

Meditations of the Pali Tradition: Illuminating Buddhist Doctrine, History, and Practice, by L. S. Cousins, edited by Sarah Shaw. Shambhala, 2022. 336pp., Pb \$24.95, ISBN-13: 9781611809879.

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On the last occasion that I met Lance Cousins, in October 2014, we sat together one evening on the top deck of the “Oxford Tube” bus travelling back to Oxford. We had been participating in a one-day conference in London on the topic of “variety in Theravāda meditation,” at which we had both given lectures. That day I had also acquired a copy of Endo’s collected papers on the commentarial literature of the Pāli canon, and I asked Lance if he would like to have a look at the volume. “No,” he rather brusquely replied, “I saw them all when they were originally published.” A bit later into the journey, and maybe softening a little, he responded to another question—“what are you working on currently”—with more grace. He explained that he felt that he himself had not published enough, in the sense of getting his knowledge out in print, and was trying to remedy this by writing a book “...on meditation.” It had not occurred to me before this that he had not published a sole-authored volume, despite having a considerable bibliography to his name, but in which all the book length publications were editions or translations of Pāli texts. One might argue that despite his intention as expressed that evening, it was not to be. Within six months of that bus journey, and seven years prior to this volume’s publication, I was one of a packed congregation attending his funeral in Oxford.

This episode explains several things about this book. Lance had had a long-term interest in a wide range of topics relating to the literature of the Buddhist tradition, especially that of Southeast Asia, and he was very well informed about the secondary literature on it. As a scholar of Pāli language he was also able to explore topics in the primary texts. He had, however, a second string to his bow, in that he also had long-term experience of meditation practice particularly within the Samatha Trust, a lay organisation “which fosters practice and study in the Samatha-Vipassanā tradition” (Samatha Trust 2024) and which he had helped found in the early 1970s. That he regrettably passed away before seeing the book into print explains the role of the volume editor, Sarah Shaw (also of the Samatha Trust), a colleague who has written extensively on meditation herself, and a former pupil of his.

Cousins therefore had a double perspective on meditation—he was very well-versed in the traditional literature on the subject and also had a practitioner’s experience of meditation in practice—something often sadly, even crucially,

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missing in academic presentations on the topic. While by no means the only academic scholar with a long-term background in Buddhist practice, including meditation, he was nevertheless in a positive position to write with some authority on aspects of meditation. This background is reflected in the book, which contains eleven chapters ranging from textual studies of topics from the Pāli corpus, to later and more contemporary aspects of Theravāda meditation.

Thus the first three chapters look at mental states cultivated through *samatha* meditation from the canon and commentaries of the Pāli corpus: *jhāna* in chapters 1 (commentaries) and 2 (*sutta*), and the formless attainments (*arūpajjhāna*) in chapter 3. The next chapter, 4, explores the canonical and commentarial literature for a discussion of the origins of ‘insight meditation’; chapter 5, the relationship of *samatha* and *vipassanā* with reference to the sevenfold purification (*visuddhi*); and chapter 6, a study of the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. These six chapters constitute a dense block of textual study and take up somewhat over the first half of the present volume (excluding notes, etc.). As such they offer a solid and detailed account of core topics in the theory and practice of meditation as expressed in the canonical and later literature of the Theravāda school. It is probably fair to say that much (but certainly not all) of this is accessible in accounts of these topics by other authors who have written on Theravāda meditation and in fact in the publications of Cousins himself, but as far as I am aware there is nowhere that one can review all such material in a single place and with Cousins’s textual knowledge, insight and critical understanding of the topics.

The second half of the book is also primarily “textual” and historical in its outlook. It has two chapters (9 and 10) which explore *vipassanā* and *samatha* practices in the modern world, giving potted histories of the techniques in regional countries of Theravāda and also briefings on the major teachers of *samatha*- and *vipassanā*-style meditation techniques with notable followings. Thus the *vipassanā* chapter focuses on Burma while the *samatha* chapter is focussed primarily on Thailand. Sri Lanka is given less than a page in the *samatha* chapter, slightly more is given to the Burmese Pa Auk system. Students especially would find these chapters helpful for situating a given meditation method or approach they have encountered in an appropriate national context.

Chapter 7 looks at meditation as described in the seventh–eighth century meditation text from Central Asia known in the academic world as “the *Yogalehrbuch*” after the title given it by its first editor, Dieter Schlingloff. This is not a Theravāda text and not in Pāli language, thus putting it a little at odds with the title of the book, but Cousins assesses it in the light of what we know of śrāvakayāna meditation systems, including whether or not it should be seen as Mahāyāna in orientation—he thinks this unlikely—and a brief discussion of the interesting topic of visualisation in Theravāda. It is based on lectures that Cousins gave on the text, and this origin is perhaps reflected in the simplicity of his discussion at some points. The editor indicates in notes where she thinks visual materials had been used to support the text. The remaining two chapters both contain translations made by Cousins. Chapter 8, “The Porāṇa Tradition” deals with the meditation tradition also

known by some scholars as the *boran kammattthan*, i.e. “old meditation” and refers to a tradition that flourished certainly in Siam, Cambodia and Laos prior to the twentieth century and the spread of simplified popularising *vipassanā*-style meditations primarily coming from Myanmar. Cousins gives an overview of this tradition, and helpfully includes English translations from the French translations made by François Bizot—published by the École française d’Extrême Orient in 1976 and 1992—of various Khmer texts belonging to the tradition as articulated in that country. As I can attest, the material shows significant overlaps in terms of litany with Siamese versions currently known to us, as well as significant divergences in other contents. As yet the manuscript collections of Thailand have not revealed Siamese parallels to the material on *cittakumāra* and *cittakumārī*, and on the five-branched fig tree—although Sri Lankan material that ultimately derives from Ayutthaya and now found in the Neville Collection at the British Library suggests that it was known in Siam. We probably have to wait for research access to a key manuscript collection from Ayutthaya now in the Suphanburi provincial branch of the Thai National Library for confirmatory evidence. Some of this doubly translated material was already published by Cousins himself in his “Aspects of Esoteric Southern Buddhism” (Cousins 1997). Fortunately he does not bring forward to this present volume the speculative discussions of the origins of *boran kammattthan* made in the earlier piece and now outdated by more recent research. (Unfortunately the editor does mention these in a note, 5, to her introduction.) Making Bizot’s translations (as distinct from his theories) relating to the *boran kammattthan* available in English has been a desideratum since the French scholar first began publishing in the 1970s and had the English-speaking Buddhist Studies world been more familiar with Bizot’s discoveries sooner, then its history of the study of Theravāda would have been transformed at a much earlier date than it has been.

The last chapter, 11, contains another translation, this also previously published but in a 2014 newsletter/magazine produced by the Samatha Trust that contains contributions from members of the organisation (Cousins 2014). This is chapter 14 of Buddhadatta’s *Abhidhammāvatāra*, “Introduction to Abhidhamma,” translated as “The Bringing Into Being of Form-Frequenting Concentration.” This is Buddhadatta’s account of *samatha-bhāvanā*, i.e. the cultivation of the *jhāna*. It is, as far as I know, the only translation of any part of Buddhadatta’s treatise and it is welcome that it should be brought to a wider audience than its previous publication allowed. I only wish that Cousins had been moved to translate more of the *Abhidhammāvatāra* for us.

The whole volume is supported by two short appendices supplied by the editor, one giving an account of four key “lists” (40 *kammattthāna*, 7 *visuddhi*, 7 *bojjhaṅga* and 10 *upakilesa*); and the second, of key pericope from the canon to which Cousins occasionally refers but does not quote in full. There are 33 pages of notes mostly of Cousins’s work but also substantially supplemented in some cases by the editor; a 14-page bibliography, and an index, primarily of proper nouns. The book is also supported by a 30-page editorial introduction by Sara Shaw that includes a brief biography of Cousins, discussion of the main themes of his work, reflections on his

intellectual circle, a history of the development of this volume and an account of the editorial work needed to bring it to press.

People familiar with Cousins's articles, from "when they were originally published" will recognise some of the chapters of this volume from his previous publications. Several of them are to some degree or another reprints of former work, containing substantial verbatim reuse of material, or again are revisions of former articles. With the exception of chapter 11, this is not mentioned anywhere in the book either in the authorial or editorial introductions or in notes (in a couple of notes Cousins indicates that he has written on a topic before), so disappointingly the material is not all as new as the cover blurb implies. Thus, for example, chapter 1 contains substantial verbatim material reproduced from "Buddhist Jhāna: Its Nature and Attainment according to the Pali Sources" (Cousins 1973); likewise, chapter 4 is based on "The Origins of Insight Meditation" (Cousins 1996); and chapter 5 on "Samatha-yāna and Vipassanā-yāna" (Cousins 1984). Chapter 6 "The *Sutta* on mindfulness with in-and-out breathing" is a verbatim reprint of his contribution to a volume edited by Dhammajoti (Cousins 2015). I have already mentioned the previous incarnations of chapters 8 and 11. The benefits of cross-referencing can cut both ways: some topics dealt with in relatively light detail in this book can be explored in greater detail in a previous publication—for example, Cousins's account of *vitakka* and *vicāra* can be helpfully supplemented with his study of these terms in his article "Vitakka/vitarka and Vicāra: Stages of samādhi in Buddhism and Yoga" (Cousins 1992).

Readers who want to examine this play between former publications and material in this volume in detail and who want to know the breadth of Cousins's publications, can cross-refer to Peter Harvey's "Obituary, Bibliography and Appreciation" of Cousins for further details of source publications (Harvey 2015). Some of the original versions of Cousins's articles that underly this book are also available for download from his Academia.edu webpage or via JSTOR, if one wishes to study how he has revised his material.

I now understand that when Lance said he felt he should have published more, he may have in part meant that he wished that what he had published was more accessible to "ordinary" meditation practitioners rather than just to academic scholars in academic journals and *festschriften*. We are therefore dealing here not with a completely new piece of writing, but in part a volume of "collected works." Readers coming to the volume expecting entirely new treatments of all the topics in it are liable to disappointment, and those of us who have used Cousins' work in the past and even collected copies of his articles will already know a large part of what is in this book. But, unlike many such volumes which are often posthumous and mechanical reproductions of an author's minor *œuvres*, this one has benefitted from the author's revision and supplementation, in some cases substantial, and a reshaping of the whole as a coherent work on Theravāda meditation in the round. There is in addition entirely new material amongst which I would include chapters 2, 3, 7, 9 and 10. Now, when dealing with the topic of meditation in Theravāda, instead of being obliged to recommend to students a handful of Cousins's articles located in

sources not so easy to track down, one can direct them to this single volume and that is a great advantage. Without doubt it is a major resource for the study and teaching of meditation from the Theravāda tradition and a very welcome addition to the bookshelf. It is sad that Lance did not get to see it published, but published it has been, thanks to Sarah Shaw, and we now have the opportunity to reflect on Lance Cousins's contribution to "meditation studies" as he wanted it to be understood at the end of his career, benefitting from the accumulated understanding of some 40 years of study and practice.

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