

*When Western Buddhists sit down to meditate, many of us may imagine that we are doing the same thing Buddhists across the globe have done for centuries. We may think we are using the same practices Buddhists have always used to overcome suffering (and probably we hope to attain the same result). But this is a problematic assumption, not least because it is based on the view that the meaning of Buddhist practice is independent of culture and time.*

*David McMahan studies the role of social and cultural context in meditation. A professor of religion at Franklin and Marshall College, he is the editor of the recently published volume *Buddhism in the Modern World* and the author of two books, including *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (which [Tricycle reviewed in Spring 2012](#)). He is a frequent contributor to scholarly journals, reference works, and anthologies, and participates widely in conferences, seminars, and lectures across the United States and overseas. An expert on Buddhism's encounter with modernity, McMahan suggests that we approach the subject by considering a monk in ancient India. "He has left his family behind; he is celibate; he doesn't eat after noon; he studies texts that give him a skeptical view of the phenomenal world and its value. Is his practice really exactly the same," McMahan asks, "as that of a contemporary secular mindfulness practitioner who is meditating to excel at work or to be more compassionate to her children?"*

*If this question makes us a little uncomfortable, there is good reason, because it triggers an underlying tension. On the one hand, we want to counter McMahan's challenge: Don't we believe the Buddha's teachings are timeless? Suffering, after all, doesn't belong to a particular culture or historical age. Beings suffered in the past and they are pretty clearly suffering now. There was a solution to suffering taught by the Buddha and it is still available today. On the other hand, an ever-growing body of evidence tells us that over time and across cultures (and even within traditions) there exist multiple versions of Buddhism that all define the human problem and its solution differently. We might be left wondering: if Buddhism is changed by culture or history, how can it be authentic? How could it be true?*

*This tension isn't just a Buddhist problem, McMahan points out. It is a deep paradox in modern life. The double-whammy of rationalist thinking is that when we imagine truth is singular, cross-cultural, and ahistorical, we slam into the reality of historical change and cultural pluralism; when we accept that plural truth claims can be equally valid, we slam into relativism.*

*McMahan says, "The understanding that social science and contemporary philosophy and anthropology have brought to the importance of cultural context is a uniquely modern Western phenomenon." But he assures us that Buddhism's teachings on emptiness and dependent origination can shed important light on this seeming paradox. In June, I sat down with him during a break at a *Mind and Life* conference in Garrison, New York, to ask him to place Buddhism beside the contemporary Western intellectual tradition to explore why and how context matters. –Linda Heuman, Contributing Editor*

Inter~view:

**Is there some popular misconception you are pushing against in your work on Buddhism and modernity?** There is a prevalent misperception, especially among Western practitioners, that what they are practicing is basically the same thing Buddhists have practiced since the time of the Buddha. They seldom recognize how contemporary forms of Buddhism have been re-contextualized by Western tacit assumptions and understandings.

**Can you tell me about your current research on the role of context in meditation?** I'm trying to see how meditation works in a systemic way within a culture. I'm trying to get away from meditative "states," or thinking of meditation in a static sense: "you do practice A and it leads you to state X." The meaning, the significance,

the understanding, and the rationale for meditation in one culture might be different than in another. For example, if somebody from a Tibetan tradition who has had very little contact with the West does a particular practice, is it really going to be the exact same thing as a modern Western professional who is doing on paper “the same practice” but nested in very different contexts?

**What exactly do you mean by “context?”** First of all, there’s the explicit context of the dharma. Right now, for the first time ever, we have contemplative practices derived from the Buddhist tradition that are being practiced completely independently of any Buddhist context. Secularization has filtered out what we would call “religious elements.” It is those religious elements, those ethical elements, and those intentions that have always formed the context of meditation and that have made meditation make sense. Otherwise, what sense does it make to sit down for half an hour and watch your breath? Somebody has to explain to you why that matters, why it is a good idea, and what it is actually doing in the larger scheme of things. When meditation comes to the West completely independently of that, it is like a dry sponge; it just soaks up the cultural values that are immediately available. So it becomes about self-esteem. Or it might be about body acceptance or lowering your stress. It might be about performing lots of different tasks efficiently at work. It might be about developing compassion for your family. A whole variety of new elements now are beginning to form a novel context for this practice, which has not only jumped the monastery walls but has broken free from Buddhism altogether.

I know people who are not interested in being Buddhists or studying Buddhist philosophy who have really benefited from stripped-down mindfulness practice. So I’m not in a position to say, “Oh no, you shouldn’t be doing this unless you can read Nagarjuna!” [Laughs.] Every culture has its elite religion and its more popular folk religion; it’s almost like mindfulness is becoming a folk religion of the secular elite in Western culture. We’ll see whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

To expand the idea of context further, there is also cultural context, which obviously can be very different. And again, there are a lot of tacit understandings there: I feel myself in a world of atoms and molecules and bacteria and viruses and galaxies that are unimaginably far away. I think I’m literally incapable of feeling myself in a world in which there are cold hells and hot hells beneath my feet. **So in that sense, just our ordinary being-in-the-world—our “life world,” to use a phenomenological term—is deeply conditioned by these cultural elements. And this cultural context provides novel goals and intentions to which meditation is put in service.**

**Does acknowledging the importance of context mean we have to be cultural relativists?** I’m not a complete cultural relativist. I’m not saying everything is cultural. There are things that obviously go across cultures. We’re all working with the same basic neurophysiology. But epistemologies and ways of seeing the world are deeply embedded in cultures. The basic categories we use to make sense of the world are culturally constructed. I think it’s interesting that the Buddhist tradition has seen something of this—not so much in terms of culture, but in terms of language and concepts. **For instance, Nagarjuna, in my reading, says that there’s no set of categories that finally, simply, mirrors the world. All categories, ultimately, are empty of that self-authenticating representation of reality as it is. I think that insight is really an interesting one to take into the contemporary world, because now we can expand on that with this idea of culture.**

You can see how that rubs up against the whole scientific enterprise. Even though good scientists are much more nuanced about it today than they would have been a hundred years ago, the ideal of the sciences is still “a view from nowhere.” The purpose is to get us out of those contexts, to get us out of those very particularistic ways of seeing things. And that’s going to be a tension between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand and the hard sciences on the other.

We want to have a kind of final understanding of the world. That's natural. We don't want to be told that the way we're seeing the world is just a product of our upbringing and our language and our culture. And yet there are certain things that can only be seen through the lenses of particular traditions or particular categories. So I think rather than seeing the existence of various systems of knowledge or taxonomies and so on as devaluing, you can see them as different lenses. That doesn't mean they're all the same and they're all equally valuable. Some may be much more valuable for certain purposes, and some may be valuable for other purposes.

**What sorts of misunderstandings about meditation might practitioners fall into if they assume the context of meditation is unimportant?** It can lead to dogmatism about progress in meditation along the path: here is this stage, here is the next stage. And we find these schemas in the Buddhist texts, so there is every reason for a good Buddhist to think those schemas of meditative progress are simply built into the nature of things—built into the mind itself. Why shouldn't we think that if we are going to be Buddhists and practice Buddhism? I'm not saying we shouldn't necessarily, but first of all, we are confronted with the plurality of maps of the path. This is the same general problem of pluralism that we are confronted with in the modern world. I don't even think it is unique to the modern world. One view would be to say that my map is simply the right one and everybody else is off. The other would be to say that there are lots of different maps, and that they do different things. If you look at actual maps of the earth, you realize that you can never really make a completely accurate map of the earth. Mapmakers struggle with this. Do you make it look curved? Do you represent roads? You just can't represent the earth on a flat piece of paper in an absolutely straightforward way. You have to make all kinds of choices. So where you are going and what you are doing really matters when you are trying to make a map. **In the Theravada, the ultimate goal of meditation is to transcend the world completely. In the Mahayana, you want to come back as a bodhisattva over and over again. So these maps get configured differently.**

**Isn't the view that "no map is absolutely true" also a view?** It is. In his Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way, Nagarjuna lays out his understanding of emptiness, and then he makes a surprising, even an astonishing, move. He says, "Ultimately, everything that I've said is also empty." This is the idea of the emptiness of emptiness. He is admitting that everything he is laying out is also a pragmatic map, not an absolute system that corresponds to reality in an absolute way. **There is some discussion and debate about whether when Nagarjuna critiques views he is talking about any view or just wrong views.** I kind of like the "any view" view [laughs]—that any kind of map or system that you hang onto and make into something that you believe corresponds to reality in and of itself becomes a kind of bondage.

**Isn't part of the problem here the assumption that "corresponding to reality in and of itself" is what it means for a map, concept, or idea to be true?** After all, we Buddhists don't buy that there is reality "in and of itself." Very true. That is why we have such a hard time as modern Westerners trying to see a way around this problem. It is so firmly built into the Western Enlightenment system of thinking, and into modernity, that we have sentences and representations in our minds that correspond (or don't correspond) to external reality. Descartes and Bacon set up this whole way of thinking. There have been a number of moves in more contemporary Western thought—phenomenology, for instance—to develop a language that gets away from this. But it is deeply rooted in our culture to think that way. And science encourages us to think that way. Maybe this tension is running through other cultures too—the tension between a very detailed systematic view of how things are versus a suspicion of our ability to construct a completely accurate model. In a lot of Abhidharma literature, there seems to be an attempt to account for everything, to get a category for everything, to really make a comprehensive accounting of the phenomenological reality of being human. I think it was in reaction to that systematizing that Nagarjuna and the Perfection of Wisdom came along and said that language doesn't work that way—it doesn't simply correspond to self-existing, independent entities that match our categories. So this tension is there even in the Buddhist tradition historically.

**I think there is an assumption among many Western Buddhists that decontextualization of the dharma is okay because if non-Buddhists just do these meditation practices—for whatever reason—then they will have Buddhist insights.** So it becomes almost a covert way of converting people.

**Yes. From what you're saying, it sounds like maybe it's not so cut and dried.** It is a little more complicated than that, because to have those insights you need to have a bit of that context in place. Explicit teachings are a context that reprograms the mind deeply, at both a conscious and a tacit level. It is no accident that Buddhists memorize and recite scriptures, repeating them over and over and over. This makes the dharma sink very deeply into the mind, so that it forms the tacit background of understanding. And that is part of what bubbles up in insight. It's not just that insight clears away everything and then—just boom!—there's bare insight into something. Reconditioning is a necessary precondition for at least some forms of insight.

**Can you give me an example?** Look at one of the earliest comprehensive meditation texts, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. I'm always fascinated by the fact that people work with this fundamental text today, because generally people just take one tiny slice of it—bare attention to breath and physical movements—and that becomes “mindfulness” in the modern world. But if you keep reading to the end of the sutra, you realize that there are all kinds of very conceptual aspects. And far from being simply “nonjudgmental,” it suggests making wise and discerning ethical judgments and judgments on the value of various things. The sutra is training the mind to see the world and oneself in certain ways. Rather than have you see yourself as solid, singular, and permanent, it offers an alternative way to train to see yourself: five skandhas. It goes through the relationship between the senses and the external world. And then the sutra ends up with a meditation on the eightfold path and the four noble truths. You are meditating on a thumbnail sketch of the whole dharma! So there is a lot of conceptual stuff going on there. The text attempts to train the mind to see the world in a particular way that is conducive to following the Buddhist path and to making progress toward enlightenment. So the text supplies a whole raft of attitudes, orientations, ethics, and values that form the context—and sometimes the actual content—of the meditation practices. Bare awareness may be a starting place, a way of focusing and concentrating the mind. But this broader context supplies the rationales and aims of practice. Even in the most secularized contemporary mindfulness movements, there are lots of these values and attitudes that enter in because it doesn't really work without some kind of conceptual and ethical orientation.

**Why do you think the importance of context is so hard to see here?** I think that's fostered by a certain idea that meditation actually gets us beyond all context, that that's really what it's supposed to do. It's supposed to get us beyond this cultural stuff and make us transcend our culture. And I would say that this itself is an idea that's coming very much out of a modern context. Modern Western notions of freedom are often about freedom of the autonomous individual from social, institutional, cultural influences and conditioning. The idea that many modern practitioners have that meditation is somehow beyond cultural or other forms of context stems largely from D. T. Suzuki's articulation of Zen, which really emphasizes the non-conceptual. It also comes out of the modern pluralistic context whereby, for the past couple of hundred years, we've been bumping into other cultures at an unprecedented rate, trying to figure out what to do with each other, recognizing each other's differences, and having wars about those differences. If we can get beyond concepts, then we are not bogged down in who is right and who is wrong and who has the right model of things. D. T. Suzuki says we can just cut through all that and get to a direct pure experience of reality in and of itself, beyond cultural context.

There is a place at a certain point for overcoming concepts and conditioning, but there is also a lot of reconceiving and reconditioning. The idea is to transform the mind, not just to extract it from all cultural influences. Buddhism itself is a culture—one that attempts to train and condition minds in specific ways conducive to awakening. In some traditions there is the idea that you do transcend all causes and conditions completely, but there is a way to go before that.

**Is there something to be said about the Buddhist notion of dependent arising in relation to context? If phenomena are dependently originated as the teachings tell us they are, in a sense it is all context.**

Yes, exactly. The very notion of things arising from causes and conditions is an affirmation of the importance of contextuality. It's no accident that the concept of dependent arising or interdependence has become so prominent in understandings of Buddhism today. The world is so interconnected today that everybody is talking about this.

In the earliest forms of Buddhism, the notion of dependent arising or interdependence was not really good news. It was a device to explain how suffering arises (as in the twelve links). It wasn't a celebration of our interconnectedness in a living web of creation. It was something you wanted to extract yourself from; it was bondage. With the arising of the Mahayana, especially in China, there was a shift in understanding the phenomenal world and its significance. Chinese Buddhists were able to look at nature as an expression of buddhanature—and there were debates about whether trees and grasses could be enlightened and whether they really were sentient. Also, there were a lot of nature metaphors for enlightenment. And so the Chinese appreciation of nature infuses itself into this idea of interdependence and provides a more world-affirming version of it, which then centuries later runs into the Transcendentalists and the Romantic view of nature and deep ecology. Now we have a whole new flourishing of the notion of interdependence that has been informed not only by these streams of Buddhism but also by various Western ideas of interdependence.

So there is a shift that happens over many centuries. There emerges the possibility of seeing the world both as a place of suffering and bondage and also as a place of liberation—a projection of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, like a training ground or a pure land, a place in which there is a sacred and wondrous hidden aspect in the ordinary things of the world. The Avatamsaka Sutra symbolizes this by wild visions of tiny universes in grains of sand or the pores of the Buddha's skin. The attitudes toward the world itself become more varied and complex. And then, when you get to the modern world, certain realities and concepts in the modern world serve like magnets that pull out particular ideas from the Buddhist tradition, leaving others behind. Interdependence is one of these ideas that has really been pulled out. Not the old idea of the twelve-link chain of dependent origination. That idea resonates with people who really immerse themselves in the Buddhist worldview, but when I try to explain it to my students, they don't get it right away. But when they read a paragraph by Thich Nhat Hanh about interdependence—how the paper is dependent on the sunshine, and the cloud, and the lumber worker, and all that—they immediately understand it.

Conditions right now in the world are such that interdependence is a prominent and obvious fact. Everything is connected through communications technology and through ease of travel. We know that if we screw up the environment over here, it can affect things on the other side of the world. So suddenly the image of Indra's net attains new significance; in fact, it has become one of the most prominent images and concepts in modern articulations of Buddhism, while it had nowhere near that prominence in the past, except in a particular Chinese Buddhist school.

I do think this pointing out of historical change and the relativity of cultural contexts can be very disturbing and destabilizing. It is not necessarily a comforting thought. But it is interesting that it is destabilizing in a way that Buddhism has been pointing out all along.