Book Review


This book has been written by Anna Lutkajtis, a research graduate from the University of Sydney, and it summarises her MA (Religion Studies) thesis. It focuses on mysticism, and specifically what was known among Christian mystics as the ‘dark night of the soul’ during the practice of meditation. The thesis, under the mentorship of Carole Cusack, examines the curious anomaly that, while the sometimes deleterious effects of meditation on the individual are prominent in other religious traditions, they have been largely ignored in contemporary Western secular contexts.

Her MA thesis concluded that any adverse effects of meditation on the individual had been put aside by Western secularists for three reasons: the religious goal of enlightenment was replaced by symptom relief in the secular field; secularists have developed forms of meditation that are divorced from their originating religious literatures and the proponents of those literatures where adverse effects were effectively dealt with; the popular media propagate meditation in a simplified form, overwhelmingly positive, a panacea without adverse effects at all.

The present book covers in fluent prose a history of the practice of meditation in both eastern and western contexts. This mainly concerns Hindu and Buddhist traditions, and then the mainstream practice in the West and, importantly, the ‘clinical’ approach that has developed in the West. The historical survey leads to the discussion of the ‘dark night of the soul’, known under a variety of other titles over time, but explained differently in the eastern and western spheres.

Another important chapter refers to the fact that meditation in the West has largely become a therapeutic intervention, meant to achieve personal transformation and not specifically spiritual enlightenment. In so doing, it has become, in the author’s opinion, something basically ‘secular’ and detachable from the religious context. It is at this point that many involved in meditation in western contexts will want to disagree...
with the author. What they see as the great achievement of the use of meditation in western culture will be contrasted with the author’s rather scathing dismissal of western de-contextualisation (marginalising the religious context), western simplification of meditative practices by means of reductionism and, in particular, the western re-contextualisation of the Buddha as a scientist giving rise to a western meditation lineage.

The author is also wary of the role that the media have played in the proliferation of meditative practice in the West. Through the western media, meditation is presented as a cure-all for bodily and psychological ills, a virtual answer to all human problems. The practice is presented as a well-based science, able to be measured and evaluated, and well equipped to make human life more bearable.

The media have also been responsible for gurus and celebrities who have swung behind meditative practice as an essential adjunct to a healthy bodily and psychological life. In fact, meditation has become a commodity and is portrayed as such in the media.

Is this a fair assessment? It will be up to the reader to judge the author’s obvious disdain for what the media have done. And in so doing, western mediators have failed—the author insists—to face the dark side of meditation, when it inevitably presents itself. Should adverse effects resulting from the practice of meditation be seen as transitory, unimportant, easily soluble? This is a negative answer; there are those who would prefer a positive one.

Lutkajtis concludes the book in a very challenging way:

I hope it [the book] is not a criticism of meditation practices, practitioners, lineages or teachers. There exist many happy meditation practitioners who may never encounter any of the issues mentioned in this book. Similarly, there are many sincere and technically proficient meditation teachers (both secular and non-secular) who are attempting to ethically and gracefully navigate these concerns. Rather, this book is an attempt at balance. Many factors have combined to create a popular, but inaccurate, portrayal of meditation as a simple, secular, science-aligned and side-effect free solution for a variety of common problems. However, this is a radically simplified perspective that has led to meditation being viewed as a panacea and to adverse effects being overlooked and ignored. (pp. 128–29)

I thoroughly recommend those involved in a discussion on meditative practice to read this book and decide on its message.

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