

Matthias Steingass

MEDITATION AND CONTROL

SNB Magazin 4

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By Matthias Steingass

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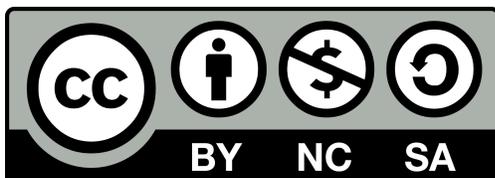
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Meditation and Control

Preface

Meditation lies at the root of the myth of Buddhist exceptionalism. The cataclysmic event known as “awakening” and its aftermath (liberation, the overcoming of suffering, perfect peace of mind, etc.), was, we are asked to believe, ignited by the Buddha’s practice of sitting meditation.

A central concern of speculative non-buddhism is to explore the relationship between x-buddhist doctrine and its meditation practice. One impetus to this investigation is the curious fact that practice seems invariably to verify doctrine. That fact raises the suspicion that x-buddhistic practice is impotent to effect anything even remotely resembling “liberation,” and, on the contrary, functions as a tool that reinforces established x-buddhistic ideology.

Or is such hallucinatory coercion only the result of subsuming “meditation” under “Buddhism”? I present you here an essay, “Meditation and Control,” by **Matthias Steingass**, that gives thought to what might happen if we invert this equation. Such a move is necessary, says Steingass, for, “meditation as a subset of x-buddhism is logically unable to see more than that which this framework and setting are able to reveal.”

Along the way, Steingass presents a provocative case for the vampiric demands of our technological society on our attention. In sum, he asks: (1) “What is our situation; how is it influenced socially by technological-economic forces? (2) Can meditation be of help in our situation? (3) What might the nature of such a practice be?

—Glenn Wallis

Meditation and Control

A distinguishing characteristic of the situation we live in is that our attention is very much in demand by media everywhere we go the better part of our waking time. The combined average time of media usage is over eight hours per day. TV-usage alone in Europe and the US is generally around four hours per day; advertising is literally everywhere our senses reach, and the content we are exposed to via this steady input does not seem to be a flow of information we process consciously as much as a stream in which we live with a lot of bait bobbing for our attention.

I am not concerned here with promoted products—with the ads and fads washed around in this hotchpotch. Rather, I am interested in the values which are transmitted to us through this multiple media frenzy. That the definition of beauty for example is inscribed into the consumer via this steady infusion is a more obvious case; but what about more subtle messages concerning, for example, moral values, what to expect from life, what goals to accomplish and how to reach them, notions of fairness in interacting with my partner, neighbors, colleagues, competitors or even with somebody hostile and hateful? Another question: how does this steady stream of media input influence our consciousness on even more basic levels? Does it do so; and, if it does, how does it alter our capacity for deep thinking, how does it affect attention span, and what is its influence on the synaptogenetic level (neuronal development in childhood)—on a child not even two or three years old, exposed to this never sleeping, maniacally colorful maelstrom, moving, shifting, whispering, magically conjuring I-want-everything-and-I-want-it-now? If you've ever seen a child in front of a TV, you know how completely attention can get hooked.

My question is, can meditation be—together, perhaps, with other practices—a form of attention-control? And if this is indeed possible, can such a practice have some kind of impact on hooked attention?

In my view, the situation is very problematic. It is not only *that* attention is hooked and we are manipulated at a very basic level of our being. It is that attention is a scarce commodity over which the fight is on, and that *we as living beings* are the one's producing this raw material around which our society in the age of information is revolving. This is not a paranoid fantasy about some Matrix in which we live (that film anyway is a false metaphor with that pill Morpheus gives Neo in order to see real reality). One can make a compelling case about how certain forms of reality and social norms are generated, and how these realities and norms we fill with life are destroying basic, essential forms of interaction.

The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler analyses the situation in depth in his book *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. He cites Primo Levi in his introduction: “Not to consider human beings as things is to escape the total humiliation and demoralization which leads to spiritual ruin.” It is an inadequate understanding of the technological thrust of our culture which leads to the conception of the human as just another thing, and, with this, to the destruction of spirituality—or to name it more fitting to the situation now in which spirituality is also a commodity: Responsibility!

Can meditation do something about this situation? If one has learned about meditation in a Buddhist context one would think it necessary to put this question to Buddhism itself. Is Buddhism able to see this problem of attention as raw material which is produced by humans who are treated as things? Buddhism declares itself to be a soteriological problem-solver which knows all about the human situation. From this point of view it seems logical that Buddhism is a

solution in this situation and that meditation then is part of the solution.

But is this so? Is meditation a subset of Buddhism? I don't think so. In a certain sense, I would put it the other way around: Buddhism is a subset of Meditation. Buddhism is a multifaceted patchwork of theories about mind, social behavior, the meaning of life, speculations about the from and where-to of Dasein. As such, it is just another culturally conditioned answer to the question that the ape who has to confront seeing his own death must ask himself. In contrast to this conditioned answer, meditation, as a „natural“ ability to think in a certain way, is a given to this ape. It is a present of life —or seen from the theory of evolution, it is the developed ability to be present with the representation of parts of the environment in a mode of nowness, while this representational nowness-system is transparent to itself.

Buddhism in this context is, like many other known, unknown, long forgotten and yet to come cultural developments, inventions, innovations and creative solutions of the *Homo sapiens*, just one answer—an answer, furthermore, that has to compete with all other answers. It is in no way a superior answer; and as Glenn Wallis's article on this blog, “Nascent Speculative Non-Buddhism,” shows [link below], it is more likely caught in a circularity of defining reality and giving answers to this defined/constructed reality without being conscious of the act of definition, which rather invents a certain reality, while stipulating that this definition/construction is the last and ultimate answer. Buddhism is unaware of the fact that it is in itself a representational act. The inability to see this is partly due, I think, to the transparency of consciousness as an island of nowness, an island which cannot see, or only to a limited extent, its foundational structures—which, as far as it concerns moral values, are to a good extent, or maybe for the most part, built by the attention-harvesting culture industries. Seen from this angle, with Buddhism being unaware of the situation and being itself a product sold to the consumer, it is part of the problem, not of the solution. If the

Buddhism in question is a x-buddhism as seen from non-buddhism then by definition it is unable to do something about the social situation in which the human as such is raw material with his attention as his central organ to be exploited. “The Dalai Lama MasterChef” [link below], seen in this light, is an example par excellence of how Buddhism is put to work to exploit consumer attention.

Meditation as a subset of x-buddhism is logically unable to see more than that which this framework and setting are able to reveal.

Contrary to this, meditation as an ability of consciousness for introspection, to look for the limits of introspection and to *think* about representations as representations is part of the becoming aware of the possibilities and limitations of consciousness.

Seen from this angle meditation must also examine buddhistic postulations about meditation and its object. For example in Tibetan Buddhism, the so called luminous or space-like mind or mind-itself is seen as an immortal entity. Does this impression hold? In light of what we know today, the impression of immortality might simply be a misinterpretation of the transparency of consciousness. If consciousness is limited in its ability to see its own foundational structures and if it calms down enough, while staying alert, to contemplate awareness as such, then it very well might regard this seemingly unborn, deathless, sky-like crystal clear space as immortal—simply because it cannot see the mortality of its foundational structure.

Furthermore, while some forms of meditation might, as is claimed, have positive effects on personal health, on interpersonal interaction, on sociality, etc. (and while this might have to do with learning to dissociate from compulsive behavior), there is on the other side no source for knowledge down there in this clear cool well of calm

abiding. The Buddha certainly did not find knowledge about quantum physics sitting under the bodhi-tree. If sitting in calm awareness, in relaxed dissociation from content is of value, then as the foundation of knowledge in the sense of Thomas Metzinger's phenomenal self-model and not as knowledge itself or as a channel which leads to knowledge somewhere in a mystical way without simple *learning*. Perhaps the direction is of importance here. To dig deeper is impossible. The bare, utter, naked awareness is the invisible concrete wall which is permeable only in deep sleep and death—in the sense that the self-model there, hereafter, does not exist, is *unthinkable*. In the opposite direction, mind unfolds in myriad strategies because of the need to ask questions.

So the answer to the initial question seems to be: Yes, meditation can be of support for a better life in terms of health and sociality; but with consciousness transparent to itself it cannot, *out of itself*, gather knowledge *about* itself. As Thomas Metzinger puts it: “From the structure of our own inner experience, epistemological claims are not yet deducible.” With this conclusion one can say meditation alone is unable to see the problem situation sketched above.

This has far reaching consequences not only with view on the immortal Buddhist mind but also in view of our own socially contingent character structures. If we want to become better beings, more tolerant, politically aware, morally grown-up, less addicted to a surrogate-life full of tomorrows which never come; and if we must doubt at the same time the ability of introspection to reveal the formative powers of our value-systems, then the very important question arises: how can we judge the quality of our knowledge? I think non-buddhism tries to give an answer here.

Meditation as relaxed and calm dissociation from content might contribute to this if it establishes a calm base from which the search does not try to reach ever more further inwardly but from where it

reaches out to the other. In the problem situation Bernard Stiegler sketches in the book mentioned above, this other is in danger of disappearing. He or she, the being we live with, disappears behind a smoke screen of fake sociality. Disappearing —and this is the main point—because we lose control of our own attention. The situation we live in is a situation in which our attention is the commodity which really counts as economic fuel, a commodity which is of crucial importance for the market. It is not, of course, a commodity that is physically traded at the CME (the Chicago Mercantile Exchange), but it is one which is nonetheless at the heart of our being and therefore at the heart of being with our fellow human beings. If we switch on the TV, then a feature film, a soap, reality-TV, a cooking show with some celebrity shaman as guest—these are nothing more than the tools to lead our attention to its maximum alertness when the next commercial starts. What the TV-company sells to the advertising company, and further, to the producer of bliss and happiness forever, is our attention. It is brain time—literally— on which they trade. Our brain time.

In a sense the price per minute paid for a commercial is the market quotation for attention. This is one of the defining features of control-society. Attention is its main commodity. The term „control-society“ should not be confused with “surveillance-society.“ The latter situation is the one which, especially after 9/11, is in full bloom. Data-scanning and gathering in every manner here and data protection, privacy, the fight for the right of anonymity there, are the two antipodes fighting. Control-society is a much less debated item. It is by definition much more difficult to discern because it is the entity which controls the individual by bringing him to the point where he willingly and joyfully consents to the norms governing his society. It is a control which is not experienced *as control*. The term stems from Gilles Deleuze, who coined it more than twenty years ago in an astonishingly farsighted text entitled “Post-scriptum sur les sociétés du contrôle.“ In this short text, Deleuze develops further Foucault’s historical analysis of the disciplinary-society and the

sovereignty-society. The latter, being the oldest form, is typical for the feudal state in which the sovereign is in full charge over life and death of the individual. From this form in Europe with Napoleon the change to the disciplinary-society was completed. This is the society in which the individual is disciplined via family, school, barracks, factory, and so on. A highly hierarchical social order is typical here, while the following control-society which is our home now, developing strongly since the second world war and especially since the roaring sixties, is a relatively flat hierarchy in comparison. A further distinctive feature here is that this (information) society shifts its main emphasis from workforce to brainpower whereby the exploitation shifts to the attention which is produced by the brains. One could say the consumer is the new proletariat, and that it is no longer his workforce that is exploited but his attention.

The analysis Bernard Stiegler offers shows in detail that the way the attention of the citizen is harvested and strained is destroying the possibility of individuation, and with this, responsibility on every plane of society from the most basic—the love of two as “an atom of transindividual universality, as the first degree of the individual’s passage to an immediate beyond“ (Badiou)—to the most general—the question how life in this civilization will go on. Control-society, not as an entity controlled by a secret organization like the Illuminati or a hidden agenda of the government ,but as an autopoietic institution, is deaf to this. It has by the very nature of its being no possibility of gathering knowledge about itself with the tool of simple introspection. So if one wants to understand the social fundamentals of our irresponsibility, of our moral failure, it is not enough to sit down and train in meditation. Meditation as attention-control from and for the individual can be part of the solution if it is accompanied by learning and the widening of the horizon of knowledge in unforeseen directions—directions that are not, and cannot be, redacted by institutions mostly busy supporting themselves instead of engaging in real, risky interaction.

In this context here I want to propose meditation as a tool of gaining control of our own attention. In the freed space which can develop in this way there must then be learning. The free space itself is not enough and can, as every *pharmakon*, become poisonous. A cleared space within as a result of meditation can only be understood as a basis and not as an ultimate aim. It would be a base in which one would refuse to let one's attention be exploited and it would be the basis from which a new learning could develop, a learning that would try to understand the situation of the human in relation to technology and program industries and the relation of these forces vis-a-vis attention and responsibility. Meditation as a clearing becomes a weapon against the parasitic forces of attention exploitation—and it protects and supports thinking as the original capability of the *Homo sapiens*.

This all is very cursory. The main questions again are: 1) What is our situation, how is it influenced socially by technological-economic forces? 2) Can meditation be of help in our situation? (3) What might the nature of such a practice be?

To develop this case further, there is some reading to do: Bernard Stiegler's *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* is the main reference point to deal with the question of our situation. Thomas Metzinger's *Being No One*, or the summary of this in his "Grundkurs Philosophie des Geistes, Band I," is a first approach to deal with the question of consciousness and to look from here—not vice versa —on older discussions about this phenomenon, and, specifically, to assess what is in general usage fuzzily called "meditation." Regarding the latter, I would suggest a look at Longchen Rabjam's *A Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission* (Chapters 9 and 10) in Richard Barron's translation. Longchen Rabjam's "natural meditative stability" (tib: *bsam gtan*) is an important term here that needs to be looked at.

What is left of “natural meditative stability“ when it is shorn of its transcendental ornamentations remains to be seen.

Links

“[Nascent Speculative Non-Buddhism](#)”
“[The Dalai Lama MasterChef](#)”

Author

Matthias Steingass is the founder of the German-English language blog [Der Unbuddhist](#). Matthias studied math and economics. He has worked in the financial markets for the past seventeen years. Matthias has also worked as a musician (bass and sampling). In addition to his career, Matthias is currently pursuing his interests in philosophy while at the same time pursuing music again, this time as a songwriter. Matthias can be reached at: matthias.steingass@web.de.

