**Brain-hacking and Mind-Upgrades: Buddhism of the Future?**

**Jay Michaelson, *Evolving Dharma: Meditation, Buddhism, and the Next Generation of Enlightenment*, North Atlantic Books, 2013, $17.95 pback, ebook**

Review by David Welsh

Jay Michaelson's *Evolving Dharma* is an engaging, lively, and personal reflection on some of the most important developments in contemporary western Buddhism. Part analysis and part spiritual autobiography, Michaelson's book takes up several key themes which will be of interest and relevance to a great many practitioners of Buddhism in modern, western societies – the dialogue between Buddhism and science; the explosive growth in popularity of 'secularized' forms of mindfulness practice; Buddhist practitioners' relationship to meditation and to spiritual attainments; identity; community; sexuality; patriarchy; sexism; power and authority; and more. Whilst Michaelson primarily discusses Buddhism in the United States, and in the context of the Theravādin tradition he himself has most experience with, the issues he raises are of relevance to western Buddhism more broadly.

Although Michaelson is trained as a scholar of religion, something which is very much in evidence in his discussions of issues around gender and sexuality, and in his clear awareness of colonialist and post-colonialist constructions of Buddhism in the west, this is a polemic and personal rather than an academic work. His aim is not simply to describe, but to persuade, and in none of the debates into which he delves does he fail to take a side. His prose is direct, colloquial and invigorating, and from a purely linguistic point of view, this book is a joy to read.

Meditation and mindfulness are the primary focus of this book, as it is through these practices that Buddhism is both infiltrating mainstream western culture and at the same time being most radically transformed by it. Over the last 20–30 years there has been a radical change in the way meditation and mindfulness is perceived in the west. No longer are these practices the preserve of a small counter-cultural minority of Buddhists, Buddhist sympathisers and others interested in spiritual development and 'alternative' culture. Mindfulness is, thanks to the efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn and

others, fast becoming a standard treatment for conditions such as stress, depression and chronic pain. Moreover, these practices are now being employed in major companies such as Google, and even in the military, in order to maximize these organisations' effectiveness.

The decoupling of meditation and mindfulness practices from their traditional, religious, Buddhist context is both a necessary prerequisite for and a direct effect of their mainstream popularity, and this is a development which Michaelson embraces enthusiastically. He refers to these practices as 'technologies' for 'brainhacking' or 'upgrading' one's mind which, although developed in Buddhist contexts with enlightenment as their aim, can be quite unproblematically removed from their Buddhist contexts and put to other uses. Those who might be skeptical of such developments are referred to somewhat dismissively as 'traditionalists' or even 'purists'. They are presented as being 'irked', 'rubbed the wrong way' or even 'enraged' by this kind of decontextualisation, rather than as having reasoned or well-founded concerns. This is more stylistic flair than substance though, as Michaelson does, in fact, acknowledge and discuss some of the difficulties these trends have thrown up, whilst still maintaining that these are more than outweighed by the positive effects of meditation and mindfulness practices being so much more widely available. Indeed, the opening chapters of the book are rather more bombastic than the rest, and as it proceeds, Michaelson nuances some of his rather categorical opening salvoes in ways which made them, for me at least, rather more persuasive.

The rapidly accumulating scientific evidence that meditation and mindfulness practices have a real and measurable effect on the brain is perhaps one of the most exciting consequences of the meeting between Buddhism and western culture. It is this hard evidence that has enabled these practices to gain acceptance in the mainstream of the health-care industry, as well as, increasingly, in institutions such as prisons and schools. Michaelson describes these developments with enthusiasm, and makes a powerful case that these secularised forms of meditation and mindfulness practice are having a hugely beneficial impact on the lives and well-being of countless people who would never have gone to a Buddhist centre or temple to learn them. He argues that thinking of these practices as technologies is an important tool for facilitating this development. Meditation and mindfulness, he argues, can be seen as mechanistic processes – that if you do a certain practice in a certain way, it will produce a predictable result.

Whilst I share Michaelson's enthusiasm for the benefits secularized meditation and mindfulness can bring to the many people who would never encounter them in a more traditional, Buddhist context, I can't help but feel that in his enthusiasm he glosses over some potentially quite problematic issues. One of these is the question of ethics. If meditation and mindfulness are indeed value-neutral 'technologies' that can be taken out of a Buddhist context and applied to other ends, what's to stop them being used for harmful ends? Do we really want corporate executives using meditation to become more effective at making money, or the armed forces using mindfulness-based techniques to create better soldiers? Even more extreme, and closer to home for me, is the fact that Anders Behring Breivik used meditation techniques to deliberately suppress his emotions before and during the terrorist attacks he carried out in Oslo and on Utøya in 2011. Michaelson does not take up these questions in his main discussion of meditation and mindfulness, although he does deal with them to an extent later in the book.

There is also the question of whether mindfulness and meditation practice really do have the kind of effects in the long-term that those who take them up in their secularized forms expect. They are often presented in terms of stress-reduction, and they do certainly have this effect, at least initially. The fact is, though, that in their traditional Buddhist contexts they are not presented or conceived of as stress-reduction techniques, but as tools for seeing more clearly things the way they are. The process of dis-illusionment that they are designed to bring about is not necessarily a relaxing or stress-free experience – quite the opposite. Michaelson does, to be fair, acknowledge this issue towards the end of his book, arguing that only a small proportion of those who take up these practices will engage with them with sufficient intensity for more radical shifts in perspective to occur, but that this is something those who teach and practice secularized mindfulness and meditation need to take into account.

The main problem for me, though, with the characterisation of mindfulness and meditation as 'technologies' for 'hacking the brain' is the mechanistic view of consciousness they imply, and this is an issue which Michaelson doesn't really deal with. The mind is not the brain, and from a Buddhist perspective any explanation of consciousness purely in terms of matter and electrical signals in the brain is going to be profoundly problematic. The scientific evidence does seems to

show quite unequivocally that certain types of practice have particular measurable and predictable effects on the physical brain and on practitioners' subjective experience of their mind. For me though, Michaelson seems so swept up in his enthusiasm for these discoveries that he ends up seeing meditation purely as science and technology, and not at all as art or poetry. The breadth of the range of experiences of individuals who encounter and engage with these practices seems to be afforded little space in this view. "Cause and effect: do the practice, obtain the results" as he puts it. I can't help but feel that something important is missing here, that the Dharma being presented is a thinned-out, watered down version of the real thing with much of its colour, vitality and poetry filtered out.

This impression was only strengthened when I came to the section on identity, where Michaelson discusses his own dual identity as both a Buddhist and a Jew – a BuJu. He explains, quite revealingly, that whilst Buddhism provides him with indispensable techniques for 'upgrading' his mind, Judaism provides him with "a way of being in relationship with that which is beyond my personal concerns and my human, self-centred nature. Judaism gives form to my life and a shared community of meaning with which to shape the sacred moments of life." This quite beautiful description of Jewish religiosity presented, for me, a profound contrast with his description of 'religious Buddhism' in an earlier chapter as "involving devotion to divine entities (including thousands of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas), hymns, authority, morals, myths, temples, priests, rituals, lifecycle events, power struggles, sectarian debates, and every one of the trappings of religion familiar (and often abhorrent) to Westerners". "The brain," he concludes, "is Buddhist, the heart is Jewish." This last sentence sums up quite neatly, for me, the central problem with the evolving Dharma Michaelson argues so enthusiastically for. Whilst he makes in many ways a powerful case for the benefits of a secularized, post-Buddhist Buddhism, the kind of Dharma-as-technology he presents leaves the heart unsatisfied. It is missing an essential something which many will look either to more 'traditional' forms of Buddhism or to other religious traditions such as Judaism or Christianity to provide.

This kind of hybrid Buddhist Judaism or Buddhist Christianity is yet another of the developments in western Buddhism whose virtues Michaelson is keen to extol. Those under 30, he argues, are no longer willing to accept an off-the-shelf spirituality presented to them as a finished product by a

particular religious tradition, but expect to be able to co-create a kind of personal iSpirituality in dialogue with several traditions. The hybridization of religious and spiritual practices is a trend he sees as representing a major cultural shift, and as one which is only gathering momentum. Yet in this discussion, the central Buddhist concept of right view seems to have little space. Whilst he argues quite eloquently for his view that there is, for example, "very little difference between the nondual YHVH and the Buddhist Dharma with a capital 'D'," he doesn't seem to take seriously the kind of objections a 'traditionalist' might raise to such a radical interpretation of the idea of Dharma – that wrong views represent a profound and basic hindrance to enlightenment. If Buddhist practices are indeed simply technologies, then it does follow that one's views are of little importance – simply follow the instructions and obtain the benefits. Michaelson quotes appreciatively the Dharma teacher Kenneth Folk who goes so far as to say, "Since this is really all about brain hacking, all about brain development, you can use whatever conceptual framework you want, as long as you do the work." The question then arises as to whether one can really claim, as Michaelson does, that such view-neutral, amoral, post-Buddhist brain development is, in any meaningful sense, Dharma. Can such a practice really lead to enlightenment?

Michaelson's answer, again, is unambiguous. In a chapter devoted to spiritual attainments, he argues for a de-mystification of the attainments described traditionally as becoming a stream-entrant, once-returner, non-returner and arahant, and looks forward to the same kind of rigorous hard scientific investigation being carried out into these states as has been carried out into meditation and mindfulness practice at a more basic level. Indeed, the element of the book which will perhaps take more traditionally-minded Buddhists aback more than his enthusiasm for secularized meditation is his fairly direct claim to have attained stream-entry himself. Again, this ties in with and is necessitated by the mechanistic view of practice he presents. If it is simply a matter of doing the practice in the right way to achieve the desired results, any reticence about claiming particular attainments is pointless.

Whilst he wishes to demystify enlightenment, though, the view he presents of what enlightenment is is profoundly untraditional, and one which will be foreign to the great majority of Buddhists, Eastern and Western: "Not only will liberated beings continue to have to deal with the same external stuff as the rest of us – they'll have much of the same internal stuff as well: uncertainty,

sadness, desires of various kinds." This view of liberation, Michaelson argues, makes it more accessible and attainable for the average practitioner. He sees it as encouraging. For me, though, this represents a profound diminishment of the Dharma, of the Buddhist tradition, and of the potentialities of the human mind.

These, then, are the central themes that run through this fascinating and provocative book. Michaelson also takes up a number of other important issues in contemporary Western Buddhism such as power relationships and sexual abuse within sanghas; the relationship between identity, identity politics and non-self; engaged Buddhism; and a number of others. His treatment of these issues is unvaryingly thoughtful and stimulating, and rather less controversial than that of the themes I've discussed here in more depth. I am sometimes left with the feeling, though, that he has gone on a long journey of practice and reflection, and ended up rather back where more traditional forms of Buddhism begin. In his discussion of the sex scandals that have plagued so many Buddhist communities in the west, for example, he concludes by saying that what is needed is a greater emphasis on ethics and the five precepts. As he puts is, "ethical action is not some moralizing side-note; without it your meditation will not progress." Yet ironically, ethics and the practice of the five precepts – the very foundations of so much of the 'traditionalist' Buddhist practice he has little time for – find little space in Michaelson's book amongst the exuberant and engaging discussions of brainhacking and non-self, and end up being, in fact, little more than a side-note in his presentation of the Dharma.

Despite what, from a more traditional Buddhist point of view, might be seen as blind spots, *Evolving Dharma* remains an engaging and important work portraiting the current state of western Buddhism and hinting towards its future development. Michaelson argues his case powerfully, passionately, with a good dose of self-irony, and perhaps more importantly with a depth of experience and realization that has grown out of decades of sincere and serious engagement with Buddhist practice. He presents his case with complexity and intellectual subtlety, but at the same time in an idiom that is direct, personal, unpretentious, and highly readable. Whilst I remain unconvinced by some of his central theses, the strength of the case he presents will force any serious-minded Buddhist to think more deeply about the ways in which the Dharma is evolving in

modern western societies, and how Buddhist communities can most effectively preserve, practice and communicate the Buddha's teachings in the 21st century and beyond.

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