

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

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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

to contribute anywhere near what I've learned,
but I'll do my little bit here, anyway.

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The notion of a kind of target essay strikes me as a wonderful metaphor and as I was searching about within my own quiver to see what arrows I might launch at our target essayist, I, perhaps taking the metaphor a little too literally, thought of my favorite Mahasiddha or great adept from the tantric tradition in India, namely Saraha. And I'm gonna start out with a couple of short quotes from Saraha's treasury of dohas.

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Saraha says, "Meditation. Why look for freedom in a lie?" And again, he says, "You're deceived by meditation, so why meditate?" Goes on to say, "Mind is unstained, don't taint it with meditation." I'm not really, in fact, going to spend a great deal of time trying to unpack this. I think there's a bit of irony in Saraha's approach, as there often is in things that he says because he, in fact, is seen as the

progenitor of a tradition within Indian and Tibetan Buddhism that goes by the name of the Great Seal or Mahamudra, chak-gya chenpo in Tibetan, that is profoundly meditative in its approach to the Buddhist path.

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Though it is worth noting that even within Mahamudra there are stages of meditation - in quotes - with terms like "non-meditation." So, there's something interesting going on there, but as I say, I'm not really going to focus on that so much. I think of it more as a kind of beginning koan for me and, perhaps, for the rest of us because what Saraha does and what I'm hoping to do a little bit here is to - I don't know if problematize is the word, exactly - but to complicate a little bit our picture of meditation.

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Primarily, though not exclusively, by doing so in terms that I would describe as sort of cultural historical. I will have some philosophical things

to say, as well, and I want to certainly acknowledge that Mark Siderits's essay stimulated all of this, even if some of the things that I say don't address as specifically as he might have liked some of the points that he's made there. But his essay is a wonderful take-off point.

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Because, as I sat down to write these comments last weekend, thinking I would just write a few pages, kind of modeled on Mark's, you know, wonderfully concise and succinct essay and ended up then with ten single-spaced pages. There's no way I'm going to be able to say everything that I said in the piece that's online.

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I'm gonna spend just a very few minutes talking about what I might describe as some kind of cultural historical issues that I think are at least worth putting into the hopper in our discussion here. And this is to try to contextualize something about meditation, both as

a topic of fascination in the contemporary world and as a topic within the Buddhist world that has been by no means simple or undisputed.

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Anyway, as I say, I'm only gonna make a few remarks about that and then focus a little more on some remarks that perhaps are somewhat more philosophical, that try to get - from at least one angle - at Mark's question about, from his title - is meditation a means of knowledge.

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On the sort of cultural historical side, I want to really make two major points. The first of these is to say what I think some of you have read one place or another and if you've forgotten it, I just want to remind you about it. Donald Lopez, perhaps, most famously and publicly mentioned this in a wonderful little tricycle piece that he had a few years back on the ten most common misconceptions about Buddhism.

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And the point that he made - he had had his class discover this in the course of a term at Michigan, I guess - is most Buddhists don't meditate, have not meditated. We tend, in our construction of Buddhism in the West, to assume that meditation is absolutely central to the tradition and has been central for all Buddhists at all places and times. And certainly, there's absolutely no denying that the normative tradition places meditation on- in a very, very important role, particularly when we're concerned with matters of soteriology, with questions of how one achieves enlightenment.

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There's no doubt that meditation is quite basic there. And I think- but I think that the other point to be made here is that historically, Buddhism constructed itself as a social institution in terms of the monastic and the lay, most basically. And the presumption through most texts and most places and times, I think it's fair to say, is that meditation was properly the

province of monastics and for laypeople, there were a variety of virtuous practices – the generation of virtue and of generosity, particularly toward the monastic Sangha, it might be noted.

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And basically that- it was presumed that- and I think this was evident from the kinds of things that Alan has talked about and written about and many people are aware of, as well, that meditation is not easy. It's not the kind of thing that you can simply and unproblematically integrate with lay life. And I think the presumption for most Buddhists in most places and times was that laypeople didn't have the time, interest, ability or whatever it may be.

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Now, the picture's more complicated than that, certainly. There are instances in the texts that we read of, of laypeople who were meditators – both in Pali traditions and in Mahayana traditions. And particularly when you get to

somebody like Saraha who is a layman, the tantric traditions, I think the boundaries begin to get a little bit more problematic. But still, this kind of distinction has been very basic in-

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So, I think we have to understand the current placing of meditation as kind of the center of attention that Buddhism gets within the liberal arts and sciences to be a function, in part, of Buddhism's encounter with modernity. And you can find in both Asian and certainly in Western settings plenty of instances in which the encounter between traditional Asian - particularly Buddhist - ideas and practices and modern ideas, practices, science, all, you know-

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Colonialism was an important agent of this in Asia. One we can't really go through all the sort of history and sociology of this, but what you find is that in the phenomenon that some people have called Buddhist modernism and others have actually called Protestant Buddhism - a

wonderful, if controversial, term - that the boundaries- the traditional boundaries between lay and monastic began to break down. Such that, for instance, you far more commonly nowadays will find Buddhist monks or nuns who are involved in what we might generally regard as social work, political work, commitment to various causes.

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This was not, this was not usually part of the profile of a Buddhist monk or nun. And conversely we find that - especially starting in the 19th century in places like Sri Lanka and Japan as modernization came in - that meditation was something that laypeople began to think they could actually do.

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And so, I think we have to understand ourselves as people interested in meditation as being part of this historical current. I see very few robes in this room and yet presumably, most people in this room are quite interested in meditation. I suspect most people in this room have attempted

to meditate or perhaps meditate quite regularly and perhaps quite successfully.

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But, we are part of a- we are a function of a particular, and very interesting, historical moment. That's all I'll say about that. First, sort of social historical point. The second social historical point is just to point out very quickly that one has to be- and I think Thubten Jinpa will certainly address this far better than I can, but I want to address this from a- perhaps a slightly different angle than his.

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Namely, that meditation is- to have it as a single word is itself a slightly problematic move because it is within Buddhism and it was within Indian culture a very, very complex phenomenon. And it was a matter- it's not as if, you know, Bob Thurman was talking yesterday, quite rightly, about the different levels of education, you know, starting with sort of memorization and

study of the texts and then sort of philosophical dispute and argumentation, rationality.

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And then there's meditation and it's as if meditation was off in this realm that was not touched by disputes at all. But, if you read the Buddhist texts from any era and any place and time, it's quite clear that people were squabbling about meditation all the time. The Buddha, if we take the Pali cannon as being, quote, the words of the Buddha - and that's itself, of course, a very difficult problem -

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but if we take that- those as acceptable, that the Buddha himself was very critical of a variety of meditative techniques that he found in the culture around him. After all, as I think Alan pointed out this morning, the Buddha after he left the palace went off and tried a couple of techniques, mastered them thoroughly and thought no, this doesn't do it.

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And the texts are full of critiques of a variety of usually not- of non-Buddhist teachers who have, you know, for instance claimed to have direct knowledge of reality, but really don't. Obviously, the stakes were high in all of this because meditation was already in the culture understood to be a possible method for attaining spiritual liberation, which was after all - as Mark puts it - the enlightenment project was the project for most spiritual teachers in the fourth, whatever, century BCE India.

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But it's not just that Buddhists were and are critical of non-Buddhist meditators and meditative techniques. They will often go off on that, but they have had disagreements among themselves from the beginning. It- there are- there is, of course, profoundly woven into Buddhist literature the sense that there are basically two complementary types of meditation that one ought to practice and master.

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Meditation that is primarily for the purpose of concentrating or focusing or stilling the mind and concentration that is involved- may or may not be more discursive, but that is for the purpose of our gaining greater insight into the nature of things.

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There are interesting studies that- You know, perhaps scholars sometimes are always, are looking for tensions and disagreements and not for unity and I think I certainly fall prey to that at times, I must admit. But, there have been some very interesting studies by scholars about these two sides of Buddhist meditation - both contextualizing them within the pre-Buddhist meditative traditions of India, where the sort of concentration techniques, you know, and insight-based techniques, if not with specifically Buddhist insight, can be found in earlier literature like the Upanishads.

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So, you have these. And there's- there can be questions raised and scholars and philosophers have raised questions whether there is a complete compatibility or can be a complete compatibility between these two different types of meditation. Certainly, most Buddhists would say, yes, there is and can be, but it's not self-evident necessarily.

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It's always been interesting to me that in the first iteration of the Buddha's so-called first sermon - the sutra and the turning of the wheel of dhamma or dharma - the origin of suffering is ascribed to craving and not overtly, at least, to ignorance. And there's some interesting material in there that one could get at in terms of meditation techniques that are more intent, it seems, on suppressing things like craving and others that are more intent, perhaps, on suppressing ignorance.

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Anyway, just one more very quick point to make about this, because I don't want to take too much time and I do want to get onto the more philosophical, in quotes, part of my talk. And that is simply to say that there- Buddhists have disputed about these matters and if you sort of follow the history of Buddhist discourse about meditation down through the years, many of you have heard, for instance, of things like the sudden gradual debate in the East Asian traditions, starting in China, but well- arguably starting in India, but certainly quite well-known in both Chinese and Japanese settings.

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Or something like the famous Samya debate in Tibet where Indian pundits and a Chinese Chan or Zen master debated over, among other things, the nature of meditation. And all I'm trying to say with this is that Buddhists, though they lay out basics of meditation and there is a kind of broad agreement on the categories and types - the order

in which one should do it, what gets priority - all these things are very much in dispute.

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And so, it's by no means a simple matter just to say Buddhist meditation, as if this were a unitary phenomenon. It's a very, very complex one. I would incidentally, probably, locate Saraha somewhere in these debates over, for instance, sudden and gradual approaches to liberation, as well as to, you know, the question of what sort of meditation has priority.

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Anyway, I'm told I'm- got only five minutes here, so I'll try to get down to what is perhaps the philosophically slightly more interesting part of my remarks. And this is to return basically to a series of very quick meditations on Mark Siderits's title question - is meditation a means of knowledge. I think one thing to note here - and certainly Mark is aware of this - if we were to translate the phrase "means of knowledge" back into Sanskrit as "pramana"-

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-and this is, in fact, often an English translation for this very important term for the means of valid cognition or avenues of valid cognition. There is no such thing as a bhavana pramana. There is no meditation listed as a means of knowledge. But this is merely a technical point, because it's quite clear that the various sorts of things that happen in meditation to meditators do come to be regarded as valid means of knowledge.

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They would in some cases be found under the category of yogi pratyaksa or yogic perception, which we've had mentioned a couple of times. Some of them might be regarded as instances of mental perception, which is another type of perception. And, in fact, if you were going to talk about discursive and analytical types of meditation, you could say that meditation also could involve something like proper inference, which is itself also a pramana or valid means of knowledge.

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What I want to do primarily is to try to delineate what seem to me five different levels of claims about knowledge through meditation. And I'm gonna sort of- they're gonna go in, I suppose, sort of ascending order of cultural difference and problematicity for people who come from a largely Western cultural context.

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And I want to say that the first level that I've sort of identified for the types of knowledge that might come to us from meditation - obviously again, a topic of Alan's talk and something many other people are talking about here - is what you might call the neurophysiological. And this is simply the claim that through the examination of- with accepted scientific techniques of a variety of different ways- sorry, of a variety of different people who engage in meditation practice, we can get information about how the brain works and it may tell us things about how the brain works that we didn't know before.

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I think Richard Davidson's research and research of other people, as well, who are involved in this area are beginning to show that this is a kind of knowledge that we can get from the- in effect, the fact that people meditate. And to the degree that, perhaps, the things we learn about the brain from neurophysiological studies tell us something about our- about empathy or other kinds of social values, there is some good in this that goes quite beyond the sort of knowledge that's to be gained from it.

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The second level of knowledge, it seems to me, that is claimed for meditation is what I would call the psychological. And this is the claim that physiology aside and with tradition Buddhist claims of- metaphysical claims in abeyance, the practice of Buddhist meditation techniques gives us first-hand knowledge of our own cognitive and affective lives.

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And the ability to control this through meditation will both provide us with information and again, perhaps, some social good, as well. The third level is perhaps slightly related to the psychological and I- but I would call it the epistemological level. And this is the assertion that physiology, psychology and Buddhist metaphysics notwithstanding, reports about the nature and functions of the mind conveyed by meditators on the basis of their experience are a legitimate source of knowledge about these topics.

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And I think this is the argument that Alan has been making and I think many people have made this argument in a variety of ways. And there are- I think there are sort of harder and softer versions of this kind of claim. I think, actually, Alan's is a very open and a kind of accommodating and softer version of the harder claims in what once famously was called the Buddhist empiricism thesis.

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And this is the, you know, the sort of argument - Buddhism is by god a scientific experiment. And, you know, you had a hypothesis that enlightenment is possible and you've got a technique that you can use, which is like 20 years of meditation and you find out at the end whether your hypothesis was correct.

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This, I think, is a little more troubling and I tend to sympathize with Mark in his suspicion of this. All three of these first that I'm describing - the neurophysiological, the psychological, the epistemological - I think are probably unproblematic for most of us. I want to just, in closing, point very quickly to two other levels of claims that are made more by tradition and by traditionalists than by modern people.

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And these are first of all, what I would describe as the metaphysical claim. And by metaphysical I mean both in an epistemological and in a sort of

ontological sense that is the claim that in fact, Buddhist meditation does allow you to see things that are beyond our ordinary ken. I just want to very quickly point out that in the classic accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment, he is said to have gained three knowledges on the night of his enlightenment.

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The first of these turns out to be the retro-cognitive ability to see infinitely into all of his past lives. The second is the clairvoyant ability to gaze around him in the cosmos and see exactly why beings are born, beings suffer and beings die. Clearly, if this is the kind of thing that meditation gets you, there are claims here that go considerably beyond what most of us tend to assume about the world.

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And, you know, I would go further and say that there are- when you begin looking into the literature on meditation, the claims that are made for meditation and what it can do for you,

it definitely begins to push a great deal at our sense of the boundaries between, quote, mind and, quote, reality. Just leave that at that.

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The final claim, and I'm not gonna detail this much, but it is important, is the transformative claim or transformational claim. And that is that meditation actually turns you into a different sort of being. And, in fact, Buddhism does insist in most of its classic traditions that when you gain a direct insight into the nature of reality on the platform or basis of a concentrated mind, you are no longer an ordinary being. You're an arya or noble or holy being.

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And the fundamental notion here is that there is something you can know, if you know it in the right way - which is meditatively or directly - that actually changes thoroughly what you are and who you are. And it, you know, there's a great deal, I think, of philosophical interest, but I

think a great deal that is philosophically
problematic in these sorts of claims -

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that knowing in a particular way will actually
change the sort of being we are. I don't deny
that, of course, our knowledge affects who we are
in all sorts of ways. But, there seems to me a
pretty strong claim involved here. At least in
the classic sources. And I think that we at least
have to sort of respect the fact that the classic
sources make these very, very strong claims.

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And, of course, the claims go all the way up to
the notion that once you get to the end of all of
this, you're omniscient. Pretty- in a sense,
pretty close to the omniscience that has always
been ascribed to the, say, the Judeo-Christian
God. You know, there- again, I'm pretty much
gonna leave it there. Can maybe pick up with some
other points later, but just, you know, to say
that within the whole compass of meditation, you
know, disputes quite aside, there are so many

different sorts of meditative states that are described in the tradition.

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And, you know, both in terms of the possible scientific interests these have, as well as in the sorts of philosophical problems that claims about these experiences have, that there's still a great deal to be discussed. Thank you.

APPLAUSE

ANNE KLEIN

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Thank you so much, Roger. And we continue with this investigation into knowledge with Thubten Jinpa, who received his geshe lama degree from Ganden Shartse and went on to get a PhD at Cambridge University and is now teaching at McGill and who will further refine this investigation by asking the question of whether meditation leads to knowledge of mental states.

THUBTEN JINPA

01:02.02

Thank you. I've actually written a text in response to the target essay that Mark Siderits has beautifully presented and I'm not going to