

MIND & REALITY

DAY TWO - TAPE 3 of 7 - PANEL ON MEDITATION

\*\*\*TAPE START\*\*\*

**CHRIS KELLEY**

00:00.02                    -you note, today's panels, unlike yesterday's, which were more focused on theory, we're looking now at applications of theory - what you might call methodology. And right now, we're turning to panel four - meditation.

00:00.19                    Much of the popular dialogue between science and Buddhism has focused solely on the ways in which mind (unintell) may be used to reduce stress and improve health. Far less attention has been paid to the ways in which such meditations facilitate reasoning and the introspective investigations of mind and reality.

00:00.36                    Members of this panel will look at how certain meditations that are specifically designed to analyze the nature of conscious experience-

\*\*\*SPEECH BREAK\*\*\*

00:00.44

-therapeutic as well as pedagogically useful in contemporary study. Professor Klein, our moderator for this panel, has been a Professor of Religious Studies at Bryce University since 1995 and Chair of the Department from 1995 to 1998. She is currently the recipient of a Ford Foundation Grant for multi-faceted project entitled, "Gender, Self and Well-being - Traditional Buddhism and Modern Western Culture, A Living Dialogue."

00:01.15

And is also founding director of Don Mountain, a center for contemplative study and practice in Houston, based in the Tibetan tradition and enriched by other traditions, as well. I now turn to Anne Klein. Thank you.

**ANNE KLEIN**

00:01.34

And welcome everyone to a wonderful panel, as I know from having read their papers and some knowledge of the participants, as well. Looking at meditation, its relationship to knowledge and

some broader historical contextualization, as well. Our target essayist is Mark Siderits, who is a Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Illinois State University. And we welcome him and his remarks.

**MARK SIDERITS**

00:02.11

Thank you. Ok, those of you who might have come in a little late this morning missed our wonderful organizer, Chris Kelley's, opening remarks. Chris was having a little difficulty getting his mouth in gear earlier this morning. And so, in addition to calling Robert Thurman a preventer instead of a presenter on one of yesterday's panels, he also at least to my ears sounded- seemed to be saying that I was not the moderator, but a martyr, on one of yesterday's panels, too.

00:02.55

Well, no I wasn't really feeling like a martyr yesterday, but maybe this morning I'm going to, because I hadn't- when I wrote the essay for our panel today, I hadn't realized that Alan Wallace

would be making the very interesting and provocative remarks that he did just now about contemplation, about meditation. So, here goes.

00:03.22

Ok. Is meditation a means of knowledge? Meditation is after all, an integral part of Buddhist practice. The question for our panel, I think, is whether it holds any lessons for us concerning the relation between mind and reality and how we can best come to know the nature of the world.

00:03.48

Now, I should say that by meditation in my remarks, I'm going to mean the sort of focused introspection that Alan Wallace was just describing for us. I don't mean all sorts of other practices that are also often included in what gets roughly called Buddhist meditation. Those can include, for instance, visualization practice, practice of projecting loving kindness throughout the world, various other forms of

practice that involve various disciplined ways of changing deeply entrenched habits.

00:04.30

What I'm going to be talking about is rather just the sort of focused introspection that I think plays an absolutely central role in the, what I will call, the Buddhist enlightenment project. Now, one often hears claims about the benefits of meditation for physiological and psychological well-being, even for one's success in business or tennis or what have you.

00:04.58

Well, these sorts of claims that we hear today have, in fact, a very long history. The classical Indian sources credit yogans (ph) with all sorts of supernormal powers. For instance, the ability to see things very, very far away. The ability to see very, very small things.

00:05.22

For instance, in Nyaya it's claimed one of these yogic perceptual abilities is the ability to see atoms. Ok. Something most of us obviously don't

have, we need to use special tools. The ability to remember past lives is also supposedly a yogic power, a power that is developed through engaging in meditational practice.

00:05.48

But, by and large, the Buddhist tradition has held these things, these supernormal powers that are developed, that can be developed through meditation, to be a distraction from the business at hand, which is attaining liberation from suffering. That is attaining nirvana. So, what role does meditation play in the Buddhist enlightenment project?

00:06.13

Well, my characterization of meditation and the role it plays in Buddhist practice overall is no doubt, going to be controversial. But that's nothing new. While most Buddhists agree that both philosophy and meditation are necessary for enlightenment, for attaining nirvana, release from suffering, there is a long history of real

tension between partisans of philosophy and partisans of meditation.

00:06.45

And within classical Indian institutionalized Buddhism, of course, there would have been, there were specialists in both. If you need to train a large body of new monks in both, then you're going to obviously divide up the labor and have some people who specialize in philosophy and others who specialize in meditation. But then you get these two classes of experts, in fact, dueling with one another.

00:07.15

Each side accusing the other of giving undue weight to their preferred practice. And so you get distortion. Well, I'm a philosopher by training and by occupation, so maybe I've simply got it all wrong. But, here at least is my understanding of the situation. The Buddhist enlightenment project is aimed at helping us overcome existential suffering by dissolving the

false assumption that there is an "I" whose life can have meaning and significance.

00:07.52

Ok. Existential suffering as most thoroughly crystallized in fear of death, realization of our own mortality, this sense of frustration, alienation, despair that can arise in response to recognition of our own mortality. But, of course, suffering runs deeper than that, that's just the signal instruments.

00:08.14

That's the point. Philosophical reasoning helps us see how our deep seated sense of interior subjectivity might not reflect reality, but instead result from processes of conceptual construction. The sense of an "I" is, in fact, the result of various conceptual impositions on reality and does not, in fact, reflect what's really there.

00:08.42

And this, by the way, is where Dan- we heard some reference made yesterday to Daniel Dennett's

notion of the self as the center of narrative gravity, which is clearly one way of making the point that the sense of an "I," the sense of self, is in fact a conceptual construction. Well, that fits quite well with the Buddhist account.

00:09.05

But, this is the role of philosophical reasoning in the project. Such reasoning can only take us so far. The point of meditation, I think, is to bring home to the practitioner in a very concrete and immediate way the fact that there is no one home.

00:09.25

We all know the difference between the sort of knowledge that can be called merely theoretical and the kind that can successfully disrupt deeply entrenched habits by being somehow more immediate than the merely theoretical kind.

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For instance, I knew for many years – I knew in that merely theoretical sense – that smoking can damage the heart and the lungs and do all sorts

of other bad things. To oneself as well as to others. But, it wasn't until I heard that wrong note on the echocardiogram that I quit. I quit, in fact, that very day.

00:10.14

Well, we can likewise know perfectly well that there is no enduring entity underlying the flow of mental states. David Hume presumably knew this. But such knowledge doesn't necessarily disrupt the habits forged from earliest childhood of thinking of such states as mine. And of thinking of this "me" as an ongoing project for which the events of this life have significance.

00:10.42

Hume noticed that when he left the study and went to play backgammon with friends he also left behind whatever conviction he had attained concerning the unreality of the self. Meditation represents, I think, a way of seeing in a concrete and immediate way that the general truth applies in one's own case. In meditation, one learns to dissect one's mental acts and thereby

see that they aren't what we take them to be, namely the performances of a mental agent.

00:11.16

To see that beneath the surface appearance of a unified seer and doer there is a large variety of impersonal mental events in complex causal interaction. It is this experience, the experience attained in meditation, that presumably brings about liberation from the illusion of a self and the suffering that is engendered by that illusion.

00:11.41

Now, this is actually, I think, part of a larger pan-Indian phenomenon. Indian epistemologists in general agree that perception is the foremost means of knowledge. And, they thought this is so because in perception, we are more directly in contact with the fact that's being cognized than we are when we employ such relatively indirect means as inference and testimony.

00:12.13

So, in perception our awareness of the fact in question is more vivid. Now, I think what we have in the case of meditation and the use it is put to in the Buddhist contemplative tradition is precisely an instance of that. Meditation is designed to make more vivid the truths that we first discover through philosophical reasoning, that strictly speaking there is no one home. Dissolving the sense of a "me" for whom the events in this life can have meaning and significance.

00:12.53

Ok. So, what does this tell us about the role of meditation in finding out important truths about the mind and reality, which is after all the topic of our conference. Well, it might suggest that the Buddhist meditation tradition represents a 2,500 year old mind science to which neuroscience should look for insights. And I think we heard earlier this morning in Alan Wallace's wonderful presentation a very

interesting and insightful plea on behalf of that, just that position.

00:13.34

Now, the thought here would be that meditative techniques are designed to enhance one's introspective powers. In fact, this is exactly what we heard Alan Wallace saying. So that what one observes in meditation more accurately reflects mental reality than do the deliverances of ordinary folk psychology.

00:13.58

And, I should say something here about- ok. Folk psychology versus mental reality as presumably exhibited in meditational practice. In this respect I would claim the Buddhist tradition is, in fact, reductionist. It is not reductionist in the sense in which we've been hearing the word reduction used over the course of this conference. Not mind-body, not physicalist reductionist.

00:14.33

In fact, for the most part, the Buddhist tradition is- maintains a kind of ontological dualism. It's not a substance dualism. It's not saying there are two distinct kinds of substance - thinking substance and extended substance - but it is a kind of - ok, I'll use some philosophical shorthand here - a trope theoretical dualist. There are two kinds of tropes, that is quality particulars. There are the rupa ones - those correspond roughly to what we think of as the material world - and then there are the nama ones, which correspond roughly to what we think of as mental phenomenon.

00:15.10

Ok. And you can construct all of reality out of those tropes. But they are, in fact, two distinct kinds of tropes. Ok. So, they are dualist in that respect, but they are nonetheless reductionist in another important sense, namely reductionist about persons.

00:15.27                   The underlying idea here is that the person is a whole made of parts. And, it's only because it's useful for us to think of all those parts all working together as one thing, the person, that we in fact get this - according to the Buddhists - misleading sense of there being a me who is the author of this narrative, the narrative of my life.

00:15.58                   But, the claim is, that is a mere conceptual fiction. The ultimate underlying reality is a reality of thoroughly impersonal physical and mental states or physical and mental events in complex causal interaction. And, the point here of both Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist meditational practice is to get in touch, get in clear touch with that underlying purely impersonal reality and thereby see through the mere conventional reality of the person, me.

00:16.39                   See it as a fiction, a useful fiction no doubt, but a fiction nonetheless. Not in our first class

ontology. Only in the second tier. Back benchers, ontological back benchers. Ok. So, that's how I see the overall Buddhist project and the relation of meditation to philosophy in that project. And now, once again, the question is could meditation be somehow in a serious, significant alliance with neuroscience as a kind of tool to be used in the cognitive science lab.

00:17.19

Well, perhaps. But I think that conclusion may be just a tad premature. For two reasons. The first has to do with the obvious point that introspection is methodologically problematic in the science context. Now, hang on, because I have a little bit more to say about that. Ok. Ok. Here's the first pass. There just isn't any reliable way of getting independent confirmation of the results.

00:17.49

But this is not the so-called privacy problem. It's a deeper problem. Because ok, someone can object to this point, by saying that Buddhist

meditation techniques have proven reliable and effective for millennia. Well, the difficulty is that this fact alone does not rule out the possibility of confabulation. Indeed, it's easy to see how mastery of Abhidharma philosophy, the kind of philosophy is typically done as a precursor to engaging in meditation, traditionally, how mastery of that philosophy would prime the meditator to individuate the mental states of their inner lives in terms of the categories of that tradition.

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And those categories, it's well-known, arose out of the efforts of early Buddhist commentators to make sense of the array of technical terms that the Buddha used in describing meditational practice. So, the typology of mental states that's at the heart of the Buddhist meditation tradition rests on the assumption that the Buddha's teachings give an accurate mapping of the mental landscape.

00:19.06                   And, so there seems to be an implicit appeal to the Buddha's omniscience in these matters and that doesn't fit well with the methodologies of the natural sciences, which require universal fallibilism. There's nothing that anyone can't be wrong about.

00:19.27                   But, there's another problem, another way of getting at the difficulty of confabulation, which is that in fact, different Abhidharma traditions individuate the ultimate mental states that one discovers in meditation differently. And, not surprisingly, those who embark on meditation having mastered one particular system of Abhidharma will, in fact, surprise, surprise, discover just the mental states that that tradition describes as their bedrock atomic mental states.

00:20.04                   Another tradition, which individuates things slightly differently will lead to meditators, in fact, seeing their mental reality in its terms.

And then, of course, when we look beyond the Buddhist tradition to other yogic traditions in classical Indian culture, we're going to find yet different maps of the fundamentals of the mind. This is the real difficulty.

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We have a problem of intersubjective agreement. Now, I should add that even if this is an insuperable problem, it might still be fine as a technique. Even if confabulation is a difficulty in making good on the claim that in meditation, we discover how the mind it genuinely is in itself. It might nonetheless do the job for which it's designed. And here's the analogy.

00:21.06

That echocardiogram note that I heard was, in fact, a false positive. There was nothing wrong with my heart. But it did make me quit smoking. Ok. Ok. So, this is one problem with supposing there can be this full-scale collaboration between the Buddhist meditation tradition and neuroscience.

00:21.33

But, there's a second and deeper reason to perhaps be skeptical about the claim that Buddhist meditation tradition can be directly incorporated into cognitive science. The argument for doing so seems to depend on the idea that meditative techniques enable one to see mental states as they really are in themselves. Stripped bare of what the folk psychology of common sense projects onto them.

00:21.59

The philosophers of the Abhidharma school would embrace this idea, in fact. They claim that this is why they think meditation works as a tool in attaining liberation, attaining nirvana. Because you are getting beneath the surface appearance of our mental states as being the results of this agent who is in charge and finding the purely impersonal reality by dissolving the big thing into its little components.

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But- and so you are getting in touch with objective reality, reality as it is independent of the concepts that we happen to use. Ok. But, not the philosophers of the Madhyamaka school- Madhyamaka is, of course, the one big exception to this Buddhist reductionist project that I've been discussing so far. For them, for Madhyamaka, the notion of self-individuating entities, the notion that there is one right way to carve up the world is incoherent.

00:23.04

This, I think, is the point of the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness. The doctrine that nothing has its nature intrinsically. And it would seem to follow from this doctrine that there can be no such thing as a theory neutral way of observing the mind and its states. The only way to observe the mind and its states is by presupposing some theory or other.

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This, I think, is the simplest, straightforward consequence of the Madhyamaka doctrine of

emptiness. I think it is because it does follow from the doctrine of emptiness that there are things there to be observed, things with determinant natures only given the sorts of interests that inform a theory.

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What one finds when using the powers of introspection developed in meditation is determined, in part, by the interests that are reflected in Abhidharma theory. So, what one finds in meditation is not necessarily the nature of the mind in itself, as it is independently of our interests, the concepts that we happen to use.

00:24.17

Now, to this, I immediately hasten to add that the same thing goes for science. Same thing goes for the observations used to test theories in cognitive science, for instance. For any science for that matter. If Madhyamaka's right and all things are empty of intrinsic nature, then the observations used in the construction and

confirmation of scientific theories must likewise depend on some going theory or other.

00:24.49

Cognitive science is no more able to show us the mind as it is in itself than is meditation. If the Madhyamaka arguments are sound, there is no such thing as how the mind is in itself. Now, of course, this may make it seem as if well, maybe there can be a collaboration between cognitive science and Buddhist meditation. If no enterprise can claim, can lay claim to ultimate epistemic privilege when it comes to discerning the nature of the mind, what reason can there be to deny that the observations derived from the Buddhist mind science are scientifically respectable and worth the attention of cognitive science.

00:25.29

Well, in principle, none. But, I suspect that the two theories are unlikely to mesh particularly well. For the interests that determine the context of Abhidharma theorizing are quite unlike those that generate the scientific context. The

former have to do with how best to live our lives. The latter have to do with technologies of material transformation.

00:24.54 Now, that's not to denigrate either enterprise, it's just to point out that they are, in fact, generated by rather disparate interests. And, so, it's not clear to me that the two kinds of enterprises are going to mesh particularly well.

00:26.11 Ok, but this brings me to a third point. I myself as a philosopher think that the jury is still out on the possibility of a strictly physicalist reduction, reductionist cognitive science. Ok. Can mental states and can cognitive science, in fact, work with a strictly physicalist ontology? I think the jury's still out on that.

00:26.40 Physicalism may be on its way. Reductive physicalism may be on its way to winning the battle over mental causation, but the hard problem of qualia remains. And I agree. It's a

hard problem. It's not clear to me exactly how that problem should be solved. The problem, in other words, of bridging the so-called explanatory gap between accounts of one's brain states, one's neurophysiology and the how it feels to me when I see something red. Ok

00:27.10

Bridging the gap between those two kinds of descriptions. Well, the question I want to raise is not who is right and who is wrong about physicalism. I think further work needs to be done to answer that question, but rather whether Buddhists, as Buddhists, have an interest in this debate and how it comes out.

00:27.35

Many would claim that they do. Many would say that the Buddhist project is incompatible with physicalism. And they might point to the role of meditation in the Buddhist project as proof of this. Now, of course, there will also be those who will point to the notions of karma and rebirth.

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And claim that those turn out to be- would be ruled out if physicalism turned out to be true. I'm not so sure that that's true. At least it is, in principle, possible to account for karmic causation through some sort of physicalist causal machinery. It also, given our current knowledge of- in the natural sciences, it seems unlikely, but it's not, in principle, ruled out.

00:28.19

But, the question here is what about meditation. The argument would be that this role, the role of meditation, depends on the irreducibility of the mental states that are investigated and analyzed in meditation. If physicalism is true, then those mental states are reducible to strictly physical events of some sort or other. In other words, ok, in meditation I isolate particular mental states like an individual act of attending, an individual samskara, individual volition. I break down what seems to be a unified conscious field into its atomic components, none of which is, in

fact, understood as the agent, the thing that's in charge. Ok.

00:29.09

That's what one does in meditation. That's how it's supposed to work. But, the argument would be, if physicalism is true, then those mental states that I've succeeded in isolating are, in fact, further reducible. I've reduced what looks like one thing - the conscious agent - to many things, many individual conscious states, but those aren't the ultimate- what's ultimately real either, it turns out. Those are mere conceptual constructions, too, because if physicalism is true those are reducible to neurophysiological events of some description or other. Ok.

00:29.41

That would be the argument for claiming that a physicalist outcome to this debate in cognitive science and philosophy of mind would, in fact, be a disaster for Buddhists. Because then, meditation could not reveal the final truth about the mind. And thus, it could not do the work it's

supposed to do of undermining our implicit belief in the self. Ok. That's the argument that someone might make as to why Buddhism does have a stake in this debate. Ok.

00:30.12

Well, I think it will be clear from what I've already said what I think a Madhyamaka would say in response to this. Given the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, there is no such thing as the final truth about the mind. And here, I liked what Owen Flanagan had to say yesterday morning in talking about the- introducing the concept of a naturalistic, imperialistic ontology, ok.

00:30.44

Supposing that the ontology that goes along with a naturalist physicalism is, in fact, the final truth. This is all that there really is. And, of course, on the other side of this debate we have people who are natural- who are dualistically imperialist in their ontology. There are, in addition to these physical things there are these

non-physical things, as well. And that's the ultimate nature of reality.

00:31.12

Well, of course, the Madhyamaka would dismiss both sides in that debate. There is no such thing as how things really, truly are. At least, that's my understanding of the doctrine of emptiness. In fact, for Madhyamaka, all this passionate debate over the truth of physicalism would just serve to reinforce their conviction that metaphysical disputes involve subtle forms of self construction.

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When someone pounds the table and says there's more to me than just this body, what are they doing? They are pounding the table. And what are they revealing through that gesture? That they think the truth is on my side. Ok. And that's a subtle form of self-construction. Well, not so good from a Buddhist perspective.

00:32.04 But, leaving Madhyamaka aside, I think even Abhidharma could agree that there is no reason for Buddhists to prefer one outcome over another in the debate over physicalism. Or at least, there isn't any role that I- any reason I can see that derives from the role that meditation plays in this Buddhist liberation project.

00:32.28 For that role depends on the efficacy of meditation in undermining the seeming reality of the categories of folk psychology. And here, I would actually allude to Susan Carey's very interesting discussion yesterday morning, yesterday afternoon, talking about research that reveals a core knowledge of intentional agency.

00:32.55 Where that fits very neatly into the Abhidharma project is it reveals to us a foundation for folk psychology which sees each of us as an intentional agent. Ok. This is the equipment that human infants come into the world with that explains how folk psychology generates this

feeling. It gives the infant the basic resources on the basis of which through developmental process, the- we come to think of ourselves as persons and thus, come to have that sense of agency of being a subject.

00:33.38

Well, of course, the role of meditation is to get beneath the surface of that, perhaps, innate or, perhaps, environmental, socially constructed or perhaps a little bit of both folk psychology that the Buddha says is, in fact, the ultimate cause of suffering.

00:33.59

Meditation does this by showing how the subject of cognition can be reduced to a set of causally related impersonal mental events. Now, if physicalism is true, then those mental events will allow a further reduction. But this does not threaten the success of the reduction. If meditation succeeds in showing us why it would seem as if there is someone home when there isn't, then it's done its job.

00;34.27

And this, I might add, this anti-homuncularist's job - dissolving that sense of there being a little person inside me who is the real me, ok. Getting rid of the homuncule, a little person. This is also common to the natural sciences and this is why, in fact, there seems to be this natural affinity between Buddhist projects and natural scientific projects.

00:34.58

The possibility of further reduction does not call into question the success of meditation performing its job. After all, no one questions the reduction of developmental biology to biochemistry on the grounds that biochemistry is further reducible to quantum mechanics, ok. We can show that the property of life is not a genuinely emergent property because we can reduce biology to developmental biology and that can be reduced to biochemistry and that, in turn, can be reduced to organic chemistry and that can, in the end, be reduced to quantum mechanics.

00:35.35

Ok. So, we can explain these- the emergent- the seeming emergence of these higher level properties in terms of the ability to reduce them to explain what's going on at this level in terms of facts about what's going on at this lower level, but ok, you got life up here. You've got this biological property. You reduce that to biochemistry. Well, biochemistry is further reducible - to organic chemistry.

00:36.00

But that doesn't mean that the reduction of these vitalist emergent properties hasn't succeeded if we can go from this level down to a lower level. Even if that lower level is not the bottom level, you still succeeded in reducing, ok. So, even if the kinds of mental states that we can get in touch with, we can find and isolate through meditation turn out not to be the final bottom level - assuming that there is one - still, the fact that it is a successful reduction is enough.

That's all that Abhidharma needs for meditation to play its role.

00:36.42

The only possible threat I can see to the Abhidharma reduction is that physicalism might give us clues that the ways in which meditation, Buddhist meditation, individuates mental states isn't, in fact, giving us access to a natural kind.

00:37.06

Ok. Oops. It's so hard. Ok. One last very quick point. I hope it's clear that nothing I've said so far has any implications for the neuroscientific investigation of meditational states. That investigation is something I think Buddhists should welcome since it might lead to new techniques for attaining liberation from suffering.

00:37.29

The question I've tried to address is whether Buddhist meditation can be more than a new objective investigation for brain science.

Whether the two can enter into an epistemic partnership. As I said, because I'm a philosopher, my views on that question may be all wrong. If so, I expect my fellow panel members and maybe some of you in the audience will set me straight. I look forward to hearing what you all have to say. Thank you.

\*\*\*APPLAUSE\*\*\*

**ANNE KLEIN**

00:37.59

Thank you, Mark, for starting us off on this wonderful quest about the relationship between meditation and knowledge. And we continue along in the same vein with Roger Jackson, who teaches the Religions of South Asia at Carleton College and who had the impertinence to ask the question, famously now, whether enlightenment is possible. And he is now going to ask what good is meditation.

**ROGER JACKSON**

00:38.32

Thank you, Anne, and thank you to everybody who's put this conference together. I've learned a tremendous amount and I'm afraid I won't be able