



The Dark Side of Dharma

Meditation, Madness and Other Maladies on the Contemplative Path

ANNA LUTKAJTIS

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*For Ricardo Claudio Farago
(and Maya and Zen)*

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Anna Lutkajtis is a postgraduate researcher from Sydney, Australia. Her research focuses on mysticism, the dark night of the soul and the healing potential of altered states of consciousness. She is particularly interested in the relationship between mental illness and spirituality, mystical experiences, and how techniques that were originally designed for contemplative purposes have been integrated into modern Western psychology. Her Masters thesis, “The Dark Side of Dharma”, examined why the adverse effects of meditation, whilst well-known in spiritual and religious traditions, have been ignored in contemporary Western secular contexts. She holds a B. Psychology (Hons) degree from UNSW Sydney, a Master of Art Administration degree from UNSW Sydney, and a Master of Arts (Research: Religion Studies) degree from The University of Sydney. Her publications can be found at www.annalutkajtis.com.

COVER ARTWORK "WHEEL OF LIFE"
BY MAN BAHADUR DONG

For centuries, *thangkas* have been an important teaching tool for the transmission of the words and visions of the Buddha. Drawn and painted with mineral colours on cotton or silk cloth, these delicate paintings depict either a deity or the life events of Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist tradition. To this day, in Tibetan Buddhism, these images are used by Dharma practitioners to support their visualisation practice.

The artist, Man Bahadur Dong, received his first lessons in *thangka* painting from his uncle at the age of fifteen. He has been practising as an independent *thangka* painter in Kathmandu, Nepal, for the past twelve years and is skilled in all types of *thangka* styles. During this time he has refined his work through his study of the tantric texts that describe the deities he paints.

Man Bahadur Dong's work is available to view and purchase here:

Website: <https://sites.google.com/site/kavrethangkaart/home>

Facebook: @KavreeThangkaArt

Instagram: @kavreethangkaart

Email: kalsangtenzin79@yahoo.com

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Finally, thank you to all my fellow academics, meditators, consciousness explorers and seekers (in particular Bart Pawlik and Giovanni Dienstmann). Your work, your lived experiences, and your enlightening conversations provide an unending source of inspiration.

Several of the chapters from this book have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals, and I am grateful to the publishers for their permission to reprint these articles here as chapters. These articles have been edited to varying degrees, and sections have been removed to avoid repetition between chapters, but the main body of the paper remains. Thank you to Douglas Ezzy and the editors at the *Journal for*

the Academic Study of Religion. Thank you also to Carole M. Cusack and the editors at *Literature & Aesthetics*. The original articles are listed here:

Chapter 2.

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Chapter 3.

Lutkajtis, Anna. The Dark Side of Dharma: Why Have Adverse Effects of Meditation Been Ignored in Contemporary Western Secular Contexts? *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2018).

Chapter 6.

Lutkajtis, Anna. "The Answer to All Your Problems?" The Overly Positive Presentation of Meditation in the Media. *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2019).

Finally, this book is for Ricardo Farago—your unconditional love, belief, and support made this work possible.

PREFACE

I first learned to meditate in 2011. Like many people, I came to the practice for non-religious reasons: stress relief and the myriad health and wellbeing benefits that were promised. I did not know exactly what meditation was or where it came from, only that it was “ancient” and associated with Eastern religions and gurus. I took a short course, learned a basic technique and diligently practised at least once per day as the teacher instructed. During the first week of my meditation practice I experienced strong headaches after each session. I thought this was unusual and checked in with my teacher, who assured me this was normal for some people and would pass after the first week or so (they did). I continued to meditate, and noticed another strange effect. Every time I would begin my practice, within several minutes I would feel myself drop into a trance-like state and I would see a purple sphere of light appear in the centre of my vision. This light was not at all unpleasant, but it was unusual and I was curious as to whether it meant something. Again, I asked my teacher. It was nothing, he said. Some people see lights when they meditate, others hear sounds. None of it mattered, just keep going.

To me, this was a highly unsatisfying answer, so of course I went straight to Google and typed in “purple light when meditating.”

After some basic searching I seemed to have an answer—the light appeared to be a *nimitta*. The Pali word *nimitta* literally means “sign” and the *nimitta* itself is a mind-generated object that appears when a meditator has reached a good state of concentration. Immediately I was both intrigued and annoyed—either my meditation teacher did not know what a *nimitta* was (which was concerning, given his self-professed status as a “meditation expert” and the high cost of his meditation course), or he was concealing this information from me. Either way, I wanted to know why.

The experience with the *nimitta* was the first of a number of strange and unusual experiences that I went on to have while meditating. These experiences piqued my curiosity to such a degree that I decided to pursue postgraduate research in this area. In particular, I wanted to investigate a meditation-related phenomenon that I was regularly encountering in my personal conversations with other meditators, but which very few people were talking about openly—meditation side effects or “adverse effects.” It seemed that many meditators, especially those with serious disciplined practices, were experiencing meditation adverse effects. For some, these effects were completely unexpected and undesirable. Others believed that meditation adverse effects were a normal part of the contemplative path, and as such they were a welcome sign of progress. There were various names that meditators gave to meditation adverse effects, including the *dukkha nanas*, kundalini crisis, and the “dark night.”

My curiosity regarding meditation adverse effects eventually led me to the Religion Studies department at the University of Sydney, Australia. After a serendipitous phone call with Professor Carole Cusack, I ended up enrolling in a Master of Arts (Research) degree in Religion Studies. My thesis was titled *The Dark Side of Dharma: Why Have Adverse Effects of Meditation Been Ignored in Contemporary Western Secular Contexts?* Through my academic research I discovered that while the scientific studies and popular media coverage of meditation have been overwhelmingly positive, a small but growing number of studies also speak of meditation adverse effects. A close examination of the scientific literature revealed that adverse effects were described even in early meditation research. These effects included profound but de-stabilising insights, problematic spiritual emergencies, and the exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions. What I found particularly fascinating was that in religious traditions, such as Buddhism, these types of

difficulties associated with meditation are acknowledged, and are usually understood to be either milestones on the path to enlightenment, the result of improper practice, or due to individual differences. Further, in traditional contexts, meditation teachers are equipped to deal with adverse effects when they arise. However, in modern Western secular contexts, negative effects associated with meditation have largely been overlooked or ignored in both the academic literature and in the popular media. Again, I wanted to know *why*.

During the course of my research project I became a more critical and analytical consumer of information about meditation. One of the first things I discovered is that it really does not make sense to talk about “Buddhist meditation” or “Hindu meditation”—rather, there are hundreds, possibly thousands, of different meditation techniques that derive from various religious sects and lineages. These techniques are heavily embedded within the specific contexts of particular traditions. I quickly learned about the rather short history of Eastern meditation in the West, and how a small number of meditation practices have been appropriated from religious traditions, “secularised” and incorporated into Western psychology and medicine. I also discovered that there is no definitive boundary that separates “secular” meditation from “religious” meditation. In fact, some modern, Eastern-derived meditation practices and Western psychotherapies have co-arisen and been mutually informed by one another, making them very difficult, if not impossible, to separate.

My thesis argued that meditation adverse effects have been ignored in Western secular settings mainly due to three factors. Firstly, in contemporary Western society the goal of meditation has shifted from a religious goal (enlightenment) to a psychological goal (symptom relief and personal transformation), leading to the assumption that meditation is harmless and “good for everyone.” Secondly, popular “secular” meditation techniques have been decontextualised and divorced from the religious literature and contemplative practitioners who could shed light on possible difficulties associated with meditation. Finally, the image of meditation that is portrayed by the popular media is radically simplified and overwhelmingly positive, to the point that meditation has been depicted as a type of panacea or “cure all.”

The fact that meditation adverse effects have been under-researched and overlooked has significant implications given the current popularity of meditation practices in a large variety of non-traditional settings,

including therapy, education, and the workplace. Meditation teaching is an unregulated industry, meaning that there are an unaccounted-for number of teachers who practise independently, possibly without any awareness of potential contraindications or adverse effects. Further, people now self-refer to meditation via the internet and seek meditation in highly variable settings outside of clinical programs, for example, in the form of performance improvement services such as coaching, or apps. Given the current popularity and proliferation of secular meditation-related products and services, it is important to understand why, in the modern West, meditation adverse effects have been overlooked, under-researched, and generally misunderstood. This book, which is based on my Master's thesis research, attempts to answer that question.

Anna Lutkajtis 2020