving into and out of the body (or, on the “subtle” side, of cosmic, bodily or other energies moving through or even outside the body), the perception of bodily movement, as well as the feelings of heat or cold.

Sensory meditation objects may be linked to the physical senses, as when a yantra is based on a material image, a mantra is recited aloud, or a body sensation is linked to a concrete body part. They can also, however, be interiorized to varying degrees, spanning from the simple visual imagination of a yantra, the subvocalized mental repetition of a mantra, or the perception of the “subtle” bodily energy centres, to visual, auditory or tactile impressions that are no longer directly linked to the eyes, the ears or the surface of the body. Just as cognitive meditation objects sometimes go beyond semantic and symbolic signification and affective meditation objects may go beyond plain feelings, so sensory meditation objects may activate the senses in ways that no longer depend on the physical sense organs but solely on inner sensation.

In general, cognitive and affective meditation objects are content-oriented and tend to employ suggestive working mechanisms, while sensory meditation objects are technique-oriented, relying on general psychobiological working mechanisms. However, even most content-oriented meditation objects involve the psychobiological effects of technical elements such as the repetition of a sound, the sustained focus on visual elements etc. On the other hand, even technical meditation objects are often given content-oriented interpretations, as when non-semantic mantras or aniconic yantras are understood as cosmological symbols.

Many, perhaps most, meditation objects involve more than one faculty. The repetition of meditative prayer involves semantic meaning (cognitive), a sense of devotion (affective), and auditory impressions (sensory). The contemplation of the letter *a* involved in the Japanese Tantric practice *ajikan* combines the visual impressions of a written letter with the auditory impression of its pronunciation.¹⁹ Sufi *dhikr* combines the pronunciation of God’s

¹⁹ Tanaka 2012.

name (auditory) and the placement of this name in one's heart (tactile).²⁰ Buddhist breathing exercises may combine the tactile and auditory sensations of the air passing through the nostrils, as well as the cognitive element of counting the breath.

So far we have been concerned with the faculties by which meditation objects are *perceived*. For self-generated meditation objects, there is an additional question of how they are *produced*. The main distinction here is between mental and kinetic objects, the latter being based on physical movement. Mentally produced objects include a wide range of cognitive and sensory objects, possibly also some affective ones; all internal meditation objects that are self-generated rather than spontaneous belong to this group. Kinetically produced objects typically include the patterned movement of body and breath in disciplines like Yoga, Tàijí and Qìgōng; most bodily meditation objects that are generated rather than spontaneous belong to this group. For spontaneous and external meditation objects, the distinction between mental and kinetic objects does not apply.

Features of meditation objects

In summary, meditation objects can largely be analysed as different combinations of the features displayed in Table 2.

As we have seen, many of these features appear in a number of variations, including “coarse” and “subtle” variants, partly corresponding to different degrees of interiorization. In many cases this reflects an understanding of the meditation objects as pointing towards a reality beyond their solid features. For instance, the point of cognitive meditation objects lies beyond the realm of ordinary cognition, the true nature of affective meditation objects lies in their deeper mental attitude rather than in any specific feeling, and sensory meditation objects make use of inner perception with only distant connections to the physical senses.

²⁰ Bashir 2013.

Location	Internal		
	Bodily		
	External		
Agency	Self-generated		
	Spontaneous		
Faculty	Perception	Cognitive	Linguistic
			Symbolic
			Narrative
			Thematic
		Affective	Positive
			Negative
			Neutral
	Sensory	Visual	
		Auditory	
		Tactile	
Production	Mental		
	Kinetic		

Table 2. Features of meditation objects.

Mental attitude

While the object of meditation is an important technical tool, both scholars and practitioners often claim that the core of meditative practice lies in the mental attitude, defined as the mode rather than the intended focus of attention. Some even argue that a meditative mental attitude may be maintained at all times, whether “walking, standing, sitting or lying down”, independently of any specific technique. Others, however, treat the mental attitude as a technical

tool for meditation, just as the meditation object with which it is combined.

This aspect of meditation is often associated with *concentration*, an exclusive attention towards the meditation object. As the 16th-century Spanish mystic Francisco de Osuna says, “meditation attends fixedly to one thing”. In a somewhat surprising image, he goes on to compare the attitude of meditative prayer to “the little dog that with upraised head excitedly and attentively wags its tail beside the dinner table, all its movements seeming to beg for food”, then proceeds to advise the meditator: “Remembering the little dog, fix your inner and outer person with total attention and alertness on the One seated at the table, who is God.”²¹

In Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist contexts, a number of terms associated with meditation are routinely translated as ‘concentration’, most notably the Sanskrit terms *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi* (see Braarvig’s contribution). Note, however, that these terms do not always refer to concentration as an aspect of technical practice but equally often as a state of mind resulting from such practice, what we might more aptly call ‘absorption’ (see Bronkhorst’s contribution). Sometimes a distinction is made between the active concentration of *dhāraṇā* and the more advanced mental state of effortless absorption associated with *samādhi*, with *dhyāna* hovering somewhere in between the two (or, as in the Tantric practices discussed by Bäumer, taking on other meanings such as visualization). Since the resultant state of one level of meditation may be taken as a starting point for the practice of the next level, it is not always easy to distinguish between practice and effect, or between mental attitude and state of mind.

There also exist, however, explicitly non-concentrative forms of meditation, in which the field of attention is kept open to spontaneous influences. In Buddhism, these are often referred to as *vipassanā*,²² often translated as “insight meditation”, and in the modern context also referred to as “mindfulness” practices or “open monitoring” (as opposed to “focused attention”). *Vipassanā*

²¹ Osuna, 1981:483.

²² Sanskrit *vipaśyanā*, Chinese *guān* 觀 or *nèi-guān* 內觀. See Houtman’s contribution.

meditation is usually directed towards spontaneous meditation objects, such as breath, bodily sensations, or stimulus-independent thoughts and feelings. The Chán or Zen traditions of “silent illumination”²³ and “simply sitting”, which may be practised with open or half-open eyes, even include external impressions. In some Buddhist contexts, non-concentrative meditation is used as a tool for coping with the uninvited influence of spontaneous thoughts during concentrative meditation, as when the Chinese Chán teacher Hānshān Déqīng 憨山德清 (1546-1623) tells his students to direct their attention to disturbing thoughts, and in particular to the point from which the thoughts come and to which they go (which is actually nowhere). It is often assumed that even *vipassanā* results in deep meditative absorption, with the mind free from all thoughts, although the technique for attaining such a state does not actively seek to avoid thoughts. Daoist *nèi-guān* techniques have been largely inherited from Buddhist *vipassanā*, though they have also been transformed along the way.²⁴

Unlike what is sometimes assumed by modern writers on the subject, non-concentrative meditation is not restricted to practises with spontaneous meditation objects but also includes techniques using self-generated meditation objects. In a verse extolling the recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha, the Chinese scholar Shěn Shàndēng 沈善登 (1830-1902) says:

The verse of Amitābha is the king of all dharmas
[With it] even myriads of distracting thoughts are of no harm²⁵

In a modern scientific context, Ospina et al. (2007) observe that the “acceptance of ... other thoughts into the field of awareness” is not only found in techniques focused on the breath itself but also in practices using Zen koans or the active counting of the breath. Sarah Shaw (personal communication) reports how some contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhist teachers compare the focus on the meditation object to the flame of a candle, the centre shining in-

²³ Chinese *mòzhào* 默照.

²⁴ See Kohn, forthcoming.

²⁵ 彌陀一句法中王，雜念紛紛也不妨。 *Bào'ēnlùn* 766.

tensely, but not to the exclusion of the halo surrounding it, corresponding in this image to thoughts that come and go. In tape-recorded lectures from the early 1960s, Mahesh Yogi argued against concentration, which he saw as bringing with it too much strain. In the psychology of meditation developed by the Norwegian organization Acem, spontaneous thoughts are considered to be just as important for the meditation process and its effects as the gentle repetition of a meditation sound.²⁶

The distinction between a concentrative and a non-concentrative (or a directive and a non-directive) mental attitude may be defined in relation to the following three dimensions:

	Concentrative	Non-concentrative
Focus of attention on meditation object	Narrow	Open
Elements diverting attention from meditation object	Suppressive	Inclusive
Self-generation of meditation object	Forceful	Effortless

Table 3. Concentrative vs. non-concentrative mental attitude.

All three dimensions address various degrees of acceptance of unintended elements in meditation. A narrow focus allows fewer peripheral thoughts than an open focus, suppression allows fewer digressive thoughts than inclusion, and forcefulness entails more rigid control of all aspects of the meditation than effortlessness, which typically entails the spontaneous modulation of the meditation object. Descriptions of one and the same meditation practice often vacillate between concentrative and non-concentrative features.

²⁶ See Holen, 2013.

Concentrative meditation typically seeks to get rid of spontaneous thoughts, which a large number of meditative traditions all over the Eurasian continent tend to see as a hindrance. In this line of thinking, spontaneous thoughts are associated with forgetfulness rather than mindfulness or watchfulness, with sloth rather than diligence, and with evil and delusion rather than goodness and enlightenment. They are seen as undesirable imprints of past actions, such as the karma of Buddhism and Hinduism or the original sin of Christianity. They are moreover linked to the created world and the world of form rather than the uncreated God or the realm of formlessness. Tellingly, the Greek term *logismoí* ‘thoughts, calculations’, which is often used to refer to digressions in meditative prayer, develops into a notion meaning ‘assaultive or tempting thoughts’ and eventually forms the basis for the notion of the seven deadly sins! Equally telling is the use of the Chinese terms *wàng-xiǎng* 妄想 and *wàng-niàn* 妄念 ‘deluded thoughts’ to refer to spontaneous thoughts, reflecting the Buddhist view that delusion is man’s primary problem. In this vein, the 14th-century English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* encourages his disciple to “hate to think of anything but God himself, so that nothing occupies [his] mind or will but only God” and to “suppress all thought under the cloud of forgetting”.²⁷ Similarly, Hānshān Déqīng urges his disciples: “When deluded thoughts arise, you just press the keyword [the meditation object] forcibly and they are instantly crushed to pieces”.²⁸

However, quite a few meditative traditions argue strongly against the suppression of thoughts involved in concentrative meditation. The Chinese Buddhist monk Wùkāi 悟開 (d. 1830) contends:

²⁷ Ch. 3: lope to þenk on ouzt bot on hym-self, so þat nouzt worche in þi witte ne in þi wille bot only himself (p. 16; Wolters, 1978:61); ch. 7: smite doun al maner þouzt vnder þe cloude of forȝeting (p. 28; Wolters, 1978: 69f.).

²⁸ 若妄想起時，提起話頭一拶，則妄想自滅 (*Hānshān lǎorén mèngyóují* p. 153).

While clinging [to the thoughts] is wrong, eradicating [them] is also bad.

攀緣固非，止滅亦病。²⁹

The Jain scholar Hemacandra (1088-1172) brings the argument for non-concentrative meditation even further:

Wherever the mind goes, don't restrain it from [going] there; for what is restrained becomes stronger, what is not restrained becomes peaceful. The mind is like an elephant in rut, which becomes stronger when restrained with effort, but comes to peace after satisfying its needs without restraint.³⁰

Non-concentrative meditation typically seeks to open the mind and set in motion latent impulses at or beyond the peripheries of conscious awareness. The transformative power of meditation is partly seen as coming from whatever impulses that are brought into play, whether they are understood as obstacles to be worked through or as resources to be made use of. In addition, some forms of non-concentrative meditation, in particular *vipassanā*, use the stream of consciousness as an object of investigation, purportedly leading to the discovery of the basic nature of reality.

Quite often, one and the same writer advocates practices that seem to involve both concentrative and non-concentrative elements. For instance, while the reader of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is told to get rid of thoughts by using the meditation object to “hammer the cloud and the darkness above you”,³¹ he is also urged to “work with eager enjoyment rather than with brute force”.³² While Hānshān Déqīng exhorts his disciples to produce the meditation object “forcefully”,³³ “as if exerting all the strength of the body

²⁹ *Jingyè zhījīn* 354.

³⁰ *ceto 'pi yatra yatra pravartate no tatas tato vāryam | adhikībhavati hi vāritam śāntim upayāti || matto hastī yatnān nivāryamāṇo 'dhikībhavati yadvat | anivāritas tu kāmān labdhvā sāmtyati manas tadvat (Yogaśāstra, transl. Bronkhorst, ms.; cf. Qvarnström, 2002:192).*

³¹ Ch. 7: bete on þis cloude & þis derknes abouen þee (p. 28; Wolters 1978:69).

³² Ch. 46: wirche more wiþ a list þen wiþ any liþer strengþe (p. 87; Wolters 1978:114).

³³ jíli 極力, jíjí 急急, zhuóli 著力.

pushing a heavy cart up the hill”,³⁴ he also tells them to generate the meditation object “gently”³⁵ and to avoid “clinging to the keyword [i.e. the meditation object]”.³⁶ This seeming paradox may partly be explained by the oft-cited idea that effortlessness comes with experience. As *The Cloud of Unknowing* says: “what previously was very hard becomes much lighter, and you can relax”.³⁷ In many traditions, the degree of effort and concentration decreases as the practitioner becomes more advanced. In this vein, several Theravada traditions advocate the use of concentrative meditation (*samatha*) for beginners, followed by non-concentrative meditation (*vipassanā*) for experienced practitioners. In the modern scientific context, Lutz et al. argue that “[a]t the most advanced levels, ... the ability to sustain focus ... becomes progressively ‘effortless’” and that even the practice of “open monitoring” starts with “focused attention”, after which “the practitioner gradually reduces the focus on an explicit object”.³⁸

Conclusion

This essay has argued that meditation implies working with attention in a number of ways.

On the one hand, meditation involves the intended and sustained *focus* of attention on a meditation object. Meditation objects may be external, bodily or internal (location), self-generated or spontaneous (agency), and cognitive, affective or sensory (faculty), or a mixture of these in various combinations. Apart from the fact that they are used as foci of attention during meditation, there may be no common denominator to the objects considered suitable for meditation, at least according to what Sarah Shaw (ms.) found with regard to Buddhist meditation.

On the other hand, meditation involves a mental attitude that may manifest to various degrees along a continuum from concen-

³⁴ 如推重車上坡相似渾身氣力使盡 (*Hānshān lǎorén mèngyóují* p. 122).

³⁵ huǎnhuǎn 緩緩.

³⁶ sǐshǒu huàtóu 死守話頭.

³⁷ Ch. 26: it schal be maad ful restful & ful liȝt ynto þee, þat bifore was ful harde; & þou schalt haue ouþer litil trauaile or none (p. 62; Wolters, 1978:94).

³⁸ Lutz et al., 2008.

trative to non-concentrative, defined as the *mode* of attention. This includes the way the meditation object is generated, the way the focus of attention is directed towards it, and the way elements diverting attention from the meditation object in unintended ways are treated. The mental attitude may be strongly concentrative, characterized by forcefulness, narrow focus and the suppression of unintended elements, or clearly non-concentrative, characterized by effortlessness, open focus and the inclusion of unintended elements – or any possible combination of the two.

In regard to both the meditation objects and the mental attitude, we have observed a widespread tendency to move from “coarse” to more “subtle” forms in what may often be considered as the more advanced stages of meditation. In this regard, the location of the meditation objects tends to involve a gradual interiorization, including a movement from the external and bodily towards the internal, purely mentalistic objects. As for the use of the faculties, the movement from “coarse” to “subtle” has several implications: Cognitive meditation objects go beyond the semantic and symbolic signification, affective meditation objects are refined beyond the realm of plain feelings, and sensory meditation objects activate faculties in ways that depend less on the physical sense organs. Finally, with regard to the mental attitude, more advanced forms of meditation tend to be non-concentrative, including less effort and fewer attempts to actively narrow the focus of attention or suppress unintended elements that may divert the attention during meditation.

This gradual refinement of meditation objects and mental attitudes is a typical way of working with the attention in meditative contexts. This does not apply to all forms of meditation or meditative frameworks but seems to reflect an orientation found in a number of widely different traditions covering large parts of the Eurasian continent.