

Article

Buddhist Meditation and the Skillful Integration of Self: Buddhist Pedagogy and Scientific Models of Mind

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Abstract

This article aims to show how scientific interpretations of the mind can be integrated with traditional Buddhist models of the mind that maintain no-self in light of modern Buddhist meditation practices. Building on David McMahan's work, it compares two models of mind, the Theater-of-the-Mind and the Ten Ox Herding Pictures (C. *Shíniútú*; K. *Sībudo* 十牛圖). The former places the self at the center of experience, while the latter, although it makes use of a conventional self, ultimately maintains the impermanence of the self. While this article primarily contributes to a theoretical understanding, a practical claim is made regarding the pedagogic reconciliation between these two approaches. This is done through the analysis of the two models of mind, an explanation of how Buddhist pedagogy integrates a model that reifies the self through provisional acceptance, and finally by providing an example of this integration with a recently developed Buddhist-based meditation program. One implication of this work is that the tensions between the secular and religious approaches to meditation that afflict so much of the discussion surrounding practices such as mindfulness can be quelled, at least to some extent, by a careful philosophical interrogation of the models of mind implied by those practices.

Keywords: Buddhist meditation; Buddhist modernism; Theater-of-the-Mind; Ten Ox Herding Pictures (十牛圖); Buddhist pedagogy

1. Introduction

After a thorough investigation of the unique psychology that formed throughout late medieval Europe, Henrich describes culturally significant influences that led to a unique way of understanding the self, the other, and the world. Highly individualistic, self-obsessed, control-oriented, nonconformist, and analytical, WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) people tend to see themselves as unique beings rather than nodes in a vast social network (Henrich 2021, p. 21). Moreover, he emphasizes the role that cultural evolution plays in psychology, criticizing the often-implicit assumption that psychology is the study of a computational machine, leaving the software to be explained by the anthropologists and sociologists. 'Psychologists treat Americans, and WEIRD people more generally, as a culture-free population; it's "culture" that makes everyone else appear deviant. Hopefully, it's now clear that we are the WEIRD ones' (p. 487).

In a similar vein McMahan takes up the task of understanding meditation as it is practiced in the modern era in his book *Rethinking Meditation* (McMahan 2023). He begins by expressing concern about the underlying assumptions that inform the scientific interpretation of meditation, particularly the attitude that culture and context can and ought to be dismissed if one is to have a clear understanding of the functioning mechanisms of



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meditation practice. One of the main points of this book is that one is unable to dismiss the ‘cultural baggage’ that accompanies meditation practice, as the culture is much more important than is typically thought. Moreover, secularism itself is a discursive tradition with values, normative practices, attitudes, prohibitions, and metaphysics (McMahan 2023, p. 19). In other words, there is no view from nowhere by which to observe meditation. Traditional, modern, religious, and non-religious approaches alike are embedded within the social imaginary of the observer.

Having met and evolved with modernism, often under the name of ‘mindfulness,’ Buddhist meditation has (re)entered Asia from the West. A shift in goals can be observed where a traditional approach that focuses on soteriology, namely worldly renunciation for the sake of favorable rebirths, is often replaced with appreciation of the present moment with relatively little concern for the afterlife. Even though the Buddhist ‘cultural baggage,’ including cosmological frameworks, the supernatural, metaphysical assumptions, Buddhist normative ethics, etc., has been filtered out, the secularized practices do not pose a significant obstacle to the incorporation of modern meditation practices in Buddhist contexts. Building on the work of McMahan (2023), this article considers what implications come from a WEIRD interpretation of Buddhist meditation as it engages with traditional practices.¹ This work primarily consists of a comparison of two models used to measure meditation progress. The first, known as the Theater-of-the-Mind (TOM) model, begins with ‘the enlightenment machine,’ a theory that considers the possibility of tracking the development of one’s meditation practice by scanning and recording neural activity. The TOM is a model that is used to illustrate the presumptions one has when approaching meditation as a measurable science of the mind. The second model is the Ten Ox Herding Pictures (TOHP), a traditional series of pictures used as a guideline for Buddhist practitioners to judge their level of progress toward enlightenment. These two models will be used to communicate the modern and traditional Buddhist approach to meditation, respectively. While on the surface they both serve as a map for the meditation practitioner, the philosophical assumptions that underpin each are at odds, as the TOM maintains the centrality of self while the TOHP considers it a consequence of the five aggregates (*skandha*).

Despite the ontological discrepancy between these models, the TOM model is utilized within a Buddhist context. It is the aim of this article to explain how the modern approach to meditation, which presumes the existence of a lasting self, can be integrated within a traditional approach, which is based on the impermanence of the self. The significance of this work is that it compares two models with different aims, followed by an explanation that shows how these two models maintain mutual support through the integration of the former with the latter. This will be done by exploring the self and deconstructivism in the context of Zen Buddhism and showing that, in this context, a conventional self is not only welcomed but necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist approach to meditation practice and enlightenment. Therefore, the reification of self does not pose a problem for Buddhists; on the contrary, it serves as a noble fiction or skillful means that guides practitioners toward definitive ontological teachings.

2. A WEIRD Understanding of Mind and Meditation

The enlightenment machine is a theory that refers to one’s ability to obtain empirical data on subjective experience from meditation. By scanning the brain and recording its activity, one is provided with a map of the mind that supplies definitive measurements regarding progress on the path to enlightenment. Such technology would not only be useful for one’s own meditation practice via objective data to aid in one’s reflection on the self, but also as a tool to confirm the high status of meditation masters—a way of certifying the capacity of one’s teacher. Such data would provide a standard for practitioners,

replicating the masters' results as a guideline for their own awakening. In other words, the enlightenment machine aims at repeatable, testable, and observable states of mind.

As McMahan points out, one of the key points that underlies this approach is a model that associates the mind with a container that holds ideas, thoughts, emotions, representations, etc. (McMahan 2023, p. 36). This model of mind, sometimes expressed as the Cartesian Theater (Dennett 1991, p. 39), begins with Descartes and his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas. In *Meditations*, Descartes's skepticism results in a dualistic understanding of the relationship between body and mind. He concludes that thinking is the only thing that cannot be excluded from his essence (Descartes 1995, p. 17) and eventually concludes that a gap exists between thinking and extension (p. 59). However, Descartes's interpretation is troubled when one considers how the nonmaterial interacts with the material. Descartes's solution to this quandary is that a thinking thing interacts with the body by means of the brain, specifically the delicate fibers of the pineal gland (Zimmer 2005, p. 37). This gland in the brain serves as a central location—a theater—where experience comes together in the form of consciousness. Despite the problems with this approach and Dennett's suggestion for an alternative model (the Multiple Drafts Theory), the TOM remains embedded among assumptions about the self and the world.²

The Theater-of-the-Mind

The TOM model is closely aligned with the scientific approach of observation, measurement, and manipulation of the object being observed. In much the same way as a physicist or biologist carefully observes the world, so too does the meditation practitioner observe the content of his or her mind. With present-centered awareness, the meditator observes without judgment, watching the thoughts, feelings, etc., that arise in the field of attention. 'This model suggests that the mind is like a container with private contents of experience, a personal theater with representations projected onto a screen of which the individual is a spectator' (McMahan 2023, p. 36).

Some implicit presumptions of the TOM model can be seen when describing the practice of bare attention or bare awareness. The term 'bare attention' was defined by Nyanaponika Thera as 'the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception' (Nyanaponika Thera 2005, p. 32). Since then, more refined definitions have been developed. Not to be mistaken for mindfulness, Parker highlights presence, defined as a combination of focusing on the now with intention, as the key element that mindfulness fosters (Parker et al. 2015). Presence is additionally defined as 'the bare awareness of the receptive spaciousness of our mind,' a 'state of receptive awareness of our open minds to whatever arises as it arises' (Siegel 2007, pp. 160–61). Furthermore, bare attention describes 'the activation of an observing self that is "attuned" to an experiencing self: a witnessing circuit that is open and curious to what is happening in the sensory unfolding of the moment, along with the broader context of one's experience also within awareness.' Mindfulness, then, 'adds to bare attention the quality of being aware without being swept up by judgments' (Parker et al. 2015, p. 226).

More explicit use of the Theater-of-the-Mind model comes in the form of a theater analogy used in some mindfulness-based programs. In the case of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), practitioners are guided to mindfully manage physical pain in the following way.

Observe the sensations in the hurt area, notice how they are changing, how sensations of stinging, throbbing, burning, cutting, rending, shooting, aching, and many others may flow in rapid succession through the region, blending into each other like a play of multicolored lights projected willy-nilly on a screen (Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 361)

In the case of psychological pain, the theater analogy is used in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), where the practitioner is guided to bring awareness to thoughts

as if they were projected on the screen at the movie theater. You sit, watching the screen, waiting for a thought or image to arise. When it does, you pay attention to it so long as it is there ‘on the screen,’ and then you let it go as it passes away; as if they come onto an empty stage and exit through the opposite wing (Teasdale et al. 2014, p. 153)

Also expressed in MBCT, ‘We can imagine we are in a cinema or theater and simply decide to watch the film or theater of the mind as thoughts come and go on the screen or stage’ (Segal et al. 2013, p. 310). In the context of Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), a theater-as-mind analogy is expressed in the following way:

Mindlessness is not a problem if the movie we’re playing in our heads is sweet and enjoyable, but sometimes it’s scary and we’d like nothing better than to get up and leave the theater. Our attention gets kidnapped by our suffering (Germer 2009, p. 40)

Finally, the MBSR workbook guides practitioners to see thoughts and emotions as arising, developing, and receding formations that do not need to be figured out or analyzed. ‘It’s like lying in a meadow watching the clouds float through the sky or like sitting in a movie theater watching the images and sounds changing on the screen’ (Stahl and Goldstein 2010, p. 85).

3. A Buddhist Understanding of Mind and Meditation³

In the context of Buddhist Modernism, Buddhist concepts have met with and subsequently been reinterpreted from various perspectives. When considering Buddhist concepts like dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), ‘oneness’ is a practical way of describing such an idea. Although the concept of oneness reflects peace and connectedness, two things fostered by many Buddhists, it can also mislead the reader to interpret Buddhism as a philosophy of non-dualism. While non-dualism plays an important role, helps explain such concepts as not-two (*advaita*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and effectively distinguishes Buddhism from Cartesianism, it is an over-simplification to brand Buddhism simply as non-dualist.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, nothing is permanent, including the self, which is the cause of suffering. Regardless of whether one associates the self with the material body or an immaterial essence, Buddhism denies its permanence. While Buddhism recognizes the distinction between material and immaterial, there is no attempt to reduce one to the other. The body and mind maintain a conditional and dynamic existence. Yet, despite the central importance of the impermanence of the self, Buddhism does not deny the existence of a self. In other words, the absence of an (independent) self does not deny the existence of a (dependent) self. This is to say that the Buddhist perspective cannot properly be understood as neither a dual nor a non-dual approach (De Silva 2014, p. 93); it is outside this dichotomy.

In the *Nidānasamyutta*, the following simile is given describing the relationship between the material and immaterial in connection with consciousness:

Just as two sheaves of reeds might stand leaning against each other, so too, with name-and-form as condition, consciousness [comes to be]; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form [comes to be]. With name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases [come to be]; with the six sense bases as condition, contact ... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. If, friend, one were to remove

one of those sheaves of reeds, the other would fall, and if one were to remove the other sheaf, the first would fall (SN 12, Bodhi 2000, pp. 608–9)

Here immaterial and material are referred to as name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*), respectively. In the context of the twelve links of causation (*pratītyasamutpāda*), name and form are conditioned by consciousness (*viññāna*) and lead to the six sense bases (*ṣaḍāyatana*). But more importantly for this article, name and form are the two main parts or aggregates (*skandhas*) that constitute a (dependent) self. These two parts are subcategorized into a total of five parts, consisting of (1) form (*rūpa*), followed by the four elements which make up the immaterial (*nāma*), namely (2) feeling (*vedanā*), (3) perception (*saṃjñā*), (4) volition (*saṃskāra*), and (5) consciousness (*viññāna*).

A well-known story to help illustrate the relationship between the material and immaterial and what this relationship implies regarding the self begins with a conversation between the Indo-Greek king, Milinda (Menander), and a Buddhist monk, Nāgasena. Their conversation considers what constitutes the essence of a chariot and whether the chariot is the same as its parts.⁴ The discourse ends with Nāgasena affirming that ‘chariot’ does not exist except as a name for a particular state of changing occurrences. It is a marker or an utterance used to refer to a particular bundle of phenomena. This analogy can also be applied to a human being. Like the chariot, an individual human exists only when all parts (which are themselves impermanent) are present. Here Nāgasena is effectively arguing that an unchanging phenomenon does not exist. What one calls ‘chariot’ or ‘self’ is a construction and thus exists conventionally, not ultimately.

In summation, the self exists as a collection of material and immaterial phenomena, which is to say the self does not occur independently because it is the consequence of the five aggregates. The teachings on the five aggregates are an extension of the teachings on dependent origination, both of which affirm that a self does not exist except as a dependent arising in the mundane world. It is the conflation of the dependent-self with the independent-self that causes suffering to occur in the form of desire or attachment.

The Ten Ox Herding Pictures

For Buddhism, desire is among the most powerful and common causes of suffering, and it arises in multiple ways, including the establishment of, and attachment to, a lasting self. This can also be seen in the form of aversion, or a desire to be rid of something, such as that experienced when confronting sickness and death. Moreover, cessation of suffering is prolonged by the ignorant view that a desire can be conclusively satisfied. Attempts are made to quell desire and aversion by striving for anticipated results; however, such attempts frequently contribute to the pain, although perhaps with temporary satisfaction.

This sense of suffering initiates the search for truth and understanding, as depicted by the ox herding series. This series of pictures represents a typical model of Mahayana⁵ practice that illustrates the developmental stages in attaining enlightenment. Beginning with ignorance and ending with nirvana, understanding the nature of the self is a consistent theme. Although there are multiple versions, among the best-known are those created by Kuōān Shīyūǎn (廓庵師遠). Dating back to China in the 12th century C.E., the pictures and accompanying poetry were both drawn and written by Kuōān. Unlike previous versions, which concluded with the eighth stage—*Person and Ox Both Forgotten* (C. *Rénniú jùwàng*; K. *Inu gumang* 人牛俱忘)—Kuōān’s version adds two more stages, ending with *Entering the Marketplace to Bestow Gifts* (C. *Rùchán chuīshǒu*; K. *Ipjeon susu* 入塵垂手). This is a distinction that highlights the importance of helping other sentient beings to reach realization, as well as the Zen understanding of nirvana.

The TOHP begin with a depiction of ignorance and therefore suffering or *duḥkha*. In his suffering, a boy (the ox herder) is shown searching for the true nature of his mind

or self (also known as innate enlightenment or Buddha-nature), represented by an ox.⁶ This first picture is entitled *Searching for the Ox* (C. *Xúnniú*; K. *Simu* 尋牛), and it is representative of one's first attempts at Zen meditation (C. *Zuòchán*; K. *Jwaseon* 坐禪). After having adjusted to meditation practice, the practitioner begins to slowly understand himself. This is represented by the boy finding the tracks of the ox or, *Seeing its Footprints* (C. *Jiànjī*; K. *Gyeonjeok* 見跡), a trace of the true mind/self. In other words, the second depiction represents a vague awareness of self or elements of the mind that have, until this point, gone unnoticed. Moreover, this is when one establishes the foundations of practice, like preparing tools to be used throughout one's lifelong spiritual journey. It is a challenging stage that requires faith as the practitioner has not yet experienced the awakening benefits of meditation practice. The third stage, however, represents a modest breakthrough, as the practitioner comes to experience his true mind/self, directly, for the first time. This is known as *Finding the Ox* (C. *Jiànniú*; K. *Gyeonu* 見牛). By staying in temples, practicing meditation, talking with enlightened teachers, and reading scriptures, one begins to make progress (Chun 2014, p. 44). This milestone is known as *samādhi* (C. *Chándìng*; K. *Seonjeong* 禪定), a state of mind that arises when one's concentration has narrowed to a single point for a long enough period that the presence of the true self may be acknowledged (Looori 2002, p. 55). However, at this point the ox has only partially been seen; the first full view of the ox comes next when the boy, in stage four, is depicted *Catching the Ox* (C. *Déniú*; K. *Deuku* 得牛). Here the mind/self has been seen, afflictions and all. Like the ox the mind is also difficult to control. The boy must learn to tame the ox despite its great strength. It is a long and challenging encounter that marks the peak of struggle in one's meditation practice. Eventually the ox settles down, however, as shown in the next stage, the boy must remain vigilant, still holding the rope, ready to respond when the ox resists. This stage is known as *Taming the Ox* (C. *Mùniú*; K. *Moku* 牧牛) and it represents a poised mental state when the practitioner maintains readiness, swiftly responding to the wild habits of the mind. While catching the ox was an intense and lengthy process, taming the ox takes even longer, although with less overall intensity. The ox is stubborn, so the boy must apply effort continuously. Finally, the tenacity of the boy pays off as he reaches a point where he may release the tension on the rope and even sit on the ox's back. The boy is depicted *Riding the Ox Home* (C. *Qíniú guījīā*; K. *Giu gwiga* 騎牛歸家), his meditation practice now being done habitually, with ease. No matter what he does, whether cleaning, cooking, walking, or playing his flute, the ox herder does so as a form of meditative practice. This sixth stage is symbolic of the implementation of practice in daily life.

The sixth stage is accompanied by a sense of resolution. Having embarked on a challenge, the boy finds, wrestles, and subdues his opponent. However, this is precisely the point at which one must consider what meditation practice is truly aiming to achieve. The sixth stage has been described in the following way:

Once the practitioner succeeds in controlling the distractions of his mind, he will now *begin to make real progress* towards returning to his true, original mind. The practice of meditation is no longer a struggle at this stage, but becomes pleasurable (my italics) (Chun 2014)

The first portion of the TOHP serves as a practical guide for practitioners who are experiencing meditation as relative beginners. The latter half, however, depicts experiences of a more abstract and philosophical nature. These concepts are not easily conveyed through written language and thus require direct experience to be understood.

The seventh stage, *Ox Forgotten, but not the Person* (C. *Wàngniú cún rén*; K. *Mangu jonin* 忘牛存人), depicts the boy resting at home, alone—the ox has been transcended. The boy's practice continues, but it no longer requires the effort it once did. The true self he has been searching for has been nothing more than a construction. There is no ultimate self to search

for. This leads one to question the boy himself and who he really is. Responding, stage eight represents *Person and Ox Both Forgotten* (C. *Rénniú jùwàng*; K. *Inu gumang* 人牛俱忘), depicted with a large, blank circle. Emptiness. Not to be mistaken for a vacuum or a void, emptiness represents the interdependent connection of all things—nothing exists independently. Moreover, as the unification between the boy and ox is depicted in the sixth stage, unification or wholeness is represented in the eighth stage. The boy and ox are one and the same. For Buddha-nature to be available, all conceptualization, including the self and other, mind and true mind, boy and ox, must dissolve. Buddha-nature is unrepresentable.

It is at this point where earlier versions of the ox herding pictures conclude; however, Kuōān's version includes two more stages, which emphasize the Mahayana approach that was so influential at this time. The ninth stage is a representation of reaching the source, or *Returning to the Origin and Going Back to the Fount* (C. *Fǎnběnhuányuán* K. *Banbon hwanwon* 返本還源), where neither boy nor ox exists, just the beauty of mountains and rivers, the original, clear, true mind/self. Everything is already expressing the truth, and so the futility of all the effort exerted in the previous stages is recognized. With this awakening a resolution is made to return to society where a figure is seen *Entering the Marketplace to Bestow Gifts* (C. *Rùchán chuīshǒu*; K. *Ipjeon susu* 入塵垂手), the tenth and final picture. This stage depicts the ox herder-cum-bodhisattva who now works to help others accrue the same realizations he has.⁷

Thus, the TOHP serve as a map to guide practitioners on their journey from ignorance to awakening. As the TOHP help practitioners orient themselves, so too does the enlightenment machine, albeit by very different means. While the TOHP expresses the experience of meditation practice through artwork including poetry, the enlightenment machine posits the theoretical possibility of using objective evidence through brain scans to monitor one's meditative progress. However, upon reaching stage seven, the ox herder's journey distinguishes itself from dualist presumptions. Here the traditional Buddhist practice and modern scientific approaches to meditation diverge. On the one hand, the modern interpretation of meditation practice expressed with the enlightenment machine and the underlying TOM model presumes a center from which the world, both internal and external, exists. In other words, the existence of a self remains unquestioned. On the other hand, the TOHP takes up the question of the self and responds in the negative, as can be seen especially in stages eight and nine.

4. Discussion

The TOM and the first six stages of the TOHP model both approach meditation practice as a search for something apart from the self, even when that search takes place internally. The role of the boy searching for an ox is much like that of Dennett's homunculus who, residing in the head of the observer, watches the screen of incoming sensory information and acts accordingly, controlling the body as circumstance dictates (Dennett 1991). Both assume a central perspective where the observer sits and observes the phenomena of their world. Such a position presumes a dualistic perspective as explained above in *The Theater-of-the-Mind*.

The primary concern of this article is the TOM model and the last four stages of the TOHP, which include the dissolution of the independent self. Buddhist meditators who incorporate modern meditation techniques, including those developed in the context of mindfulness-based interventions, with their traditionally based meditation practices, have some explaining to do. This is based not only on presumptions about the self but also on the ultimate goals of both secular and Buddhist practices. This explanation can be described as a reintegration, as it refers to the blending of psychologized, detraditionalized, and de-

mythologized (McMahan 2008) Buddhist practices in a secular setting that are utilized in a religious forum.

Typically, the terms secular and religious denote a sharp contrast between a world-focused view or immanence on the one hand and a view that transcends and subsumes that immanence on the other. However, to assume that the secular and the religious are at odds with each other is problematic. This article considers these distinguishable but not opposing approaches, both of which are subsumed by spirituality. Although spirituality may have religious connotations, it is a term often used by the non-religious who maintain an affinity with transcendence (Spiritual but Not Religious, or SBNR).⁸ Used in this context, the terms spiritual and religious have been considered interchangeable insofar as they both represent the desire for intuitive knowledge, unrestrained by empiricism. However, rather than associate spirituality with a skillful way of including religiosity into daily, secular life, this article refers to Solomon's understanding of spirituality (which he qualifies as naturalized) as aligned with wonder and curiosity (Solomon 2002, p. 14). Both religious and non-religious people alike are spiritual in the sense that they stand in awe before the unknown. While one may use intuition and personal experience as their guide, another the rigors of careful analysis and calculation, and yet another both, spirituality can be seen simply as a human quality. In other words,

Spirituality is not primarily a matter of beliefs (although it certainly involves beliefs). It is rather a way (or a great many ways) of experiencing the world, of living, of interacting with other people and with the world. It involves a set of practices and rituals, not necessarily prayer, or church services, or meditation, or prescribed rituals of purification but any number of ways, whether individual or collective, of thinking, looking, talking, feeling, moving, and acting (Solomon 2002, p. 12)

4.1. Construction and Deconstruction

It is the main premise of this article that while both the TOM and the TOHP models include a self or a central point of view from which to practice meditation, only the TOHP calls it into question. In the case of the TOM, the self occupies a physical space, a central seat within the brain, from which the (inner and outer) world is perceived. In the TOHP, the self is represented by a boy who is searching for his true self/mind. Unlike the TOM approach, which reifies the self, the TOHP comes to express an ontologically nuanced narrative that ultimately expresses the impermanence of the self. To help understand the nature of each of these approaches, the work of McMahan is helpful. Referring to constructive and deconstructive approaches to meditation, McMahan begins by highlighting the aspects of a constructive approach as the cultivation of attitudes, virtues, ideas, emotions, and ways of thinking and being. The dismantling of these aspects is attributed to a deconstructive approach (McMahan 2023, p. 16). Based on the constructive–deconstructive distinction, the following section investigates the TOM and the TOHP, in turn.

4.1.1. The Theater-of-the-Mind and Constructivism

Referring to Cook, McMahan emphasizes the constructive elements of the empirical approach to meditation as exemplified in the TOM. As shown above, the presumption of the existence of a central observer is explicitly utilized in various mindfulness-based programs. From a place of nonjudgemental awareness, the practitioner is guided to observe the comings and goings of the mind, whether it be a thought, emotion, sensation, or other. Upon the acknowledgment of the phenomena, the meditator is further guided to watch it pass, noticing its changing nature as if watching clouds drift across a sky or scenes play out on a movie screen.

The nature of this open monitoring practice, often referred to as bare attention, emphasizes ‘clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception’ (Nyanaponika Thera 2005, p. 17). In Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), bare attention helps the practitioner learn to recognize thought patterns and deflate the influence they have, especially when those thoughts lead to rumination and avoidance and therefore depression and anxiety. This is an effective practice, which, unlike Cognitive Therapy (CT), a therapeutic technique that targets and challenges harmful thinking patterns in a more direct way, encourages the practitioner to simply observe their thoughts without instilling them with reality. One of the main aims of MBCT is to see thoughts as thoughts (or mental events), not as reality. This is expressed with a quote from Jon Kabat-Zinn in the MBCT workbook.

[T]he simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life (Teasdale et al. 2014, p. 169)

Through meta-cognitive practices, also referred to as decentering, one prevents rumination caused by engagement with harmful schemata or belief in inaccurate thoughts. However, as Cook points out, an epistemic gap exists between appearance and reality. While a meta-cognitive perspective ideally grounds the observer, enabling her to step back and more accurately judge her thought patterns, a truly meta-cognitive perspective or a view from nowhere is impossible. For there to be observation, a subject (and object) is needed, with which unavoidably come a profusion of experiences that inform and thus manifest a particular reality. The gap between thought and accurate thought, quite possibly reduced, still exists and becomes filled in (becomes a complete concept) based on context and the experiences of the observer. Moreover,

the epistemological equivalency created between scientific and meditative practice, and the meditative training by which practitioners learn to relate to thoughts from a decentered perspective—are premised on efforts to distinguish ‘appearance’ from ‘reality’ (Cook 2017, p. 115)

In other words, the appearance–reality dichotomy is itself based on a particular set of conditions where a presumption regarding the need to purify reality from appearances exists. Rather than ridding reality of appearance, one is reframing her reality through the practiced shift in perspective taught in various meditation practices like bare attention. Practices do not reveal an essential truth; rather, they create a new reality (Cook 2017). McMahan refers to it in terms of a social imaginary or ‘a social and cultural context in which people live and make sense of their lives’ (McMahan 2023, p. 55).

Furthermore, regarding the content of the mind, meditation practices often implement the use of labeling to make sense of and organize the convolution of mental events. For instance, while poised in a meditative state, the practitioner waits for the content of the mind to arise. Through gentle investigation, the experience arises or is discovered—‘investigation reveals and heals’ (Teasdale et al. 2014, p. 118). Consequently, the label, say, ‘anger’ or ‘tightness in the chest,’ is attached, and after some breathwork, the observation of the mind continues. Here, such words as ‘arise’ and ‘reveal’ exemplify the approach mindfulness practices take to uncover what is already present. However, according to the explanations given in this section, a more accurate term is ‘construct’ as ‘[t]he phenomenon is not merely observed but also constructed in the very process of observation’ (McMahan 2023, p. 45). Not only may the ambiguous experience be interpreted in a variety of different ways, but the framework that assumes it is possible and/or necessary to categorize such experiences is not neutral but follows from one’s social imaginary. The dividing up and organizing of a ‘blob’⁹ of experience is itself a meaningful and creative, or constructive, act.

4.1.2. The Ten Ox Herding Pictures and Constructivism-Deconstructivism

The constructive–deconstructive nature of the TOHP begins with an investigation of the true nature of dharmas. Given its complexity, dharma is translated into a variety of terms, including law, teaching, phenomenon, and quality (Buswell 2004, p. 242). Here, dharma is being referred to as an absolute, objective truth, also referred to as a primary existent (*dravyasat*) (Williams et al. 2012, p. 68). During early Buddhism, there were various theories regarding what is permanent and irreducible. Consideration of these irreducible dharmas have come to include such factors as the material (including the four elements and the five sense organs), the mental (including contact, sensation, perception, etc.), the mind itself, nirvana, and a host of other factors. Disagreements have been had over what factors of human experience can be considered a primary existent, and as a result the lists of irreducible dharmas differ across various schools.¹⁰ Following these discrepancies, a shift was made away from dharma theory toward emptiness theory—which has become a pillar of Zen philosophy.

The shift from dharma theory to emptiness theory is reflected in the journey of the ox herder, who begins looking for the true nature of his mind/self only to find it exists as a mere concept or construction. In other words, according to Zen philosophy, everything, even dharma, is empty of inherent or primary existence. However, this is not expressed until nearly the end (beginning in stage 7) of the analogy. The TOHP strategically guides the practitioner, conditionally allowing the necessary use of inherent self as a skillful means to enter philosophically definitive teachings surrounding such topics as interdependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*), emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and no-self (*anātman*). As the student's practice matures, her concepts and convictions are recognized as not corresponding with independent realities. Her concepts divide and organize the phenomena that constitute her experience in particular ways (McMahan 2023, p. 108).

Contrary to the position expressed through the TOM that a self exists and is central to the observer, the TOHP begins assuming the existence of a self only to dissolve this assumption as the practitioner's progress develops and understanding deepens. This pedagogic strategy, also known as the employment of skillful means (*upāya*), is a way for the teacher to guide the student based on the student's needs. This can be better understood considering the three turnings of the dharma wheel, a set of teachings given by the Buddha after his enlightenment. These three sets of teachings begin with fundamental concepts and increasingly become more definitive. The first set includes such basics as the four noble truths and the eight-fold path, while the second set includes teachings on emptiness. These first two turnings of the wheel are said to have been inexplicit or not philosophically definitive (*neyartha*) due to the tendency for inexperienced practitioners to follow the whims of the mind.¹¹ When the student is ready, a third set of explicit, philosophically definitive teachings (*nitārtha*) are given on topics, including the three natures and consciousness-only (Williams et al. 2012, p. 113).

Like the progression from self to no-self develops in the three turnings of the dharma wheel and in the ten stages of the ox herder, the shift from dharma theory to emptiness theory becomes clearer when contrasting the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness) with the *Prajñāpāramitā Hrdaya Sūtra* (the Heart Sutra). In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the inherent nature of the dharmas ground the teachings, as can be seen in the following passage:

Just as if a skilled butcher or his assistant, having slaughtered a cow, were to sit at a crossroads with the carcass divided into portions, so a monk reviews this very body ... in terms of the elements: 'There are in this body the earth-element, the water-element, the fire-element, the air-element.' (DN 22.6, Walshe 1995, p. 338)

In the *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra*, emptiness is of primary importance, as can be seen in the following passage:¹²

O Sariputra, form is not separate from boundlessness; boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form. Feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and discernment are also like this (Tanahashi 2014, p. 219)

Although there are differences in their approaches, both early and later Buddhism agree on the centrality of no-self. While early Buddhism explains self as a conditioned result of dharmas (i.e., the five aggregates), Mahayana teachings question and subsequently deny the permanent nature of all phenomena including the dharmas. The role emptiness plays as a metaphysical explanation of the self and the world is especially emphasized in Zen. Ultimately, all is interconnected and therefore impermanent or empty of an independent nature—even the distinction between saṃsāra and nirvana is empty. However, this is not a nihilistic assertion where all is void; on the contrary, all constructed distinctions collapse, including the mundane and the ultimate, and the transcendent becomes available in the immanent.

This can be further described by contrasting knowledge from wisdom (Somers 2022, p. 389), traditionally described with the analogy of mountains and rivers.

In the beginning of our practice ‘mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.’ They are manifested in the whole phenomenal universe. After much practice, the self is forgotten and ‘mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers.’ As the practice continues and matures even further, ‘mountains are again mountains and rivers are again rivers.’ The mountains and rivers of the beginner are not the mountains and rivers of the mature practitioner. However, the mountains and rivers of the mature practitioner are identical with the mountains and rivers of the beginner. Do you see? (Loori 2002, pp. 83–84)

5. Shaping Modern Zen Buddhism: Recovering the Human Spirit (RHS)

Although Buddhism was in America by the end of the 19th century, it did not start to flourish until it blended with the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s. There were various reasons why Buddhism was embraced in the West, including feelings of alienation due to changes in technology, confusion due to the decline in traditional roles, feelings of being unsettled due to the consequences of World War 2, and fears associated with the Cold War (Grogan 2013, p. xi). However, a reason of particular importance to this discussion on ontology of the self is the sense of re-enchantment that arose because of an increasingly industrialized world. While monotheistic traditions struggled to find their place among a secularizing world, elements of Buddhism (such as the assimilation of the immanent with the transcendent) were welcomed. The industrialization that followed the scientific revolution included a mechanistic view of nature. What was once explained as a miracle was now explained logically, leaving some to yearn for a (re)humanized world in the face of disenchantment. Among other traditions, including Hinduism and Indigenous spiritual traditions, Buddhism provided a means of re-enchanting the disenchanted. The mundane became rich with spiritual life experienced through meditation and maintained with an account where the conceptual and the ultimate dissolve into each other.

Having taken root in foreign soil, Buddhism transformed often by shedding mythology and traditional elements such as ritual practice and emphasizing/intricating psychological features (McMahan 2008). The result of this transformation has come to be known as Buddhist Modernism, and from this perspective, meditation not only became more emphasized than before but also came to be studied as a science of the mind. It is at this

overlap between Buddhist meditation and the scientific approach to mind that one finds the enlightenment machine and the TOM, as well as various mindfulness-based practices, which, implicitly or explicitly, utilize the TOM model.

The modernization of Buddhism met with great success, particularly regarding the effectiveness and popularization of mindfulness and mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). A discourse between Buddhism and science began, an example of which comes in the meeting between Korean Zen Master Venerable Seung Sanh and molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn in the United States (<https://www.lionsroar.com/why-jon-kabat-zinn-brought-mindfulness-to-the-mainstream/> accessed on 1 September 2025). The development of Kabat-Zinn's MBSR, among other programs, grew in effectiveness and popularity. Eventually mindfulness curricula were translated into various languages and began spreading throughout the world, including to Buddhist nations. In the case of South Korea, the Korean Center for Mindfulness opened in 2008, and the Institute of Korean Meditation and Psychotherapy (IKMP) opened in 2011, both of which conduct research including work with mindfulness-based programs. In the case of IKMP, the founder and director is Jogye Order nun and professor of Buddhist studies, Venerable Seogwang. Aside from making mindfulness-based programs more widely available in Korea, Venerable Seogwang has developed her own program that explicitly includes Buddhist tradition and teachings. Entitled *Recovering the Human Spirit* (RHS), this 8-week program 'integrates traditional Zen Buddhism with modern psychological healing meditation while also embodying the Mahayana spirit of altruistic practice'¹³ (Song and Song 2025, p. 37).

Given its Buddhist foundations, the guidance offered by the RHS program includes not only compassion and loving-kindness but also liberation from saṃsāra. Derived in part from the previously developed *Non-Dual Therapy* (Song 2021), RHS places the six realms of saṃsāra (C. *liùdào lúnhuì*; K. *yukdo yunhoe* 六道輪廻)¹⁴ as guiding principles to help practitioners recognize their states of mind, including thoughts, feelings, experiences, etc. Following an introduction to various meditative and mindfulness-based practices, the program culminates with teachings on the TOHP (Song and Song 2025, p. 49), inviting participants to contemplate the fundamental nature of the mind and the self. Whereas preliminary sessions emphasize breath-focused practices, RHS incorporates teachings on the TOHP alongside investigations into critical phrases (C. *huàtóu*; K. *hwadu* 話頭)—interrogative prompts designed to probe the nature of the mind and self. In doing so, the program integrates contemporary practices popularized by MBIs within an explicitly Buddhist framework.

6. Conclusions

Considering the conception of the self in the context of the TOM, there is a brain to be scanned and, conversely, a self that sits at its center. Principally, the TOHP adopts this supposition but only as a pedagogic strategy; once one's practice has ripened, a more ontologically sensitive investigation commences. Therefore, although these models maintain distinct aims, they hold in common the manifestation and utilization of a self, albeit temporary in the case of the TOHP. Regarding the TOM model, this is significant because it forces a reinterpretation of a model that supposes the possibility of a neutral perspective, where an object can be seen as it is (unconstructed). In the case of the TOHP, this is meaningful because it is a skillful means by which no-self will come to be affirmed. Like the TOM model, however, the TOHP also aim for an unobstructed perspective from which to see the true mind/self. Despite maintaining a deconstructivism inclusive of constructivism, the shift to emptiness theory maintains an element of constructivism in the form of the concept of emptiness itself and, more obviously, as a living tradition that establishes it.

Overall, the WERID approach, which hypothesizes about the possibility of an enlightenment machine and therefore maintains the TOM model, is bound to this world with the goal of empirically derived knowledge. The Buddhist perspective includes this within a model that incorporates the worldly within the saṃsāra-nirvana or immanent-transcendent axis. With liberation from saṃsāra as their primary aim, Buddhists operate within a complex ethical framework which grounds the entirety of the tradition. Moreover, a level of complexity is added when a set of teachings includes models to ease the practitioner into philosophically definitive territory. After briefly exploring the shift from dharma theory to emptiness theory with reference to the three turnings of the dharma wheel, it becomes easier to see this pedagogic scaffolding as utilized by Zen traditions. This is in contrast with modern approaches to meditation, which use skillful means to translate the teachings of the Buddha to make them accessible to those unfamiliar with Buddhism. While the former has otherworldly aims regarding karma, rebirth, nirvana, etc., the latter tends to emphasize worldly goals including benefits, often therapeutic effects, that can be actualized in the here and now.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

C	Chinese
DN	Dīgha Nikāya
K	Korean
M	Milinda's Questions
MN	Majjhima Nikāya
SN	Saṃyutta Nikāya

Notes

- ¹ This is significant due to the multitude of benefits as well as concerns that surround the conversation on modern interpretations of meditation. While the benefits, especially regarding psychological/physiological therapy have been widely explored important research investigating worrisome elements of meditation, especially in the modern era, has come to light. Some of the issues investigated include neoliberalism and commodification (Purser 2019); meditation-related adverse effects including reexperienced trauma (Britton et al. 2021) and emotion regulation difficulties (Serhatoğlu et al. 2022); colonialism and secularization (King 2021); and biopolitics as it relates to technology (Divino 2024) just to name a few.
- ² The materialist approach is often found to be an acceptable alternative. Materialists pose that the various parts of the physical brain are what constitute the mind. The mind is not a distinct substance which acts through the brain (as Descartes concluded), but a phenomenon of the brain. Although materialists would agree that mind-brain dualism is false many have not given up on a primary assumption of the theory: that there is a center which establishes the observer as a subject. As Dennett points out, 'even the most sophisticated materialists today often forget that once Descartes's ghostly *res cogitans* is discarded, there is no longer a role for a centralized gateway, or indeed for any functional center to the brain' (Dennett 1991, p. 106). He refers to materialists who simultaneously deny dualism and maintain a seat from which one views the world as Cartesian Materialists, 'the view you arrive at when you discard Descartes's dualism but fail to discard the imagery of a central (but material) theater where "it all comes together"' (p. 107). For a full account of mind-brain dualism see Flanagan (2002).

- 3 Concerning Buddhist terminology, concepts applicable to Buddhism in general will be accompanied with the source language in Sanskrit while concepts specific to Zen will be accompanied with Chinese characters.
- 4 Nāgasena asks Milinda, ‘is the pole the chariot... the axle... the wheels... the body of the chariot... the flagstaff... the yoke... the reins... is the goad the chariot?’ To which Milinda responds, ‘O no, revered sir.’ Nāgasena continues, ‘But then, sire, is there a chariot apart from the pole, the axle, the wheels, the body of the chariot, the flag-staff of the chariot, the yoke, the reins, the goad?’ and again Milinda responds says ‘no.’ Based on this interaction Milinda has admitted that the chariot is neither its individual parts nor is it apart from them, which leaves Nāgasena to conclude. ‘Though I, sire, am asking you repeatedly, I do not see the chariot. Chariot is only a sound, sire. For what here is the chariot? You, sire, are speaking an untruth, a lying word. There is no chariot’ (M, [Horner 1969](#), pp. 36–37).
- 5 It is worth noting that although the TOHP are usually associated with Mahayana (specifically Zen) Buddhism the depicted concepts have been traced back to Theravada Buddhism ([Rahula 1978](#)).
- 6 In contrast to gradual approaches to enlightenment where one cultivates wholesome qualities over long periods of time (over many lifetimes), there are several schools of Mahayana Buddhism including Zen which emphasize the innateness of Buddha-nature in all beings. This innate nature is referred to by a multitude of terms including innate enlightenment (C. *Běnjúé*; K. *Bongak* 本覺), Buddha-nature (C. *Fóxìng*; K. *Bulseong* 佛性), true nature (C. *Zhēnxìng*; K. *Jinseong* 眞性), dharma nature (C. *Fǎxìng*; K. *Beopseong* 法性), original mind (C. *Běnxīn*; K. *Bonsim* 本心), one mind (C. *Yīxīn*; K. *Iljim* 一心), true mind (C. *Zhēnxīn*; K. *Jinsim* 眞心), true self (C. *Zhēnwǒ*; K. *Jina* 眞我), emptiness (C. *Kōng*; K. *Gong* 空), thusness (C. *Zhēnrú*; K. *Jinyeo* 眞如), essence (C. *Dāngtǐ*; K. *Dangche* 當體), and others. To avoid confusion this article refers to mind and self (interchangeably).
- 7 Perhaps anticipating the final stage of TOHP to be Buddhahood or paradise one may expect the discussion on self to continue. Who or what enters nirvana/ becomes a buddha? Although some Zen Buddhist rituals such as those done during funeral ceremonies refer to the deceased as a spirit or ghost (C. *Líng*; K. *Yeong* 靈) that transcends this world ([Moon and Somers 2023](#)) Zen doctrine describes nirvana as not distinguishable from this world. This will be explored further in Section 4.1.2.
- 8 For more on this in the context of Korean Buddhism see [Somers \(2024\)](#).
- 9 The conceptualization of experiences as a blob that can be ‘de-blobbed’ (distinguishing between thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) has been expressed in the following way. ‘Notice carefully what happens when you “de-blob” unpleasant experiences by focusing attention closely on them—homing in on their separate components—body sensations, feelings, and thoughts’ ([Teasdale et al. 2014](#), p. 103).
- 10 Lists of dharmas have been compiled over the years by various schools including the 75 dharmas of Sarvāstivāda, 82 dharmas of Theravada, and the 100 dharmas of Yogacara, just to name a few. For more on this see [Williams et al. \(2012, pp. 63–69\)](#).
- 11 As expressed in the analogy of the poisoned arrow, the Buddha urges the novice to practice rather than philosophize. Philosophers, like a man shot with a poisoned arrow who refuses to remove it until he understands the details of his attacker, have their priorities out of order. Understanding the nature of the dharmas cannot be done until one has sufficiently prepared their mind (MN 63, [Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995](#), pp. 534–35).
- 12 This comes from a translation by Tanahashi and Halifax in 2007, based off of the 7th century version by Xuanzang (玄奘).
- 13 본 연구에서는 전통적인 선불교와 현대의 심리치유적 명상을 통합하면서 또한 이타적 실천행을 아우르는 대승정신이 반영된 선명상 수행법인 RHS 명상 프로그램을 탐색하고자 한다.
- 14 The 6 realms or paths of saṃsāra consist of the realms of: hell (C. *Diyùdào*; K. *Jiokdo* 地獄道), the hungry ghost (C. *Ègǔǎodào*; K. *Agwido* 餓鬼道), the animal (C. *Chùshēngdào*; K. *Chuksaengdo* 畜生道), the jealous gods or titans (C. *Xiūluódào*; K. *Surado* 修羅道), heaven (C. *Tiānshàngdào*; K. *Cheonsangdo* 天上道), and the human realm (C. *Rénjiāndào*; K. *Ingando* 人間道).

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