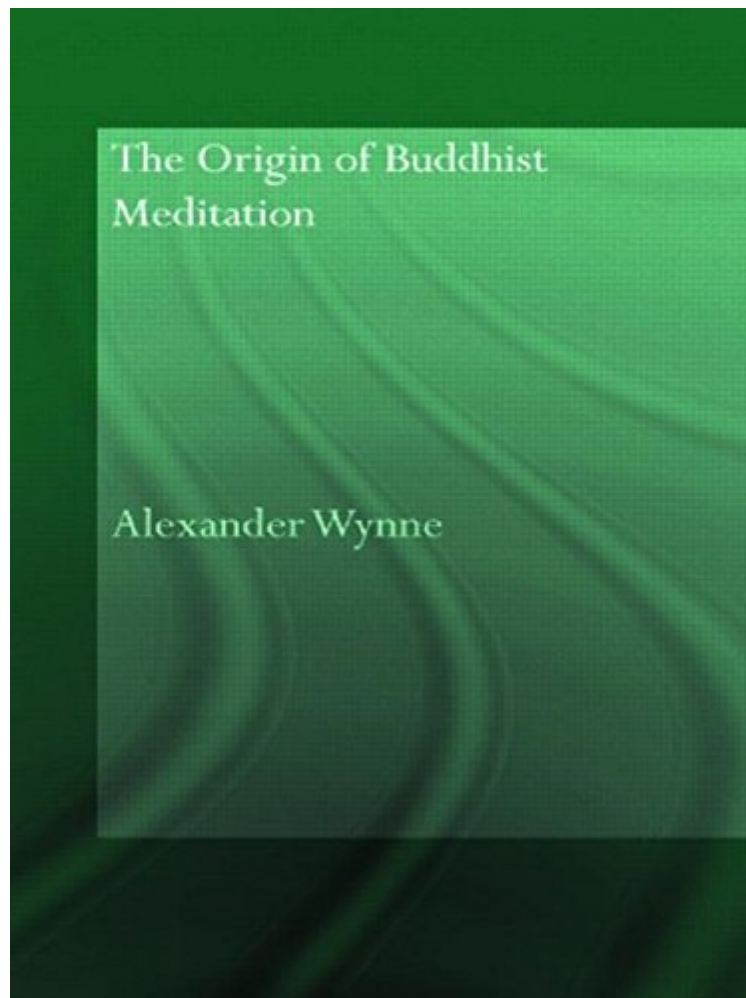


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## The Origin of Buddhist Meditation (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism)

Alexander Wynne

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#2777641 in Books Alexander Wynne 2007-06-08 2009-04-29Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.21 x .42 x 6.14l, .59 #File Name: 041554467X184 pagesThe Origin of Buddhist Meditation | File size: 40.Mb

**Alexander Wynne : The Origin of Buddhist Meditation (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Origin of Buddhist Meditation (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism):

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful. Sometimes difficult going, but worth itBy Craig ShoemakeI found this an extremely thought-provoking, occasionally riveting, speculative account of the Buddha's life before he was the Buddha, though it was also heavy going at times. Wynne's fundamental thesis is that by closely examining, through linguistic and comparative textual analysis, the earliest Buddhist scriptures, it is possible to not only detect earlier and later strata of material, but to actually catch the historical Buddha in action.Wynne tells you what's on his mind right

up front: "The biggest problem in Buddhist Studies is that nobody knows what the Buddha taught" (1). While I actually don't agree with this statement, it is fine as an operational standpoint or working hypothesis. Indeed, it is the justification for Wynne's entire project (with which I do agree), and if you want a magnifying lens view of the Dhamma, Wynne is a good guide. He is to the point about what he intends to do: "In this book I will reconsider the problem ["of establishing a relationship between early Buddhist doctrine and historical fact"]. I will attempt to prove that facts about the Buddha's early life are historically authentic and can be used to identify some of his teachings in the early literature. The historical facts in question concern the mysterious figures who are said to have taught meditation to the Buddha-to-be (the Bodhisatta), Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. I will claim that the primary text in which this account is contained, the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, is probably the earliest and most historically valuable biographical tract in the early Buddhist literature. This being the case, it is quite likely that the Bodhisatta really was taught meditation by these two men. This text does not say anything about the content of the earliest Buddhist teachings, but I will use it to provide a historical background to early Buddhist thought in another way. I will attempt to show correspondences between the early literature on the two teachers and some of the speculations contained in the philosophical literature of early Brahminism. By this means I will try to reconstruct the philosophical presuppositions of the two teachers' meditative practices. This will lead to a much improved understanding of the teachings that the Bodhisatta rejected and thus, I will claim, some idea of his intellectual development" (2-3). I actually believe he accomplishes most, if not all, of the above. There are trials and tribulations along the way though, interspersed with sections of wonderful insightfulness and interest, and these--the good and the bad--are what I'll be talking about in this review. First the good: You can learn a lot of really cool stuff from this book! Wynne is a skillful detective, and he leads you step by step via meticulous analysis of the texts, their words and their histories, to ferret out clues to the Buddha's life story. Consider a neat little revelation he offers in the introduction. Starting with an insight Richard Gombrich offered concerning jokes and puns attributed to the Buddha ("Are jokes ever composed by committees?") (2), he goes on to point out that even the Vinaya's monastic laws can be sources of historical insight: "...one of the rules in the Bhikkhu-patimokkha forbids the teaching of the dhamma 'word to word' to a layman. From this evidence we cannot conclude that such things never happened... However, in stipulating that the teaching out not to be 'word for word' (padaso), the rule indirectly indicates the manner of teaching the dhamma to ordained monastics... and implies that Suttas were transmitted 'word for word' even in the earliest period, thus raising the possibility that some of the Buddha's teachings, and perhaps even his words, have been preserved verbatim" (7). I offer this as an example of the sort of deductive textual analysis Wynne employs, and which, it seems to me, yields much fruit. The book's chief focus, as noted, concerns the two teachers the bodhisatta studied under before his enlightenment, the meditation masters Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. Personally, I've never had any doubt they were real people, but Wynne pursues the reality of their existences with the enthusiasm of a prosecuting attorney. Apparently some smart people have doubted they ever lived--Messers Zafiropulo, Bareau, Bronkhorst and Vetter among the guilty. Wynne has first to undermine their arguments and then set his own in place as superior. I will not here attempt to reconstruct the points-counterpoints (I'm trying to encourage you to read the book, after all), though I can't help but note one passage on page 13 where Wynne discusses the Bharandu Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya. Bharandu, it turns out, was also known as Bharandu Kalama, and the Buddha was visiting the man in the hermitage of their former teacher, Alara Kalama. "It is even possible that Bharandu, and not the Buddha (who had forsaken the community), was the son or spiritual heir of Alara." I don't know why, but the image of these two old companions on the Path reminiscing in that hermitage (where is it now?) gave me a quite indescribable thrill. I think the text has indeed recorded a moment in time, and the sutta seems to corroborate the story of the bodhisatta's apprenticeship under Alara Kalama. Similarly, in the discussion of Uddaka Ramaputta (the "son of Rama"), Wynne makes much of idiosyncrasies of the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, noting that some scholars (e.g. I.B. Horner) have "been duped by [its] repetitive oral style" into missing the differences between the Uddaka Ramaputta and Alara Kalama accounts. For example, upon close reading it becomes clear it was Uddaka's father Rama and not Uddaka himself who had attained the "sphere of neither perception nor non-perception" (fourth of the arupa jhanas). And that is why, before the bodhisatta departs, Uddaka offers him not co-governorship of the community (as Alara Kalama had done), but total control. (This says a lot for the kind of person Uddaka was, by the way.) I don't want to dwell overlong on particulars here. Suffice to say that anyone interested in Shakyamuni the man (as opposed to simply the myth) will find great pleasure in Wynne's textual revelations. I think he proves well that the suttas have much to offer the historian, not only in terms of discovering what kind of person the Buddha was, but also his teaching. As noted though Wynne does hit some stumbling blocks. The biggest is his insistence that Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta necessarily represent a Brahminic meditation tradition as opposed to shramanic. Discussion concerning the shramanas--the wanderers and free-lance ascetics so numerous in the Buddhist suttas--is curiously absent from Wynne's book. The emphasis is almost entirely on brahminism--the Upanishads and later meditation-related texts found in the Mahabharata--but I am not sure how relevant these texts are to a discussion of the Buddha. As far as I am aware nobody has ever conclusively shown that the Upanishads were known to the Buddha or in any way influenced him, even if simply as something to argue against. The region around Magadha where the Buddha lived and taught lay somewhat outside the traditional

Brahminic sphere of influence, which was more to the northwest; you might even call it a backwater. I have always been inclined therefore to assume the Bodhisatta's teachers were not members of the established tradition of rituals and sacrifices, but stood more on the fringes, offering alternative, perhaps even controversial or exotic ideas and practices. If, for example, you look at the Buddha's brahmin interlocutors versus the wanderers, you'll see the spheres of interest of the two groups are almost mutually exclusive: one is all about "hearth and home," community and rituals, the other is interested in meditation, other worlds, and the value--or lack thereof--of various ascetic practices. (At the same time, if you look at the larger picture of Indian mediation systems and their associated beliefs, I think it is difficult, indeed artificial, to say that one group of meditators' practices were "Brahmin" while another's was "Jain" or Buddhist or shramanic or whatever. The reason, simply, is that contemplatives are on the whole a fairly practical lot--that is, they tend to use what works--and the reason the Buddha continued using the practices of his teachers was because they delivered genuine benefits. Similarly, whether the teachers came from a brahminical tradition or not is somewhat irrelevant given the religious environment of the time. The suttas clearly reflect a world in which people of all different stripes--loners, community followers, intellectual leaders, freelance philosophers--all went around competing, arguing and sharing what they did and why they did it. I think any notion of a tight, "pure" tradition--brahmin or otherwise--is illusory.) I also wonder if Wynne understands a lot of what he's talking about, specifically as regards the meditative states that are front and center in some of his discussions. He talks a lot about "element meditation" but never really defines it, and then on page 39 says "Early Buddhist and Brahminic meditators, so it seems, believed that liberation was achieved by means of a meditative progression through the material elements and a few higher states of consciousness beyond them." This statement is patently false in the light of the Pali suttas (nibbana is not the top of an ascending stair of meditative states) and it puzzles me how he could actually believe it. Also, on page 43 he essentially says the Upanishadic doctrines are based on experience of the formless realms. But for anyone with firsthand experience of these states of consciousness this has to appear a dubious assertion at best. While the early Buddhists did indeed draw equivalencies between mental states and ontological states (realms) of existence, the jhanas are not nondual in character; that is, the Upanishadic philosophy (tat tvam asi = "That thou art") is unlikely to have been deduced or derived from them. I think this lack of understanding of meditative states shows itself most seriously on pages 102-3. There Wynne discusses the meaning of "consciousness stopped," in the process asking a number of questions. For example: What is meant when the text says consciousness is "stopped"? What does this have to do with liberation? Do these passages contradict other passages in the suttas? Does consciousness disappear when liberation is attained? (Which, I must say, would be quite a trick!) The best Wynne can manage in response to these psychological quandaries is a bit of philological wiggling and then what amounts to a shrug of the shoulders and the decidedly unsatisfying conclusion that perhaps it all comes down to "poetic license." My final complaint--and what will probably bother most readers far more than anything I've said thus far--is the specialist-level depth of some of the philological discussions. Consider the following riveting passage from page 62 (note: I am missing the diacritical marks): "The relative/correlative construction yad...tan in 3cd may be pronominal or adverbial, and both possibilities suggest different cosmogonies. The problem is confused by the fact that tan in 3d agrees with (e)kam: this suggests that the subject of 3d may be identical with the subject of v. 1-2, named in 2c as tad ekam. This identification is accepted by Brereton, but according to the alternative interpretation offered above, which generally agrees with Macdonell's translation, this is not so and the word ekam in 3d is a red herring. The same confusion surrounds the word tad in 4a--it could be either a pronoun or an adverb. Moreover, a confusion over the relative clause, similar to that found in 3cd, is again seen in 4b. Macdonell and Bereton think that yad in 4b picks up kamas of 4a, but it could be a relative pronoun agreeing with tad in 4a..." (62) If after reading this you are not experiencing at least a small degree of mental constipation you clearly possess a stronger constitution than do I. (Or perhaps you finished fourth year Sanskrit...) So, fair warning: you will have to endure a bit of this sort of thing--especially in chapter four--to get to the pearls I noted earlier. My advice? Endure!

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Highly stimulating on the history of ancient Indian meditation types

By jonnos This book contains a historical study of some types of meditation described in the ancient Buddhist suttas, beginning with the two called the state of nothingness and the state of neither perception nor non-perception. In the old texts these are presented as being rejected by the Buddha, but still they are often part of the description of the Buddhist path to liberation. Wynne starts out to prove that the two men who supposedly taught these meditation types to the Buddha were real persons who subscribed to the Brahmanical teachings as presented in the early Upanisads. His arguments to show that the two men actually existed are not surprisingly the weakest part, since this is probably impossible to prove. As the sutta Wynne believes is the oldest and has the most reliable account of the Buddhas awakening do not give any details about the two men, he has to rely on other texts which do not have the same claim to authenticity. Here the two meditation teachers are connected with Brahminism by living in (Brahmanical) hermitages (Pli assama, Sanskrit rama). Unfortunately, this word had probably not been coined at the time of the Buddha. At least it is not used in any of the voluminous Brahmanical texts in Vedic Sanskrit, except for a few late texts (Gotapatha Brahmana and the Dharma Sutras). There is in fact no evidence that such hermitages existed at all at the time of the Buddha. This makes it probable that the texts in question were composed late, and in any case they can not be taken as evidence for the meditation teachers Brahmanical background. However, Wynnes arguments

that the types of meditation concerned are related to the Brahmanical tradition seem stronger. But it is unfortunate that he repeatedly uses the expression formless meditation, a term which is not used in the oldest Buddhist texts. His discussion of the possible Brahmanical basis for elements meditation and the meditations on space and consciousness that are clearly connected with these, is particularly suggestive. Still, it may be debated whether the meditations on nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception did originally belong to the same tradition. Wynne himself notes that these two meditations were supposed to be ways to reach liberation, and it seems possible that the other formless meditations on infinite space and infinite consciousness had other aims. If Wynne really means what is implied by the book's title, it is hard to understand how such rather abstract and impersonal meditation types could have led to the development of true Buddhist meditation. Wynne seems to agree that the really authentic Buddhist meditation type is Jhna meditation, being closely connected with the search for cessation of craving. One might feel that he should have taken a more in-depth look at this type of meditation if he really wanted to argue that its origin is to be found in the state of nothingness etc. At least I am not convinced of this. It has often been stressed that formless meditation is essentially a foreign element in the Buddha's teachings and that it is illogical that he should have rejected the two meditations but later incorporated them in his path to liberation. Another more general problem is that the phrase early Brahminism is used repeatedly without defining early. Most of the Brahmanical texts cited are probably later than the Buddha, which makes them hard to use as evidence for the origin of Buddhist meditation. The arguments in this book are complicated and often hard to follow. This makes it difficult for the reader to arrive at a conclusion as to whether Wynne succeeds in what he is trying to show. This is of course mainly due to the complicated nature of the available evidence. Wynne deserves praise for presenting a lot of stimulating material and for trying to make sense of it all. For those with an interest in the origins of ancient Indian meditation and of the Buddhist teachings, it is highly recommended. Just be warned that it needs to be read more than once. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Wow By Thiago Silva I loved so much this book. It made me wish there were other serious books on history of Buddhist meditation. His style is very clear, and his development indeed puts the reader closer to events that happened thousands of years ago, trying to grasp the surroundings given the fragments of descriptions we have today. I particularly enjoyed much the summary of his analysis at the end of each chapter: this kind of thing should be a standard in scholar literature.

Having identified early material that goes back to the Buddha himself, the author argues that the two teachers of the Buddha were historical figures. Based on the early Brahminic literature, namely the early Upanishads and Moksadharmas, the author asserts the origin of the method of meditation learned by the Buddha from these teachers, and attempts to use them to identify some authentic teachings of the Buddha on meditation. Stimulating debate within the field of Buddhist Studies, the following claims are put forward: the Buddha was taught by Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, as stated in the literature of numerous early Buddhist sects, is historically authentic. Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta taught a form of early Brahminic meditation the Buddha must consequently have been trained in a meditative school whose ideology was provided by the philosophical portions of early Upanishads. Shedding new light on a fascinating aspect of the origins of Buddhism, this book will be of interest to academics in the field of Buddhist studies, Asian religion and South Asian studies.

'[A] well-argued and well-researched scholarship that takes us through the many byways of early Buddhism... [A] thoroughly enjoyable read.' - Roger Bantock, *The Middle Way*, Vol 82, No 2, August 2007  
About the Author: Alexander Wynne is a translator for the Clay Sanskrit Library. He was awarded a DPhil in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford in 2003 and was a Junior Research Fellow at St Johns College, Oxford, from 2002--2006.