

Mind and Attention in Indian Philosophy: Workshop Report

By

Kevin Connolly, Jennifer Corns, Nilanjan Das, Zachary Irving, and Lu Teng

This report highlights and explores five questions that arose from the workshop on mind and attention in Indian philosophy at Harvard University, September 21st to 22nd, 2013:

1. *How does the understanding of attention in Indian philosophy bear on contemporary western debates?*
2. *How can we train our attention, and what are the benefits of doing so?*
3. *Can meditation give us moral knowledge?*
4. *What can Indian philosophy tell us about how we perceive the world?*
5. *Are there cross-cultural philosophical themes?*

1. How does the understanding of attention in Indian philosophy bear on contemporary western debates?

In contemporary western analytic philosophy, it is assumed that attention involves selection, while the nature and function of that selection remain matters of controversy. How might Indian conceptions of attention bear on these debates?

At the workshop, Alex Watson compared the Brahminical and Buddhist views of attention. On both views, attention is sufficient for consciousness. According to the former, however, awareness outstrips attention, while according to the latter attention just *is* awareness. The Brahminical view posits a distinct organ of attention, the *manas*, directed by the self. According to the Buddhist view, however, there is no self and no *manas*; rather, consciousness is exhausted by momentary, attended experiences. Watson raised three main problems for the *manas* view. First, not all attention is voluntary. Second and relatedly, as in daydreaming, attention is often captured without the subject even seeming to realize it. As emphasized by Jeorg Tuske in his presentation, however, insofar as Buddhism involves the instructed direction of one's mental states, it may seem that *some* voluntary direction of attention is not only allowed,

but required. Third and finally, Watson alleges that there is a more fundamental problem in the self-manas model: the self requires antecedent awareness to direct the manas. Against the Buddhist view, on the other hand, Sebastian Watzl emphasized non-illusory experiences of controlling the focus of one's attention that are irreducible to one experience event causing another. The Brahminical view that awareness outstrips attention, however, remains unsupported if in these cases one is *attending* to oneself as a director of attention.

Whether we can ever have an experience of ourselves “as of a thing or substance that does something” as alleged by Watzl, can be questioned in any case. A related worry was raised by Declan Smithies commenting on Catherine Prueitt's exposition of Abhinavagupta.

On Abhinavagupta's view, structured, conscious experience results from the effect of the *apoha* process on attention. The *apoha* process is a recursive process of exclusion, triggered by *vasanas* (previously stored mental imprints), which have in turn been triggered by subjective factors (e.g., goals and desires). The structure of the experience resulting from this process is held to be such that we always consciously attend to subjects and objects together. On this view then, attention is not only necessary for the emergence of the integrated perception of objects, as on contemporary integration theories of attention, but always also results in the experience of *oneself* as an experiencing perceiver.

Here enters Smithies' raised worry: in some, perhaps all, cases, we don't seem to be aware of a subject. Our attention can be engrossed in things in the world to the exclusion of ourselves. As Hume pointed out, we seem unable to turn our attention in on ourselves at all, and as Gilbert Harman has emphasized, when I turn my attention to my experiences, I find only the world presented there, and not the presumed subject of the experiences. Even if our subjectivity comes into being by having these structured experiences, as Prueitt offered in reply, it does not

follow that we thereby *attend* to ourselves as emergent subjects when having structured experiences.

The preceding discussions assume, like contemporary western views, that attention is a phenomenon of selection, but Kranti Saran argued that cases of meditative attention establish that conscious attention (at least) is only loosely connected to selection. Saran argues that there are cases of meditative attention during insight meditation wherein one is conscious without selectively attending to anything. Notice that the *sufficiency* of attention for consciousness must here be simply assumed if this is to be a case of not only consciousness without selection, but *attention* without selection. To encourage the subjugation of this claim to scientific scrutiny, Evan Thompson distinguished in his commentary between two distinct attentional phenomena: focused attention and open monitoring. As was repeatedly raised in discussion, however, it is not clear whether the non-selective phenomenon of interest to Saran is one of attention at all.

Saran's depiction of non-selective consciousness through *insight* meditation bears interesting resemblance to the construal of *calm* meditation offered by Laura Guerrero following Dharmakirti. She construed the practice as a fixing of one's attention on increasingly rarified objects until eventually consciousness of *any* object drops out altogether. On this view, however, not only attended, selected objects fall out, but *consciousness* as well. Here we do not seem to have (conscious) attention without selection. As with Prueitt's Abhinavagupta then, in Guerrero's understanding of calm meditation: to cease to selectively attend is to lose not only the objects of conscious experience, but oneself as a conscious subject.

The role of attention in Indian philosophy has many further connections with contemporary western analytic debates. Worth particular mention are those in ethics. As discussed by Keya Maitra, the moral exemplar of the yogi, as depicted in the *Bhagavad Gita*,

may be best characterized by the manner and content of the yogi's "non-attached" attention. As pressed by Nico Silins in his commentary, however, evaluating this proposal requires getting clearer on the distinction between attached and non-attached attention. Similarly, Jake Davis appealed to the Buddhist notion of *mindful* attention as a means of objective, ethical knowledge that can be defended from moral relativism. As Sharon Street pressed in her commentary, however, evaluating this proposal requires further specification of a type of attention whose exercise is capable of yielding ethical knowledge.

2. How can we train our attention, and what are the benefits of doing so?

When thinking about how we can train our attention, the initial question to address is this: **What determines what the mind attends to?** At the workshop, Alex Watson's paper compared two prominent classical Indian theories of attention in response to this question.

- According to one picture (espoused by the Brahminical thinkers, especially by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers), there is an internal sense organ, *manas* or the mind, which has two functions. In the case of ordinary sense-perception, it serves as a go-between that connects the self with the sense organ: once the self is connected to the mind, the mind to the sense organ and the sense to the object, awareness of the object can arise and the self can attend to the relevant object. In the case of introspection, it behaves as an internal sense by which the self can attend to its own cognitive states. In each case, the self, by controlling the mind, controls what it attends to. Watson raises two problems for this view. First, it makes attention voluntary; but not all attention is voluntary. Secondly, the self needs to already have awareness of what objects the mind could possibly attend to, in order to make decisions about how to direct the mind. But, *ex*

hypothesi, such awareness could not arise unless one were to have directed attention to those objects.

- According to the other picture (endorsed by the Buddhist), there need not exist any self in order for attention to be possible. The mental life of an agent consists merely of a sequence of discrete awareness-events, each of which involve attention. The problem for this view is to explain (i) cases in which an agent attending to an area in anticipation of the object that will arrive there, (ii) cases in which an agent seems to choose what it attends to, and (iii) the cases in which several objects compete for attention and the need for resolving this conflict arises. A large part of Watson's paper was devoted to the Buddhist replies to these worries. In response, Sebastian Watzl asked how the Buddhist would explain the datum that the phenomenology of attention typically involves experiences of oneself controlling the focus of attention. Watson's reply was that these are just brute facts about the particular agent's mental life.

After determining what the mind attends to, our next step toward answering how we can train our attention is to ask: **What kind of top-down influences is attention open to?** David Nowakowski's paper nicely illustrated how the range of objects that we can attend to is restricted by our previous awareness-episodes. This discussion focuses on a debate between the Buddhists and the Nyāya philosopher Udayana about the momentariness of objects.

- The Buddhists seek to prove the momentariness of various middle-sized objects by appealing to a universal premise, namely that everything existent is momentary. Against this, Udayana points out that, in order to establish this universal premise, the Buddhist must not only show that some existents are momentary, but also show that no non-

momentary object is existent. In order to do this, it must be possible to cognitively attend to non-existent objects. For the Buddhist, this is possible, because we cognitively attend to a cognitive object (*ākāra*), which in the veridical case just is an inner replica of the mind-independent object to which it refers. In the non-veridical case, the cognitive object refers to what does not exist (*asatkhyāti*). Thus, a non-veridical awareness event is sufficient to allow the mind to cognitively attend to a non-existent object.

- In order to refute this view, Udayana claims that one's cognition can stand in a relation to a determinable object only if its causal history involves epistemic processes like veridical perception, veridical inference, etc., which link it to that object. Now, in the case of non-veridical cognition including the so-called "cognition of non-existents," the object appears in a manner that is "other than what it is" (*anyathākhyāti*); for example, when a horned hare appears in cognition, the hare appears as characterized by a feature that in fact is absent from the hare. This phenomenon also received some discussion in Nilanjan Das's paper, "Cognitive Penetrability in Nyaya." According to this view, in order to cognize a particular or a property in a locus from which it is actually absent, we must have cognized that feature before by means of some veridical epistemic process (what Udayana calls an "epistemic instrument") and are now recollecting the object of that previous cognition. So, we never cognitively attend to a non-existent like a horned hare, but only ascribe a previously cognized existent feature, e.g., a pair of horns, to an existent object before us, e.g., the hare. Thus, according to this view, what we have learned through epistemic processes in the past limits the range of objects that we can cognitively attend to now.

We are now in a position to answer our original question: **How can meditation train attention?** In his paper, Kranti Saran presented a response to this question. Saran examined three claims:

A1: Attending to something is always at the expense of attending to something else.

A2: The phenomenology of attention is structured into foreground and background.

A3: Suppose attention were radically dissociated from selection. Then one person in the NSA could snoop in on everything. And that's absurd. Call this "Snoop's World."

Saran's goal is to resist A1 and A2 and yet not end up in "Snoop's World." His claim is that conscious attention is neither conceptually nor structurally tied to selection within consciousness. If this is true, some prominent theories of attention are mistaken (e.g. Smithies (2011), and Watzl (2011)). Moreover, if selection within consciousness is a necessary consequence of a capacity limitation, and there are experiences in which there is no selection, then there are experiences, which are not capacity-limited.

Saran argues that the deployment of attention in insight meditation is an example of an experience that defies A1 and A2, without incurring snoop problems. Here's how it goes. At the first stage, one focuses on the inflow and outflow of your breath, and makes the area that one is focusing on smaller and smaller. At the second stage, one is aware of lots of sensations in one's body that one ordinarily ignores. At the third stage, one sweeps attention serially over (and through) parts of the body while observing the sensations present there. At this stage of the meditation, there are no "dark" areas, and one can feel high-resolution sensations "flowing" over and in all parts of the body. Instead of scanning one's body part by part, one can take in the full three-dimensional array of bodily sensations and bodily boundaries in one take. If Saran were

right, it would provide one kind of answer to our original question. Meditation trains attention to be unselective.

One final and related question is this: **What are the practical and or moral benefits of meditative training?** In the workshop, we encountered two perspectives on this question.

1. *The Brahminical Perspective.* In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *yogin* is presented as a practically ideal agent who is even-minded in success and failure. In her talk, Keya Maitra argued that this practical ideal is tightly connected to the way in which, through continuous meditation, the *yogin* directs his attention in a non-clingy way toward the world. However, as Nico Silins pointed out, the relevant questions are these: How is clingy attention different from non-clingy attention? Is clingy attention merely diffuse attention, or is it characterized by a lack of control? Is this property of clinginess or non-clinginess sufficient to distinguish the manner of the *yogin*'s attention from that of the non-*yogin*, or do we need to ascribe to the *yogin* a different manner of attention altogether? In response, Maitra argued that both the manner and content of the *yogin*'s attention were different.
2. *The Buddhist Perspective.* Within the Buddhist tradition, meditation is often taken as a means of training attention. In his talk, Jake Davis argued that training attention through Mindfulness Meditation can lead to moral expertise. By attending to external and internal stimuli more carefully, subjects become experts at knowing which motives contribute to ease, and which contribute to unease. This, according to the Buddhist, is tantamount to moral expertise. So, the standard of ethical judgment, for the Buddhist, is the agent who is *wide awake* and attends to all the external and internal stimuli. However, as Sharon

Street pointed in her comments, the question is: What makes this expertise moral, rather than merely instrumental? It is not obvious that the causal regularities between motivation and ease or unease ground morality.

3. Can meditation give us moral knowledge?

In the workshop, Jake Davis argued for a moral epistemology grounded in the early Buddhist dialogues of the *Pāli Nikāyas*. The Buddha denies that faith or reason give us access to moral facts. What else is left? Contemporary western answers include moral intuition, moral perception, emotions, etc. Davis adds another answer: mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*,) cultivated through meditation.

Davis argues that mindfulness meditation modifies our attentional and/or memory processes (Davis and Thompson, 2013, develop these arguments at length). Expert meditators are alert to stimuli that would ordinarily elude consciousness. For instance, subjects who completed a three-month meditation retreat had a reduced “attentional blink” (Slagter et al., 2007). The attentional blink occurs when two targets are presented in rapid succession. Presumably because the first target occupies attentional resources, subjects are unaware of the second. Mindfulness also attenuates affective biases within attention and memory. One study on memory showed that subjects could recall positively valenced words better following twelve-week meditation training. Prior to (but not after) training, the subjects in question were best able to recall negative words, followed by neutral, and finally positive ones (Roberts-Wolfe et al., 2012).

Davis argues that mindfulness plays a role in moral epistemology on the following grounds. Lack of alertness and affective biases result in ordinary individuals being unreliable

judges of what motivations (e.g. good will, friendliness, hatred, or greed) bring about ease and unease. Mindfulness therefore puts one in a better epistemic position to discover what motivations cause ease and unease. To avoid relativism, Davis claims that morality must be based in an ethical project all humans share, and all humans share the basic ethical project of avoiding unease. Thus, mindfulness puts one in a better epistemic position to discover which motivations are (ethically) good and which are (ethically) bad to have. Given this, we should either become meditators ourselves or treat the community of mindfulness meditators as moral experts.

Many philosophers will reject Davis' thesis that people share an ethical project of avoiding unease. In her commentary, Sharon Street worried that Davis allows only for enlightened self-interest, not genuine morality. For Davis, motivations like friendliness and greed are good or bad only insofar as they further the self-interested goal of living with ease. Relatedly, Street asks whether we would still defer to mindfulness meditators if they converged on the conclusion that hatefulness and greed lead to more ease than other motivations. Doing so would seem to give us the wrong moral theory. So even if we should defer to mindfulness meditators on authorities about what reduces unease, we should not ipso facto defer to them as moral authorities.

In a question to Davis, Susanna Siegel objected that unease can be ethically good. For example, anger feels good in some contexts and is politically necessary. Yet even righteous anger often leads to unease. Righteous anger creates two potential problems for Davis. We can tease these problems apart using D'Arms and Jacobson's (2000) distinction between two ways that emotions can be appropriate. First, having an emotion can make one better (or worse) off in some way. Emotions can be expedient, spur you to action, or reduce unease. Insofar as righteous

anger spurs you (or your peers) into action, it can make you better off (this was Siegel's point). And sometimes, the benefits of action outweigh the costs of unease. Second, emotions can fit (or fail to fit) their objects. Arguably, anger is fitting if and only if you are angry at something unjust (e.g. political corruption or betrayal). Someone who responds to betrayal with (genuine) friendliness may live a life of greater ease. Yet her emotional responses to betrayal are arguably unfitting; the unjust deserve our anger. One could therefore argue that we ought to feel unease in ethical situations where unease is fitting.

Davis makes a first-order normative commitment—reducing unease is always good—that many philosophers will also reject. Can we divorce Davis' moral epistemology from this commitment? Perhaps one would judge all sorts of moral questions more reliably if one were more alert and less biased. For example, affective biases may lead one to ignore evidence that one's friend has committed a crime or to misclassify the pliers in a black man's hand as a gun. If Davis' moral epistemology is dissociable from his first-order normative commitments, mindfulness could add to any ethicist's epistemic toolkit, regardless of how normative ethics turns out. Arguably, Davis would still have made a significant discovery about moral epistemology (and perhaps epistemology more generally). Davis would have discovered a new epistemic tool (distinct from reason, intuition, emotions, etc.) that it is within our power to improve (through meditation).

However, there is room to resist the claim that Davis' moral epistemology and normative commitments are separable. It will be useful to draw an analogy with Keya Maitra's talk on yogic attention in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In a response to Nico Silins' commentary, Maitra argued that the manner and object of yogic attention are interdependent. The yogi attends to the conscious self (as opposed to external objects) in a non-attached manner. And the yogi cannot

attend in this manner to anything but the self (perhaps because one becomes attached to any external object she thinks about). So the success of yogic practices depends on how, and so what, one attends to.

Similarly, perhaps the success of mindfulness meditation depends on your first order normative commitments (a reply first suggested by Sean Smith). Consider an example to illustrate this claim. Courtney believes that she ought to maximize cognitive and/or affective stimulation (even if this brings tremendous unease). Courtney may lack (and believe she ought to lack) the requisite mental discipline and/or motivation to become an expert meditator. For instance, she may believe that sitting silently for eight hours a day over twelve days is a tremendous waste of affective and cognitive stimulation (and therefore not worthwhile). So individuals with certain normative commitments might be unable or unwilling to become mindful because of those commitments.

Davis may therefore have good reason not to divorce his moral epistemology and normative theory. But this could create further problems for his epistemology. For example, if the success of meditation depends on normative commitments, then there may be a type of normative selection bias in mindfulness meditators. People who become expert meditators will tend to share certain antecedent normative views. Thus, expert meditators may converge in their moral judgments because of their shared antecedent commitments, not their ability to detect ethical facts.

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4. What can Indian philosophy tell us about how we perceive the world?

How do we come to have conceptualized experiences of the world? According to Dharmakīrti, an influential 7th Century Buddhist Philosopher, we arrive at such experiences through the transformation in perception from *svalakṣaṇas*—non-conceptual qualitative particulars—to *samanyalakṣaṇas*—conceptualized “type-tokens” that occupy our ordinary perceptual experiences. The question is: How does such a transformation take place?

In her paper, Laura Guerrero explains Dharmakīrti’s answer to this question. She points out that Dharmakīrti’s distinction between *svalakṣaṇas* and *samanyalakṣaṇas* seems analogous to Jerry Fodor’s distinction between *iconic* and *discursive* representations. A discursive representation has a correct decomposition, such as a sentence, whereas an iconic representation, such as a mental image, does not. *Svalakṣaṇas* are akin to iconic representations in that they both do not involve conceptual cognition, and *samanyalakṣaṇas* are akin to discursive representations in that they both involve conceptual cognition. Therefore, Guerrero thinks that the question at issue can also be formulated as: How does the transformation from iconic representations to discursive representations take place?

According to Guerrero, Dharmakīrti takes the process of transformation to break down into two steps. In the first step, iconic representations together with some *subjective factors*—

which include aversions, desires, affects, and interests that constitute the agents' "engaged situation at the time of cognition"—trigger *vasana*, which are subconscious mental imprints that encode information from past experiences. In the second step, *vasana* facilitate a recursive process of exclusion called *apoha*, in which the *vasana* kick out irrelevant differences of things that are in fact radically individuals and focus on their functional features that are relevant to our interests in order to create similarities among those things. With the created similarities, our perceptual system then judges those things as belonging to the same type.

For example, when you see a fire, your iconic representation of it and some subjective factors such as your practical interests in this particular situation trigger the encoded information about fires from your past experiences. Next, your current experience is compared with your past experiences to create functional similarities among the fire you see now and other fires you saw in the past, which allow your perceptual system to judge them as the same type of individuals.

In his comments on Guerrero's presentation, Alex Byrne pointed out that the distinction between iconic and discursive representations seem irrelevant because iconic representations are no more "nominalist friendly" than discursive representations. As Guerrero said, *svalakasanas* cannot be conceptualized because this involves properties and according to Buddhism, there are no properties at all. However, if we compare mental image of a cow, which is an iconic representation, and a sentence "There is a white cow with green horns," which is a discursive representation, we find the picture taking as much of a stand on what properties the cow has as the sentence. This suggests that iconic representations are no more suited to capture *svalakasanas*.

Some related issues in Indian philosophy are the cognitive penetrability of perception and its epistemological implications. In his paper, Nilanjan Das focused on the Nyāya school's

theory on these issues. He argues that Naiyayika (the adherents of the school) take it as possible that our cognitive states can influence our perceptual experiences. One example is the sandalwood case, in which the subject believes that sandalwood is fragrant, and this causes him to experience a piece of sandalwood (far away from him) as fragrant. Das thinks that adopting the cognitive penetrability thesis allows Naiyayika to explain cases of illusion and hallucination, which seem to pose a problem to the *principle of perceptual contact* accepted by Naiyayika: “Any entity that forms a part of the content of a perceptual state (in a human being) must be causally linked to some sense or other.” In the sandalwood case, the subject’s memory of the fragrance forms a causal link between his present perceptual experience and the fragrance; similarly, in cases of illusion and hallucination, the subjects’ cognitive memory-based states form a causal link between their present perceptual experiences and the relevant properties, objects, or facts.

Das points out that the same approach can be used to explain some cases of recognition in which properties encountered at an earlier time are now ascribed to some individuals. So, some (but not all) instances of recognition also count as instances of cognitive penetration. However, there seems to be an epistemic difference between cases of recognition and epistemically bad cases of cognitive penetration (e.g., in a case of hallucination): whereas the subjects in recognition cases have reason to endorse the contents of their experiences, they lack such reason in epistemically bad cases of cognitive penetration. Here Naiyayika faces another problem: When do cognitively penetrated experiences provide us with reason for believing their contents?

To answer this question, Das appeals to a parallel between cognitive penetration and theoretical decision-making. Cognitive penetration, as Das sees it, involves a transition between two experiences—the initial non-penetrated experience and the resultant cognitively penetrated

experience. A subject has reason to believe the contents of the resulting experience just in case the subject is reasonable in making a transition from the initial experience to the resulting experience in the “decisional counterpart” of that experience. In particular, Das proposes the following three necessary conditions: the *new epistemic reason condition*, which says that the subject must have reason to believe the contents of the initial experience; the *reliable starting-point condition*, which says that the subject must have reason to believe that their penetrating cognitive states are reliable; and, the *percolation condition*: that the subject’s initial experience jointly suffices with the penetrating state to supports the resulting experience.

In Susanna Siegel’s comments on Das’ presentation, she asked why Das appeals to the decisional counterpart strategy since they are obviously different. In reply, Das argued that the etiology of cognitive penetration can be rationally assessed in a similar way that the etiology of a decision procedure can. That is why he compares the two. In the Q&A section, Imogen Dickie also pointed out that Das’s internalist decisional counterpart strategy appears to be in tension with Nyāya’s externalist Perceptual Contact principle since it requires that the subject have some reason to believe the contents of the initial experience. In reply, Das argued that the requirement is not incompatible with externalism since reasoning from unsupported evidence is an unreliable method.

5. Are there cross-cultural philosophical themes?

Do philosophical themes transcend cultural boundaries, even without communication between cultures? In his commentary on David Nowakowski’s talk, Farid Masrour argued that some papers at the workshop, including Nowakowski’s paper on Udayana, provides evidence that there are some cross-cultural themes in philosophy, which occur at distinct locations in spite of the very different cultural contexts in which they have been embedded. However, a critic of

this idea might point out that there is a tendency to misconstrue the ideas from other cultures, including those from Indian philosophy. In such a case, the apparent similarity between ideas would be artificial. So, the argument goes, we need to avoid importing our own ideas onto Indian philosophy.

In his commentary, Masrour pointed to three issues that are commonplace in western philosophy debates and implicit in the framework in which Udayana is working. First, there is a well-developed epistemology, in particular, a sophisticated theory of inference. There is also a well-developed account of perception that sounds like a direct realist account of perception. Thirdly, there is an account of the origin of cognition that sounds like an empiricist view. In short, it seems like Udayana and his interlocutors took various positions in logical space on issues and topics that have been important for philosophers of a different tradition that did not seem to have any communication with these people. This gives some support for the idea that there are some cross-cultural topics and themes in philosophy that occurred at distinct locations in spite of the very different cultural contexts in which they have been embedded. Because of this, Masrour argued, contemporary work on Indian philosophy can offer a significant contribution to philosophy, in that it can provide evidence for the existence of trans-cultural philosophical themes.

A critic might highlight the following, however. Consider the difference between the projects of examining what Ancient Western Philosophy had to say about issues surrounding direct realism, as opposed to the project of examining what Indian philosophy has to say about those issues. With the Ancients, despite the temporal divide, arguably there is a tradition connecting them to us. With Indian philosophy, however, the case for a unifying tradition is much harder to make. Given this, there might be a special danger of importing our own ideas

onto Indian philosophy. In the case of the Ancients, while there is still a danger, there is reason to believe that our contemporary ideas might be similar to theirs: our contemporary western philosophy arose out of theirs. With the case of Indian philosophy, there is no such reason.

We are sympathetic with the idea that there are cross-cultural philosophical themes. But even if this is not the case, there are alternative ways to develop a dialogue between Indian philosophical traditions and contemporary western philosophy. We have thus far discussed workshop presenters (including Nowakowski) who used contemporary ideas to interpret ancient Indian philosophy. In contrast, presenters like Kranti Saran and Jake Davis, and Evan Thompson in his commentary, used examples and theories from ancient Indian philosophy to engage with contemporary western debates.

In his reply to Saran's talk, for instance, Thompson advocated for a new kind of cognitive science to bring Indian philosophy to bear on modern western debates. He argued that Indian meditative and philosophical traditions offer hypotheses, such as Saran's claim that there can be attention without selection. Such claims, however, need to be conceptually, phenomenologically, and experimentally disentangled. And that takes a certain kind of cognitive science, which he called "Cross-cultural Contemplative Cognitive Science."

In his response, Saran added that he thinks there are several ways to engage with the Indian Philosophical tradition. One is by engaging philologically; that is, through a method that is grounded in texts. A second way is Thompson's way: using experiments to naturalize claims made in Indian philosophy. A third way, Saran suggested, is by just treating the ideas as philosophy, without worrying about textual fidelity or about how the ideas can be tested empirically. Saran argued that we should not see the ideas of Indian philosophy as unpalatable,

but rather as authentic ideas from a tradition, ideas that have their own internal justification and logic. We should take the ideas seriously as philosophy, he argued, and engage with them.